

A critical review of dark tourism studies

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Abstract

The topic of dark tourism emerged in the last three decades as tourism became more accessible. It allows forgotten history to be revised and transferred to the public. This study aims to restructure existing categorization regarding dark tourism and address the research gaps in dark tourism studies. We collected studies from international publication databases – Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. We pre-processed the following data for each study: topic, authors' location of university affiliation, study area, year of publication, top-cited articles, top productive journals in publishing dark tourism studies, keywords, and internality/externality of the author from the study area. With the current paper, we analysed review articles published from 1996 to 2024 (first quarter), applying qualitative methods. Based on these, a new analytical framework was generated. Furthermore, the connections between research topics were also analysed. The results of the analysis highlight specific research gaps in the literature on dark tourism and address poorly visible research fields in international journals, e.g. terrorism-related research, social media links of dark tourism, postcolonial contexts, or commemoration of communist past and heritage. Consequently, certain countries and regions are underrepresented in the literature. This critical review offers new research areas but also gives some directions to the theoretical enrichment of the dark tourism concept.

Keywords: thanatourism, commemoration, categorization, connections, 4E concept

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Introduction

The tourism and hospitality industry was exponentially growing and progressing in innovations before the worldwide lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Over time, increasing numbers of destinations have been opening up and investing in tourism growth, making modern tourism one of the core drivers of socio-economic change. Due to the strengthening competition, innovation became a crucial element of tourism development (STREIMIKIENE, D. *et al.* 2020). Despite the increasing study on dark tourism, there is still much to learn about its potential to boost

the travel and tourism sector after COVID-19. Most of the researches ignored dark tourism's inventive and economic contributions to the industry's comeback in favour of concentrating on its psychological and social elements.

Technological change, governmental attitudes and aims, changing regulations (e.g. permeability of borders), and evolving customer motivations influence the direction of tourism development. Thus, various directions have emerged recently in innovative global tourism. Innovation includes new things not done before and a recreation of existing tourism products to be more competitive. There are different processes forc-

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ing innovation in the tourism industry. In our paper, innovation is understood as occurring in three directions. First, innovative mass tourism uses smart tourism tools such as digitalization, artificial intelligence, 5G, and service-oriented robotics. Second, technological change has contributed to the emergence of a sharing economy in tourism. For instance, Airbnb (CHENG, M. and FOLEY, C. 2019; BRESCIANI, S. *et al.* 2021) and other peer-to-peer platforms pose new and robust competition for traditional accommodations (e.g. hotels). Third, niche tourism prompts innovation. On the one hand, governments consider economic aspects; on the other, they often focus on social, cultural, or even spiritual aspects of tourism. Changing regulations have made travel more accessible (i.e. easier, faster, and cheaper), contributing to the growing number of domestic and international tourists (PROOS, E. and HATTINGH, J. 2022). More and more customers seek individualized and personalized experiences that differ from mass tourism. Thus, there is a growing demand for niche tourism (BUNGHEZ, C.L. 2021).

The significance of the dark tourism concept can be explained with the help of the 4E model which combines four fields: emotions, experiences, education, and entertainment (ASSYLKHANOVA, A. 2022). This model underscores the multifaceted nature of dark tourism, balancing theoretical concepts with practical tourism products (ISAAC, R.K. 2022). Moreover, other factors such as the growing popularity of the co-creation of knowledge and recognition of the importance of commemoration are also significant aspects to be considered when planning and implementing tourist activities. Dark tourism aims to use underutilized potential attractions such as battlefields, cemeteries, disaster sites, concentration camps, memorials, volcano creeks, and killing fields to provide answers to the challenges concerning the abovementioned factors.

This paper presents a critical review of dark tourism literature, which began gaining research interest around 30 years ago and is generating increasing curiosity among researchers. This paper's primary

aim was to analyse the scientific literature on dark tourism. Thus, this work identifies the state of current dark tourism literature, trends in the topics, and areas for future research and dark tourism sites. The study aims to co-create knowledge about dark tourism activity and support cooperative education between dark tourism sites and academic researchers. Previous studies have examined several aspects of dark tourism, such as its causes and effects (SHARPLEY, R. and STONE, P.R. 2009; BIRAN, A. *et al.* 2011; CAUSEVIC, S. and LYNCH, P. 2011). However, there is a knowledge deficit about its implementation and ramifications in emerging markets because these studies mainly concentrate on Western contexts. This study fills this gap by looking at dark tourism from a broader, international viewpoint, enhancing current research. Recent studies (CAI, *et al.* 2022; RADZEVIČIUS, M. 2022) have begun to explore the intersection of dark tourism and post-pandemic recovery, indicating a burgeoning interest that this paper seeks to develop further.

This study addresses the following gaps:

- Comprehensive literature review: Mapping the current landscape of dark tourism research to identify prevailing trends and gaps.
- Post-pandemic recovery: Exploring the role of dark tourism in the recovery and innovation of the tourism industry following the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Sustainable integration: Proposing frameworks for integrating dark tourism into sustainable tourism practices to enhance economic resilience and cultural preservation.

The practical significance of this research is twofold. Firstly, dark tourism offers a means to transform mindsets and commemorate crucial moments in human history, thereby enriching collective memory and cultural heritage. Secondly, in the wake of the COVID-19-induced crisis and recession within the tourism sector, dark tourism presents a viable source for economic revitalization and innovation, contributing to the broader recovery efforts of the industry.

A review of dark tourism studies

Dark tourism is not a new phenomenon; research began in the 1990s, and its popularity has increased, despite most of the relevant articles were published after 2010. The rapidly expanding body of research should be surveyed systematically to provide an overview of the state of the art in the field, supporting future studies. We comprehensively reviewed existing English-language peer-reviewed articles on dark tourism from Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, collecting the data on the year of publication, location of university affiliation of the authors, research area, study topics and categories, and keywords used. We compiled these into a database we could use for the data analysis.

Literature review

Articles regarding dark tourism began appearing in well-cited peer-reviewed journals in 1996. However, the number of studies on the discussed topic has sharply increased in the last decade. The overall trends in fresh articles have been more about defining the scope of dark tourism; identifying visitors' experiences and emotions at dark tourism sites; and political dimensions regarding the relationship with collective memory (BUCKLEY, R. 2012; LIGHT, D. 2017). LIGHT identified key issues and themes in dark tourism and assigned priority levels to the individual topics: one star for the lowest research priority and three for the highest priority (LIGHT, D. 2017).

Dark tourism research works have concentrated on the following directions of the currently discussed area: the concept of dark tourism itself (COLE, T. 1999; LENNON, J.J. and FOLEY, M. 1999; LENNON, J.J. and MALCOLM, F. 2002; LENNON, J.J. and SEATON, A.V. 2004; BOWMAN, M. and PEZZULLO, P. 2009; SHARPLEY, R. 2009; SHARPLEY, R. and STONE, P.R. 2009); ethical issues related to the living and the dead (COLE, T. 1999; LENNON, J.J. and FOLEY, M. 1999; STONE, P.R. 2006; SHARPLEY, R. 2009; SION, B. 2014); the politics of the dark tour-

ism industry (SHARPLEY, R. 2009; CAUSEVIC, S. and LYNCH, P. 2011; CARRIGAN, A. 2015); the main motives of visitors (BEST, M. 2007; BIRAN, A. et al. 2011; HYDE, K. and HARMAN, S. 2011; BIRAN, A. and HYDE, K.F. 2013). From the literature, there is no globally accepted definition of dark tourism or what it encompasses. All authors have operated from their understandings of and explanations for it.

Spanning educational purposes to thrill-seeking and commemorative motives, dark tourism research has examined a variety of tourist motivations and experiences (BIRAN, A. et al. 2011; DUNKLEY, R.A. et al. 2011). At dark tourism sites, visitors frequently experience emotional reactions like sadness, curiosity, and excitement. Their actions often reveal a complicated interplay between sensationalism and sincere commemoration (WIGHT, C.A. and LENNON, J.J. 2007; STONE, P.R. and SHARPLEY, R. 2008). The management of dark tourism destinations presents particular difficulties on the supply side, such as ethical issues regarding the depiction of tragedy and the participation of tourists in delicate historical contexts (ASHWORTH, G.J. 2004; HARTMANN, R. 2014).

Several general patterns and directions emerge from the studies we analysed. For example, researchers from former colonizing countries use ample accessible data to conduct comprehensive investigations of dark tourism sites within their previous colonies (BURROUGHS, J. 2015; SHARMA, N. and RICKLY, J.M. 2018; JAMALIAN, M. et al. 2020). Another trend is the regretful and commemorative writing in Jewish, Polish, and German researchers' works about the Holocaust (BIRAN, A. et al. 2011; COHEN, E.H. 2011; BAKOTA, D. et al. 2020; SAWCZUK, M. 2020), or Ukrainian authors' writings on the Chernobyl nuclear accident (ZERVA, K. 2017; BAKOTA, D. et al. 2020). What is evident from these observations is that the primary research sites are in the past colonies of developed countries, in underdeveloped and developing countries, and in places that have experienced war or other disputes. In the study of dark and discordant heritage, ASHWORTH's work has been

essential, especially when analysing how societies commemorate difficult pasts like slavery (ASHWORTH, G.J. 2004). In his discussion of the function of heritage tourism in presenting contested histories, ASHWORTH draws attention to the “dissonance” that might occur when various groups have divergent interpretations of historical events (ASHWORTH, G.J. and TUNBRIDGE, J.E. 1996). His observations offer a starting point for comprehending the difficulties and moral dilemmas of overseeing dark tourism destinations. It is important to highlight these evident logical research tendencies to create groupings related to the study areas of the articles on dark tourism.

Although research on dark tourism has focused on a variety of historical and cultural settings, slavery history has received a lot of attention as a critical component of dark tourism in Africa, particularly in Ghana. The cultural and ethical challenges of portraying this traumatic past have been demonstrated by researchers such as YANKHOLMES, A.K.B. and MCKERCHER, B. (2015), who have investigated visitors’ experiences and perceptions of slavery heritage sites like Ghana’s Cape Coast and Elmina Castles (YANKHOLMES, A.K.B. 2009; MOWATT, R.A. and CHANCELLOR, S.H. 2011). Notwithstanding these efforts, there is still a demand for more research in this field since it does not thoroughly examine other African countries or relate the broader ramifications of slavery tourism to dark tourism practices elsewhere.

Researchers have used both inductive and deductive approaches to studies of dark tourism. Some authors apply a specific theory to the dark tourism industry (IVANOVA, M. and BUDA, D.M. 2020); others perform standard empirical research, reviewing the literature to develop hypotheses, conducting the study, collecting and analysing the data, and drawing generalizations from the results (HARTMANN, R. 2014; LIGHT, D. 2017; PLIAKAS, T. 2017; MIONEL, V. 2020; LIM, S. and KIM, J. 2023; MORA FORERO, J.A. et al. 2023). IVANOVA, M. and BUDA, D.M. (2020) apply Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “rhizomatic thinking” to dark tourism in the context of communist heritage; their analysis enables openness through a dynamic, hetero-

geneous, non-linear, decentralized approach. Rhizomes are networks cutting across boundaries of hierarchies, categories and move beyond dualistic understandings of concepts or legacies. Via rhizomatic thinking, the authors connect experiences and memories of communism with the present interpretations of communist heritage, exploring the topic as a process of shifting connectivity rather than a confined and permanent construct. Moreover, the importance of historical and cultural memory in the growth of post-communist tourism is highlighted by studies on dark tourism in Romania and Bulgaria. SCHNEIDER, A. et al. (2021) highlight the possibility of targeted tourism policies by identifying the variables that motivate tourists to visit Romania’s dark sites, including the Sighet prison. MILEVA, S. (2018) examines Bulgaria’s undeveloped dark tourism industry, emphasizing the necessity of a culturally sensitive strategy that considers the country’s distinct historical background. PATRICHI, I.C. (2013) provides other examples of the allure of dark tourism destinations, such as Romania’s Merry Cemetery, by shedding light on their reflecting and emotional appeal. When taken as a whole, these studies highlight how the niche might influence post-communist identity and economic development.

Furthermore, there have been significant deductive contributions to the notion of dark tourism. In one, LIGHT, D. (2017) introduces the term *thanatourism* to describe dark tourism and tracks the evolution of academic research on the topic over the 1996–2016 period. He also provides a kind of categorization of sites that are analysed in dark and thanatourism research. Similarly, LIGHT, PLIAKAS provides a comprehensive content analysis, focusing on definitions of dark tourism, theories, and dark tourism spots around the globe (PLIAKAS, T. 2017). HARTMANN, R. (2014) presents new directions in contemporary tourism research by investigating previously studied dark tourism concepts, in reviewing the history of the field, HARTMANN highlights the focus on sites with shadowed history. Focusing on development possibilities, a group of Colombian researchers has prepared an analytical review

of the tendencies of dark tourism as a new industry direction in Cundinamarca, Colombia (MOISÉS, J. et al. 2020).

Starting from the results of the previous analyses aims to extend the knowledge of dark tourism by updating the time frame and offering a broader multidimensional perspective that includes emerging non-Western markets that are often underrepresented in earlier analyses. Unlike LIGHT, D. (2017), and MOISÉS, J. et al. (2020) which focused primarily on thematic and conceptual categories, this study integrates regional variations and explores the role of black tourism recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic. By examining the intersections between sustainable tourism practices and economic resilience, this study provides a new framework for understanding the evolving impact of dark tourism worldwide.

The methods for analysing the spheres of tourism are diverse, although qualitative methods are used most often (WIGHT, C.A. 2006; BIRAN, A. and HYDE, K.F. 2013; FRIEDRICH, M. and JOHNSTON, T. 2013). Commonly, the studies are conducted as observations of tourists' behaviours and in-depth interviews; extensive surveys are not particularly popular in dark tourism papers (WIGHT, C.A. 2006; BIRAN, A. and HYDE, K.F. 2013). One additional qualitative method in dark tourism research is criticism of secondary textual materials (LENNON, J.J. and FOLEY, M. 1999) such as books, travel blogs, movies (ZERVA, K. 2017; BAKOTA, D. et al. 2020), and website content including social media posts (BERTOLDI, D. et al. 2020; KERR, M.M. et al. 2020; WYATT, B. et al. 2021). Compared to the previously published review articles, our research has a different focus on analysing regional differences. Moreover, by using LIGHT'S (2017) research as a starting point, we aim to logically categorize topics. In addition, we explore the connection between various dark tourism-related topics.

Data and methods

With this study, our aim was to categorize and sort the currently available literature regarding

dark tourism and highlight the gaps in the research. The sources of the articles obtained for this study were Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. For this research, we considered both touristic and non-tourism and hospitality journals. We collected peer-reviewed articles written in English and research in various other languages with translated abstracts to English from 1996 to 2024 (first quarter). We collected the sample data over a reasonably limited period because the main aim was to show the patterns and trends in the research on dark tourism rather than discuss details of each empirical study and identify gaps in the literature.

Regarding data availability, Google Scholar is open to everyone, whereas the other two were available through our institution's subscriptions. We identified a final number of 519 papers on dark tourism, which served as the only search term; adding more search terms would have inevitably yielded more results, but we wanted to focus solely on the results on dark tourism. For each paper, in a database created with the following fields: the title, location of affiliation of authors, the study area of the paper, year of publication, top-cited articles, top productive journals in dark tourism studies, keywords, whether the author was internal or external to the site being studied, and the abstract.

As stated in *A review of dark tourism studies* section, previous researchers have used qualitative methods such as observations of tourists' behaviours and in-depth interviews and quantitative methods such as clustering subtopics. We analysed review articles published from 1996 to 2024 applying qualitative methods. First, we sorted the collected review data for input into an Excel tool called Pivot Table to produce graphs, maps, and tables for analysis; we also compiled a categorization table that emerged from the document analysis. Each heading is derived from a combination of the NVivo word cloud of the keywords in the works reviewed.

Results

Here we present and discuss the study findings according to our three main groupings.

For descriptive analysis we have statistically processed the data; analysing the year of publication and the university affiliation of the authors, the study area, and the geographical relation of the authors to the study area. Last but not least, we also analyse the connection between the keywords and research topics.

Year of publication and authors' location of university affiliation

In 30 years, 519 published peer-reviewed articles related to dark tourism were included in Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. In the first decade, there were fewer than ten studies because dark tourism as an industry sector was not yet recognized at all. Between 2001 and 2010, there were slightly more scientific papers about dark tourism (36), but the highest interest in dark tourism and its constituents has been observed in the last decade. Rapid growth in the amount of work is connected to different reasons that will be discussed later in this paper.

One of the crucial factors in the analysis is the settings of the dark tourism studies and the authors' university locations; this elucidates the global interest in dark tourism research.

Figure 1 presents the top 10 authors' university locations of dark tourist studies. We counted 71 authors' university locations among the 519 papers.

Two main groups of countries emerge from the analysis: the first one is where most of the research funds, opportunities, and infrastructures are concentrated, while the countries in the second experienced events that can be the basis of dark tourism activities. Figure 1 presents countries that have been researching the topic of dark tourism for the last thirty years. Five countries are in Europe, and the United States, and Australia. The European nations are the developed countries, the remainings are countries that have suffered various forms of brutality, mass mortality, or other violent events in their history. There were also a small number of articles by multiple authors collaborating from varying countries. Figure 2 presents a Leopold matrix of articles released yearly from 1996 to 2024 in the top ten author source countries.

Publications on dark tourism increased in number over time. The UK, the United States, and Australia were the first countries where dark tourism was considered independently before 2011. It can be stated that 2011 marks the take-off point of the global scientific interest in dark tourism itself.

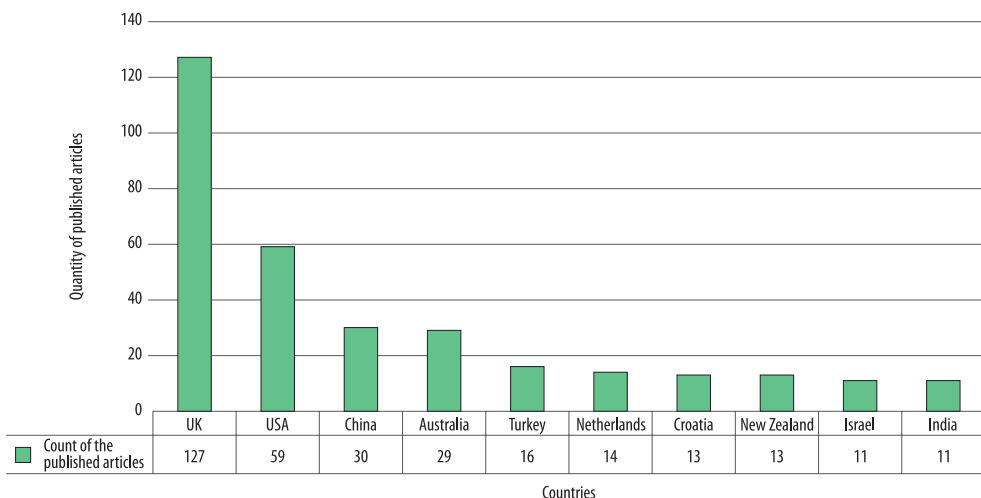


Fig. 1. Top 10 authors' university locations of dark tourism-related articles. Source: Elaborated by the authors

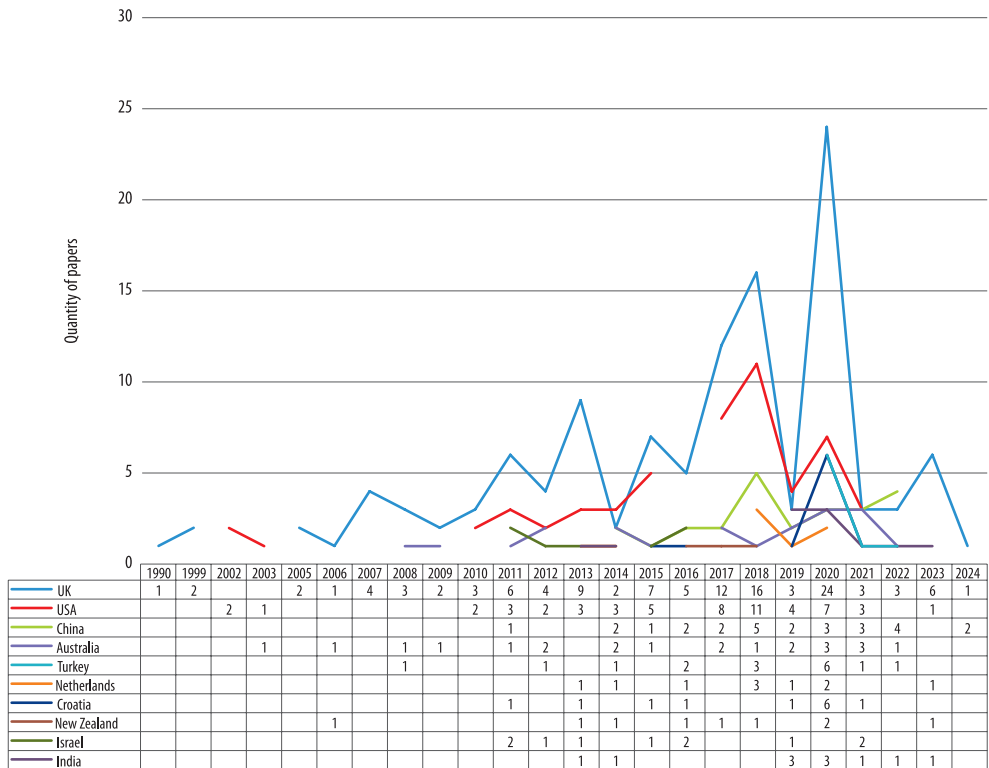


Fig. 2. Number of articles by year of publication and the origin of authors by countries (top 10).
 Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Targeted study areas and their internal/external relation to the university affiliation of authors

In addition to knowing the location of the university affiliation of authors of dark tourism-related articles, it was essential to see the investigation target countries. Figure 3 presents a world map highlighted to reflect regions analysed in the last three decades; the colours reflect the intensity of research output based on the number of published articles (darker colour means more articles). The United Kingdom, the United States, and China produced darkest tourism papers, from 16 to 40 on a particular study area. There was a moderate number of papers on sites in Australia, Indonesia, Japan, the Central European states, and Turkey, and there were few sites investigated

in Canada, African countries, Central Asia, and some Western European states. The map visually highlights the research gaps in grey as undetected dark tourism sites. We note that the authors of 135 articles examined the dark tourism industry worldwide rather than in particular locations. Most of these articles are theoretical or conceptual papers, that mention specific locations as examples but have not conducted any particular empirical research.

Figure 4 presents the number of works produced based on whether the author was internal or external to the study area. It was considered an indicator of unevenness (e.g. centre-periphery relations) in producing scientific output within dark tourism as a research topic. We consider an author internal if their institutional affiliation was in the same country

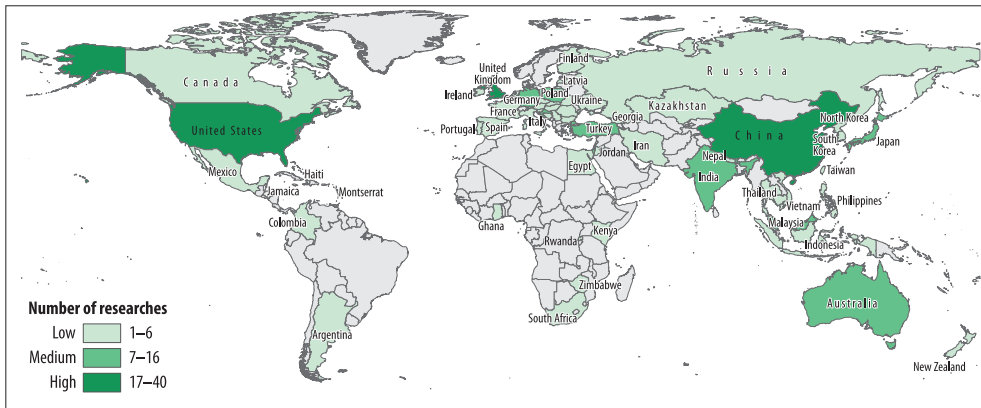


Fig. 3. World map of the dark tourism study areas in this review. Source: Elaborated by the authors.

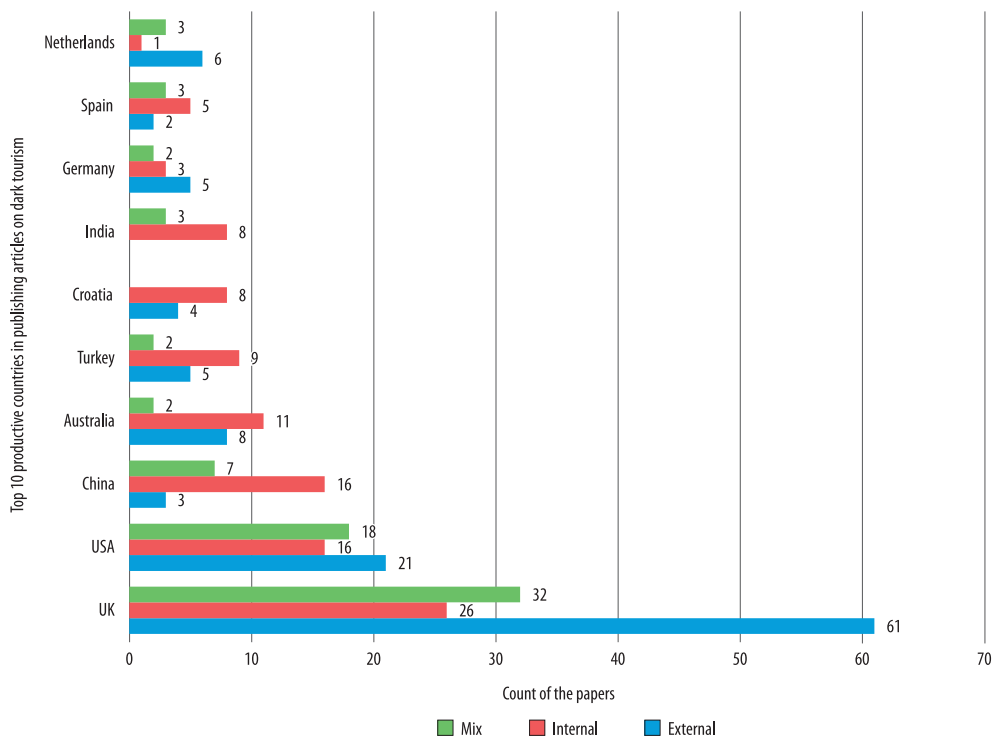


Fig. 4. Internality and externality of the authors to the analysed region (top 10). Source: Elaborated by the authors.

where their study located and external if it was outside the country. Only the affiliations were considered; i.e. the authors’ nationalities were not analysed since these data are often unavail-

able. Only the first authors were analysed – but according to our survey, in most cases, the lists of authors were entirely internal (59.3%) or external (34.9%). The figure shows that the UK is

the leader in publishing articles on dark tourism themes in all aspects: external, internal, and mixed study areas (a combination of internal and external). Overall, authors from the UK, the United States, Australia, and Germany studied areas outside their own countries; in the remainder of the top 10 countries, authors studied dark tourism within their own countries. We suggest that the first four states, being developed Western nations, simply have more resources and possibilities to conduct and publish research worldwide.

Most cited articles and their brief content

To understand the overall trends, topics, and comprehension of the highly cited articles, we have compiled *Table 1* of the top 10 most cited articles in dark tourism research (as per Web of Science, Google Scholar, and Scopus). The leader in this list is Philip R. STONE with his article “A dark tourism spectrum: Towards a typology of death and macabre related tourist sites, attractions, and exhibitions” published in 2006 in *Tourism*. This article discusses the concept of dark tourism and proposes a typology to categorize various dark tourism sites based on their intensity and characteristics. STONE introduces the idea of a “spectrum” to illustrate the varying degrees of darkness associated with different tourist sites and attractions related to death and the macabre.

The second cited article in the list is “Dark tourism” by John J. LENNON. He reviews two decades of research on dark tourism and thanatourism, highlighting key themes and debates (LENNON, J.J. 2017a). The article evaluates the definitions, ethical issues, political dimensions, demand, management, and research methods related to dark tourism, and argues that dark tourism often overlaps with heritage tourism. Whereas, LIGHT reviews academic research on dark tourism and thanatourism over 20 years, focusing on definitions, ethical issues, and the differentiation between dark tourism and heritage tourism (LIGHT, D. 2017). He critiques the progress made and identifies future research directions.

The next popular paper in dark tourism research is “Consuming dark tourism: A thanatological perspective” by STONE and SHARPLEY, where the authors explore dark tourism consumption through a thanatological lens, examining how socio-cultural attitudes towards mortality influence the demand for dark tourism (STONE, P.R. and SHARPLEY, R. 2008). They propose a model to understand the consumption patterns and motivations of tourists engaging with sites associated with death and disaster.

It is crucial to state that STONE is the author who has made significant contribution to the body of research in dark tourism. Almost half of the top ten cited articles were written by STONE. He is the editor of the Dark Tourism Forum. His research interests include the consumption of dark tourism within contemporary society. In 2012, STONE examined how dark tourism mediates the relationship between life and death in modern society (STONE, P.R. 2012). The paper argues that dark tourism sites serve as mediating institutions that help individuals construct meanings of mortality (539 citations).

It is also crucial that there are several review papers among top cited studies. One of them is the work of Rudi HARTMANN, who focuses on the management of heritage sites associated with death and disaster, discussing new concepts and research directions in dark tourism and thanatourism (HARTMANN, R. 2014). The paper examines the dissonance in heritage tourism management and the geography of memory.

There are two case studies on the list (see *Table 1*). STRANGE and KEMPA compared the tourist experiences at two former prisons, Alcatraz and Robben Island, and discussed the multiple shades of dark tourism (STRANGE, C. and KEMPA, M. 2003). The authors explored how these sites are marketed and interpreted, considering the influence of memory managers and tourist expectations. FOLEY and LENNON explore dark tourism related to President John F. Kennedy’s life and death, focusing on the media’s role and the dilemmas faced by curators and staff at related sites (FOLEY, M. and LENNON, J.J. 1996). The paper examines how assassination sites are present-

Table 1. Top 10 most cited articles in dark tourism research

Article	Year of publication	Journal	Author(s)	Citations	Type of article
A dark tourism spectrum: Towards a typology of death and macabre related tourist sites, attractions, and exhibitions	2006	Tourism: An Interdisciplinary International Journal	STONE, P.R.	1608	Research
Dark tourism	2017	Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology and Criminal Justice	LENNON, J.J.	661	Review
Progress in dark tourism and thanatourism research: An uneasy relationship with heritage tourism	2017	Tourism Management	LIGHT, D.	660	Review
Consuming dark tourism: A thanatological perspective	2008	Annals of Tourism Research	STONE, P.R. and SHARPLEY, R.	596	Research
Dark tourism and significant other death: Towards a model of mortality mediation	2012	Annals of Tourism Research	STONE, P.R.	583	Research
Dark tourism, thanatourism, and dissonance in heritage tourism management: New directions in contemporary tourism research	2014	Journal of Heritage Tourism	HARTMANN, R.	376	Review
Shades of dark tourism: Alcatraz and Robben Island	2003	Annals of Tourism Research	STRANGE, C. and KEMPA, M.	343	Research
JFK and dark tourism: A fascination with assassination	1996	International Journal of Heritage Studies	FOLEY, M. and LENNON, J.J.	288	Research
Educational dark tourism at an in populo site: The Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem	2010	Annals of Tourism Research	COHEN, E.H.	222	Research
Dark tourism: Morality and new moral spaces.	2009	Channel View Publications	STONE, P.R.	168	Research

ed and interpreted by tourists. This paper was one of the first dark tourism-related studies.

The ninth most frequently referenced article belongs to Erik COHEN, who introduces the term “in populo” to describe dark tourism sites at the population centres of those affected by a tragedy (COHEN, E.H. 2011). The study focuses on Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial museum in Jerusalem, and discusses such sites’ educational impact and authenticity. One more conceptual article by STONE closes the list of widely cited articles (168 citations). Author delves into the moral implications and ethical challenges posed by dark tourism, exploring how it creates new

“moral spaces” for interpreting death and suffering within tourism contexts (STONE, P.R. 2009). It also critically examines the relationship between dark tourism sites, visitors, and the societal representations of mortality.

Top leading journals publishing dark tourism papers

The field of dark tourism, which explores travel to places associated with death, tragedy, and macabre, has attracted great academic interest in recent years. The main engine of this progress is the publication of

high-quality studies in the most prestigious journals. These journals provide a platform for scholars to disseminate their findings and shape debates by highlighting emerging trends, theoretical advances, and case studies around the world. Having examined the contributions of these prominent publications, researchers can gain an in-depth understanding of the current state and future direction of dark tourism research. The five leading journals and their H-index is shown in *Figure 5*.

The *Annals of Tourism Research* is the leading journal in publishing dark tourism-related studies, known for its high impact and rigorous selection process. *Tourism Management* is the second most productive journal (22 papers). *Current Issues in Tourism* ranks third in the articles published on dark tourism. The *Journal of Heritage Tourism* (16 papers) and *Tourism Geographies* (12 papers) round out the top five, highlighting their contributions to the field with a substantial number of published papers. Notably, the leading two journals are published by Elsevier, whereas the other three by Taylor & Francis.

Keyword analysis and categorization of the articles by topics

We analysed the articles based on the keywords to define the popularity of research topics within dark tourism. NVivo analytic software was used to produce a word cloud of the list of keywords from all articles (*Figure 6*). The words in orange were the most often used: dark tourism, experience, death, war, and heritage. All of the words below are closely related to the topic of the review paper. They describe the essence of the articles on dark tourism.

Because one of our main aims with this article was to categorize research on dark tourism, we created a different categorization compared to LIGHT's (2017) analysis which gives a more comprehensive mode to understand research made on dark tourism and highlights several research gaps. The reason for the changes is on the one hand, that new categories emerged from studies published following LIGHT's review of the dark tourism literature. On the other hand, recent literature also identified previously unused categories.

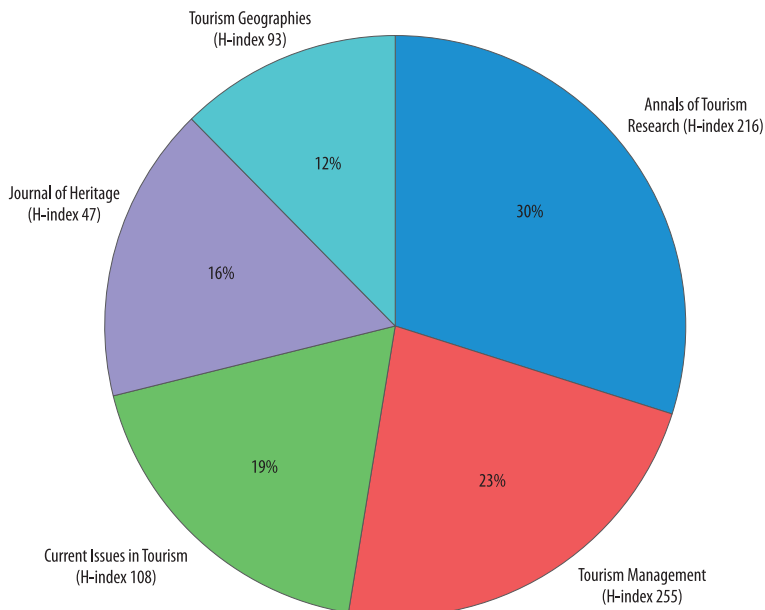


Fig. 5. Leading journals in publishing research on dark tourism (top 5). *Source:* Elaborated by the authors.

Table 2. *Categorization of the literature by subtopics of dark tourism*

Subtopic	Number of studies	Author(s) and the year of publication
Cemetery dark tourism*	9	LENNON, J.J. and SEATON, A.V. 2004; LEVITT, L. 2012; LAWS, C. 2013; STON, B. 2014; SEATON, A.V. 2015; BROWN, L. 2016; MIONEL, V. 2020.
Communist dark tourism**	7	LENNON, J.J. and FOLEY, M. 1999; VOLCIC, Z. et al. 2014; FRANK, S. 2016; MILEVA, S. 2018; TIBERGHEN, G. and LENNON, J.J. 2019; IVANOVA, M. and BUDA, D.M. 2020; LENNON, J.J. and TIBERGHEN, G. 2020, 2021; SCHNEIDER, A. et al. 2021.
Dangerous zones*	21	SIEGENTHALER, P. 2002; GOATCHER, J. and BRUNSDEN, V. 2011; STONE, P.R. 2013a; YANKOVSKA, G. and HANNAM, K. 2014; CAVE, J. and BUDA, D.M. 2018; HRHORCZUK, N. 2019; BAKOTA, D. et al. 2020.
Dark tourism related to natural disasters*	9	BUISSINK, N. and CROY, G. 2005; RITTICHAINUWAT, N. 2008; ROBBIE, D. 2008; PEZZULLO, P.C. 2009; RUCIŃSKA, D. 2016.
Educational dark tourism**	10	The Shoah (Holocaust COHEN, E.H. 2011; OREN, G. and SHANI, A. 2012; STONE, P.R. 2013b; WHITE, L. and FREW, E. 2016; LENNON, J.J. and TEARE, R. 2017; NHLABATHI, S.S. and MAHARAJ, B. 2020.
Emotions in dark tourism**	27	PODOSHEN, J. 2013; DERMODY, E. 2017; CAVE, J. and BUDA, D.M. 2018; MARTINI, A. and BUDA, D.M. 2018; NAWIJN, J. and BIRAN, A. 2019; ZHENG, C. et al. 2019; BERTOLDI, D. et al. 2020; BULL, A.C. and DE ANGELI, D. 2020; DRIESSEN, S. 2022.
Ethics in dark tourism**	10	CARR, G. 2010; BIRAN, A. and HYDE, K.F. 2013; FISHER, J. and SCHOEMANN, S. 2018; MARTINI, A. and BUDA, D.M. 2018; KORSTANJE, M.E. 2019; ŠULIGOJ, M. 2019; BERTOLDI, D. et al. 2020.
Experience in dark tourism**	50	YAN, B.-J. et al. 2016; ZHENG, C. et al. 2016; BOATENG, H. et al. 2018; WEAVER, D. et al. 2018; LANGHOF, J.G. and GÜLDENBERG, S. 2019; SONG, Z. et al. 2019; Cui, R. et al. 2020.
Genocide tourism*	18	LENNON, J.J. and MALCOLM, F. 2002; HUGHES, R. 2008; SIMIC, O. 2009; MOFFAT, R. 2010; CAUSEVIC, S. and LYNCH, P. 2011; FRIEDRICH, M. and JOHNSTON, T. 2013; HOHENHAUS, P. 2013; KOLETH, M. 2014; SHARPLEY, R. 2014; STON, B. 2014; ISAAC, R.K. and ÇAKMAK, E. 2016; CARRABINE, E. 2017; BECKER, A. 2019.
Ghost tours*	10	GARCIA, B. 2012; HEIDELBERG, B.A.W. 2014; IRONSIDE, R. 2018; FINDLAY, J. 2019; LANGHOF, J.G. and GÜLDENBERG, S. 2019; WESTON, G. et al. 2019; DANCAUSA, G. et al. 2020.
Memory (commemorative) dark tourism**	33	HOHENHAUS, P. 2013; FORSDICK, C. 2014; PLOMINSKI, A. 2017; HASSAPOPOULOU, M. 2018; SAWCZUK, M. 2020; MACCARTHY, M. and HENG RIGNEY, K.N. 2021; ŠULIGOJ, M. and KENNEL, J. 2022.
Motivations in dark tourism**	30	WARD, A. and STESSEL, A. 2012; TANG, Y. 2014; ZHENG, C. et al. 2016; ALLMAN, H.R. 2017; LENNON, J.J. and TEARE, R. 2017; PODOSHEN, J.S. 2017; KORSTANJE, M.E. 2019; WANG, S. et al. 2019; ÇAKAR, K. 2020; MITCHELL, V. et al. 2020; Su, D.N. et al. 2020.
Postcolonial dark tourism**	5	CARRIGAN, A. 2015 CARRIGAN, A. 2015; CHOUNG, E. and CHOI, S. 2020.
Reviews on dark tourism**	7	STONE, P.R. 2013b; HARTMANN, R. 2014; LIGHT, D. 2017; PLIAKAS, T. 2017; DHATRAK, S.P. 2020; MOISÉIS, J. et al. 2020; NAEEM, N. and RANA, I.A. 2020; LIM, S. and KIM, J. 2023.

Table 2. *Ccontinued*

Subtopic	Number of studies	Author(s) and the year of publication
Slavery-related dark tourism*	17	AUSTIN, N.K. 2002; ASHWORTH, G.J. 2004; BEECH, J. 2008; DANN, G.M.S. and POTTER, R.B. 2008; YANKHOLMES, A.K.B. 2009; YANKHOLMES, A.K.B. and MCKERCHER, B. 2015.
Social media role in dark tourism**	4	ZERVA, K. 2017; BERTOLDI, D. et al. 2020; NAVICKIENE, R. et al. 2020.
Suicide/crime-related dark tourism**	20	PRECE, T. and PRICE, G. 2006; BEST, M. 2007; KANG, E.-J. and LEE, T. 2013; STON, B. 2014.
Terrorism**	6	SÖNMEZ, S.F. 1998; FYALL, A. et al. 2006; KORSTANJE, M.E. and CLAYTON, A. 2012; SERAPHIN, H. 2017; ISAAC, R. 2018.
War/conflict tourism*	78	SHARPLEY, R. and STONE, P.R. 2009; BIGLEY, J.D. et al. 2010; BRAITHWAITE, R. and LEIPER, N. 2010; CARR, G. 2010; CHRONIS, A. 2012; CHEAL, F. and GRIFFIN, T. 2013; SEATON, P. 2019.
Dark associated with Holocaust*	23	LENNON, J.J. and FOLEY, M. 1999; KEIL, C. 2006; KÄELBER, L. 2007; BEECH, J. 2010; BIRAN, A. et al. 2011; COHEN, E.H. 2011; ALLAR, K.P. 2013; ISAAC, R.K. and ÇAKMAK, E. 2014; BUSBY, G. and DEVEREUX, H. 2015; LIYANAGE, S. et al. 2015; PODOSHEN, J.S. 2017.

*Categories adopted from LIGHT, D. 2017, **Categories identified by the authors.

needed in this direction. This study offers several distinctive contributions compared to prior reviews of publications on dark tourism. First of all, it provides a more up-to-date analysis, encompassing themes and trends that have surfaced recently. The paper offers a comprehensive, coherent framework that considers recent advancements in the discipline by methodically classifying research subjects beyond specific events or places. It also provides a more inclusive viewpoint by highlighting significant geographical and thematic gaps, such as the underrepresentation of regions like post-communist countries (PATRICHI, I.C. 2013; MILEVA, S. 2018), Africa, and Latin America. To demonstrate interdisciplinary opportunities and the possibility of further investigation, the study also graphically depicts the thematic linkages among dark tourism subjects (see *Figure 7*).

Our aim was to create a categorization that includes the new topics and does not establish categories based on a single event or location. On our own, we identified 20 categories from among 428 studies. Generally, we found that mass publication in dark tourism research started in earnest in 2011 and increased extensively after 2016. According to BUCKLEY, R. (2012) and LIGHT, D. (2017), themes such as definitions and scope of dark tourism, ethical debates, collective memory issues, motives for visiting dark spots, and visitors' experiences were the highest research priority between 2006 and 2016. A very high-priority topic emerged during our research on dark tourism: war and conflict zones. Current conflicts such as the ones in Israel and Ukraine will change the state of affairs when they end, but we do not have clear evidence for new destinations and directions in dark tourism. However, we believe it is likely that Bucha and Azovstal are potential destinations for dark tourism in the category of war zones where human rights were violated.

Following Duncan LIGHT's influential work in 2017, several reviews have further explored emerging trends and gaps in dark tourism research, which could add signifi-

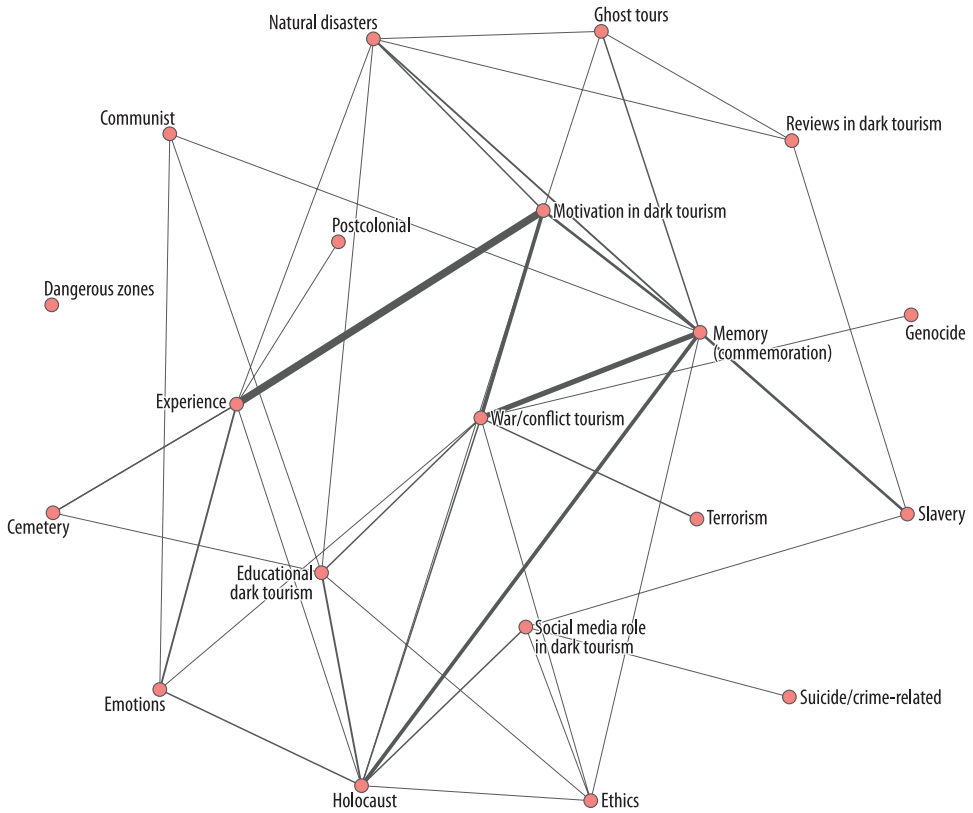


Fig. 7. Connection between categories of dark tourism. Source: Elaborated by the authors.

cant depth to this manuscript. For instance, a bibliometric study on the evolution of dark tourism was presented by MORA FORERO, J.A., NIETO MEJIA, J. and LEÓN-GÓMEZ, A. (2023), with particular attention to the reasons behind tourist visits, moral dilemmas, and the cultural significance of locations connected to tragedy and death. This study shows that there is a growing interest among academics in comprehending the ethical issues of dark tourism, especially when it comes to places like concentration camps and disaster sites (MORA FORERO, J.A. et al. 2023). Expanding on this, SHEKHAR and VALERI (2022), who looked at the study trajectory of dark tourism, there was a noticeable surge in publications during the COVID-19 pandemic, which suggests that themes of mortality and memorialization are

becoming a growing trend. This paper additionally stresses knowledge clustering and network analysis in dark tourism research, mapping academic collaboration with tools like Sci2 and Gephi. SHEKHAR and VALERI also emphasized the significance of investigating dark tourism's sociocultural, psychological, and ethical aspects and advocated for greater regional and cultural variety in the industry (SHEKHAR, A. and VALERI, M. 2022).

In analysing the categories by the keywords used, the categories identified by previous studies were the most popular. Visualizing the connection between the categories also highlights possible research directions, and the combinations of multiple categories could enable us to grasp the complexity of dark tourism. Furthermore,

the underrepresentation of postcolonial or post-socialist studies is also reflected in the thematic connections since these categories are not embedded in the wider net of topics.

One of the essential aims of this paper was to identify research gaps in the literature on dark tourism (BORÉN, T. and GENTILE, M. 2007). Generally, identified gaps can be divided into three groups of understudied topics. First of all, there are territorial gaps. *Figure 3* shows countries with no dark tourism studies (coloured in grey). Historically, there has been tremendous suffering in Africa, Latin America, and Central Asia, and these areas offer many sites for dark tourism. For instance, Africa can be studied in the context of slavery tourism, which has been explored in numerous studies. Scholars like YANKHOLMES and MCKERCHER have extensively examined slavery heritage in Ghana (YANKHOLMES, A.K.B. and MCKERCHER, B. 2015), alongside other studies focusing on the representation and remembrance of slavery across various heritage sites (BEECH, J. 2008; YANKHOLMES, A.K.B. 2009; MOWATT, R.A. and CHANCELLOR, S.H. 2011).

Latin American states could be case studies for tourism in dangerous postcolonial zones, and Central Asia and Eastern Europe historically are the cores of post-socialist and communist frames of reference (CRISTIANA, P.I. 2013; MILEVA, S. 2018; SCHNEIDER, A. et al. 2021) based on factors such as built environment, exploitation, violation, and conquering. The second group of gaps can be called topic gaps (analytical framework gaps). We identified the following topics as little seen in the current research body: postcolonial context in dark tourism (CARRIGAN, A. 2015), use of communist heritages in dark tourism (BORÉN, T. and GENTILE, M. 2007; MILEVA, S. 2018), terrorism-related research, and social media links have not been elucidated insufficiently. Thirdly, interconnections shown on the connections web would be helpful to observe which topics are poorly studied in an interdisciplinary manner.

By showing how locations connected to trauma, humiliation, or conflict can produce

or reinforce conflicting memories and narratives, ASHWORTH'S work has been essential in exploring the function of "dissonant heritage" in dark tourism (ASHWORTH, G.J. 2008). His studies of dark heritage and slavery heritage broaden our knowledge of how challenging histories are portrayed and understood for various audiences, which can enhance our examination of heritage tourism in postcolonial settings and conflict areas. Since ASHWORTH highlights the management of intricate historical narratives at dark tourism sites and raises the possibility of education and reconciliation, this viewpoint meets the gaps in our study (ASHWORTH, G.J. and HARTMANN, R. 2005).

Due to the complex meanings of dark tourism, extending analyses to these understudied regions and topics could benefit education on the events and provide the basis for a shared understanding and commemoration. To this end, an increasing role of internal authors would be also beneficial to fulfil the potentials (emotions and experiences, education and entertainment) of dark tourism.

Dark tourism connects interdisciplinary directions regarding its touristic and service object qualities. According to ISAAC, R.K. (2022), this is an emerging subject in the analysis of dark tourism, but further research is needed to grasp the various types of visitors and experiences and the diversity of meanings associated with tragic events. Our study supports this statement by highlighting regional and thematic gaps in the existing body of literature.

Conclusions

Dark tourism is an intangible product aimed at commemorating and co-creating knowledge. It is an essential tool in cooperative education because evolving popularity allows forgotten history to be revised and transferred to the public. With this paper, we demonstrated a considerable gap in the research on the dark tourism industry, and we offer unique ideas concerning tourism

development. By highlighting this issue, we hope this research will provide future potential study topics. As highlighted in the discussion part, several development pathways offer unique ideas concerning tourism development, but these are not being addressed in the literature: For example, speaking about death camps, forced labour camps, and other dark events in East European and Central Asian countries is crucial, and dark tourism with communist heritage and postcolonial context is less studied. It would not only provide valuable contributions to the scientific work on the topic but could also contribute to wider social and political aims.

This paper's main empirical contribution is mapping the most common dark tourism study themes and identifying their interconnections. Our updated classification of dark tourism research offers a framework for comprehending the field's changing geography. Further investigation into the relationships between dark tourism and social, cultural, and political goals is also encouraged by this article, especially in post-conflict and post-communist settings.

It is important to highlight the primary limitation of this paper, which is that we only searched one term "dark tourism"; we would have inevitably retrieved more articles if we had used more search terms. So far, there are only a few reviews on overall dark tourism studies, thus, our reference point was Duncan LIGHT'S (2017) prototype; we revised the existing categorization and analysed the connections between research topics. The main contributions of this research are the following: the most often discussed research topics and their connections are identified, and the uneven geography of the studies is highlighted. Based on these findings, several possible directions for future research are indicated. Besides the above, another possible study topic concerns the circumstances around the emergence of the novel coronavirus infection. As is known, the first person infected with COVID-19 was identified in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China. Experts claim that the illness was traced to Wuhan's

wet market (LE PAGE, M. 2021; XIAO, X. et al. 2021). Considering this background, Wuhan could be viewed as a possible dark tourist site – creating a new category: pandemic-related destinations.

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