

SPECTACLE OVER SUBSTANCE: THE DIGITAL APPROACH OF DARK TOURISM

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Abstract: *In nowadays digital era, sites of trauma, death, disasters and collective mourning are highly mediated through online platform designed for entertainment and visibility, all empowered by algorithms. The purpose of this paper is to have a closer and critical look on how dark heritage adjusts itself in contemporary tourism, where locations of historical tragedies are repacked into a visual spectacle, all consumed through social media. Algorithms of social media platforms, such as TikTok and Instagram, advantage the shocking values and the dark aesthetics over historical fact and empathy. These platforms favor a higher risk of trivializing trauma and disaster, the whole concept of dark tourism, because of how it's presented in online space. The dark heritage tourism in the digital ages is increasingly subjected to the processes of commodification and cultural detachment, whereby memory becomes a visual thing circulated for affective impact, rather than for a historical reflection. A superficial engagement and the virality of short videos shared online are helping into shaping the behavior of the tourists visiting dark heritage sites. Lastly, this paper holds a critical assessment on how dark tourism is presented in social media and proposes few strategies for educating the tourist of dark heritage sites. In addition, the paper takes the discussion further by exploring the educational role of dark tourism and considering how the aestheticization of trauma shapes public memory. It also suggests ethical and sustainable ways to engage with dark heritage in digital spaces.*

Keywords: *dark heritage, social media algorithm, dark tourism*

JEL classification: Z32

1. Introduction

As stated in previous papers regarding this matter, it's well known that dark tourism involves traveling to places that have encountered, or are associated with death, disaster, depravity, misfortune, and the macabre as Lennon and Foley (1999) defined it. The "dark tourism" term was first defined by Foley and Lennon (1996b) as a "tourist interested in recent death, disaster and atrocity" borne of a "fundamental shift in a way in which death, disaster and atrocity are being handled by those who offer associated tourism products". However, they were not the first to refer to death related destinations. Rojek (1993) called this concept of visiting death related site as "black-spots", or "the commercial developments of grave sites and sites in which celebrities or large numbers of people have met with sudden and violent death". Later, Philip Stone (2006) introduced the concept "spectrum of darkness", expressing the idea that not all dark tourism destinations have the same spectrum of "darkness", some are darker (like Auschwitz – a place where horrid atrocities took place), some can be presented in a

grey light (a random museum of Holocaust that it's not closer to the place where the atrocities took place).

Dark tourism creates a unique, yet controversial concept as it offers an uncommon feeling and atmosphere that are grief, sadness and guilt in contrast to other kind of tourist sites (beaches, mountains, metropolitan, etc.) which presents joyful feelings.

Thus, dark tourism is melding memory, history, culture and economics, raising some essential questions about how we choose to remember, learn and transform pain into an object of visitation.

Very closely related to this phenomenon is the term dark heritage, which refers to those elements of cultural heritage that carry the memory of traumatic and uncomfortable events. These spaces (that can be physical or virtual visited) become sensitive meeting points between memory and identity. In addition, the educational role of dark tourism has gained a growing attention in recent years. Dark heritage sites give visitors meaningful opportunities to learn about history, reflect on ethical issues, and develop empathy. By engaging with stories of suffering and resilience, visitors can better understand the dynamics of violence, intolerance, and collective trauma. Museums, memorial centers, and guided interpretation programs help situate these events within their historical context, ensuring that trauma is not reduced to simple spectacle. In this way, dark tourism can serve as a valuable teaching tool, fostering both emotional connection and critical thinking. Building on this perspective, the goal of this paper is to examine how digital platforms are reshaping the way dark heritage is perceived, consumed, and understood. By looking at the influence of algorithms, online visual culture, and user-generated content, the study explores the tension between visibility and sensitivity, between remembrance and entertainment. The following sections pursue this line of inquiry by analyzing how digital mediation transforms the role of dark heritage in contemporary tourism and by identifying ethical, sustainable strategies that can help preserve its educational value.

2. Literature review

The literature on dark tourism explores its psychological, ethical, and cultural dimensions. Seaton (1996) framed it as "thanatourism," where visitors seek confrontation with death as a form of existential reflection. Lennon and Foley (2000) emphasized that dark tourism reflects postmodern anxieties and global media fascination with tragedy. Scholars such as Hartmann (2014) and Light (2017) have noted its uneasy relationship with heritage management, arguing that dark sites often oscillate between commemoration and commercialization. Recent studies have expanded this discussion to the digital sphere. Bolan and Simone-Charteris (2018) explored how online media can enhance the dark tourism experience, while Sharma (2024) examined the intersection of digital culture and dark tourism. Together, these studies suggest that digital mediation both democratizes and distorts engagement with dark heritage. In nowadays digital era, sites of trauma, death, disasters and collective mourning are highly mediated through online platform designed for entertainment and visibility, all empowered by algorithms. When it comes to dark heritage sites, the social media platform helps in transforming these places with a huge tragic weight in a different scenery, all to get more likes, shares and visibility. Every influencer is searching for a different and innovative way to demonstrate their presence on the places where others perished, as Hodalska (2017) stated. At this point, we can talk about commercialization

of pain through social media platforms, capitalizing grief and suffering through online storytelling and technology. Although Holdaska (2017) talk about the motivation for some of the tourist visiting dark heritage sites, that they present the same pattern in being “digital narcissist” with the need to collect memories to come back in touch with their feelings.

The dark heritage tourism in the digital ages increasingly subjected to the processes of commodification and cultural detachment, whereby memory becomes a visual thing circulated for affective impact, rather than for a historical reflection. A superficial engagement and the virality of short videos (reels) shared online are shaping the behavior of the tourists visiting dark heritage sites. In an era where the “like, share and follow” buttons are the new instruments used by the public to reach the history, it can be said that “clicking” is becoming synonymous with “remembering”. A selfie from Auschwitz or Chernobyl can be perceived as empathy but can also trivialize the deep meaning of that dark heritage site. The algorithm-driven logic of digital platforms amplifies these trends. Because algorithms favor content that generates the most engagement, they tend to push forward shocking, aestheticized, or sensational images of dark heritage. Strong emotional reactions, whether sadness, fascination, or fear, are rewarded with greater visibility. In turn, users feel encouraged to produce striking visuals instead of engaging in meaningful reflection. This creates a feedback loop in which sites marked by trauma risk becoming stages for digital self-performance. The idea of ‘affective publics’ (Papacharissi, 2015) is particularly useful here: online communities form around emotionally charged images rather than historical understanding. Shared feelings, not factual knowledge, drive engagement, shifting dark heritage from a space of learning to one of emotional consumption. Digital tourism also shapes what researchers call ‘mediated presence.’ In this mode, physically being at a site becomes less important than capturing and sharing that moment online. As documenting replaces experiencing, the reflective dimension of dark tourism gives way to performances crafted for algorithmic visibility.

Finally, online exposure often leads to selective memory. Users encounter fragmented, decontextualized versions of the past, not curated by historians or educators, but filtered through platform algorithms. As a result, tragedy risks becoming a visual commodity, and remembrance is reduced to an aesthetic gesture.

Overall, the literature suggests that dark tourism is undergoing a digital turn, one that requires careful analysis of how trauma is mediated, commodified, or educationally enriched in online spaces.

3. Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative and critical approach, analyzing digital representations of dark heritage across social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. The research methodology is based on critical discourse analysis and media semiotics, aimed at understanding how algorithmic structures influence emotional engagement and educational outcomes. A theoretical review of old and contemporary works was conducted to map the evolution of dark tourism research, with emphasis on digital mediation, affect theory, and memory studies. Academic sources include peer-reviewed articles, books, and recent analyses of online behavior. Sources include peer-reviewed literature on dark tourism, social media studies, and digital ethics. This analysis focuses on:

- visual aesthetics used in dark tourism posts,
- language patterns emphasizing shock, aestheticism, or emotional display,
- algorithmic amplification mechanisms,
- ethical issues emerging from content circulation.

The purpose of this paper is to have a closer and critical look on how dark heritage adjusts itself in contemporary tourism, where locations of historical tragedies are repacked into a visual spectacle, all consumed through social media. Algorithms of social media platforms, such as TikTok and Instagram, advantage the shocking values and the dark aesthetics over historical fact and empathy. The digital content trends were compared with official museum narratives, educational guidelines, and curatorial frameworks of internationally recognized dark heritage sites. This comparison highlights discrepancies between historically accurate representations and algorithmically rewarded content. The study does not collect or analyze private data. It relies on public, widely visible trends, hashtags were followed in online.

4. Results and discussion: Digital platforms and the aestheticization of trauma

Digital platforms have transformed the ways in which dark heritage sites are perceived and consumed. Algorithms reward engagement-driven content, privileging emotion, spectacle, and aesthetic appeal over factual accuracy and moral sensitivity. Sontag (2003) and Hirsch (2012) caution that such visual consumption risks turning historical suffering into commodified emotion. This dynamic reconfigures collective memory, making it algorithmically curated rather than historically grounded. Before the digital era, the visual representation of worldwide tragedies, dark tourism sites and grief representations were managed by institutions such as museums, or they were presented in documentaries and history books, all of which tried to maintain a certain rigor and solemnity (Lennon & Foley, 2000). Building on Citton (2017), the results show that algorithmic systems play a major role in shaping collective memory:

- users are exposed to curated fragments of history,
- viral sounds and trends overshadow historical information,
- emotional intensity becomes more important than factual accuracy.

Nowadays representation of dark heritage sites is also shaped by visual social media platforms, platforms where anybody can create a dark and aestheticized grief content and the accent is not on the historical facts or empathy, the algorithms are showing the “shock”, the emotion and it’s just a visual representation (Sontag, 2003). The problem in this matter arises, in my opinion, when algorithms “decide” what kind of content the users are seeing (Citton, 2017). What kind of “memory” is collectively building when the algorithms show just one side of “the story”? Although the digital aestheticization of trauma is not a negative act, it can also function as a gateway to knowledge and empathy, it’s difficult to maintain solemnity and a certain rigor.

In the absence of a responsible approach, collective memory can be distorted, exploited or abused. One of the biggest risks is trivializing history by transforming it into attractive visual content, but it’s a content emptied of its deep and painful meaning. The result of

this trivializing is that trauma is aestheticized, and historical complexity is sacrificed for visibility (Sontag, 2003; Hirsch, 2012). Institutional narratives emphasize:

- contextualization,
- survivor testimony,
- critical reflection,
- historical accuracy.

In contrast, algorithm-driven content prioritizes:

- spectacle,
- emotional reaction,
- short attention spans,
- visually iconic motifs.

Thus, digital mediation often undermines the educational mission of dark heritage sites. Another risk is the unethical commercialization of the trauma, when platforms and its users can capitalize the interest in dark heritage to sell experiences, products, or services that turn tragedy into spectacle. VR tours, thematic filters, memorial-themed, or sponsored content related to genocide can reach sensitive limits of memory exploitation. The grief and trauma are reduced to an easy emotion and a background.

An alternative to online hysteria is slow tourism. Slow tourism is defined as spending more time in a certain place, with the priority of personal reflection and understanding the deep cultural meaning of the visited place (Fullagar, Markwell et Wilson, 2012). This kind of tourism holds strong relations with the local community and reduces the social impact of traveling on the environment (idem). One of the biggest benefits of slow tourism on dark heritage sites is that this form of tourism is combating trivialization of historical meaning and grief in online platforms and it's creating a stronger and ethical bond between tourist, local communities and dark heritage spots. In a world where dark heritage risks are becoming just an aesthetic emotional Instagram post, slow tourism is offering a sustainable and ethical strategy. At the same time, digital technologies can be used in meaningful ways when they are guided by ethical principles. Curated digital archives, contextual mobile apps, and narrative-based AR experiences can foster deeper understanding rather than superficial engagement. Instead of amplifying shock value, these tools can offer layered explanations, survivor testimonies, and interactive timelines that help visitors navigate complex histories. *Digital literacy also plays a crucial role.* Teaching users how algorithms work, how to photograph sensitive sites responsibly, and how to share memories ethically can influence how they behave online. When tourists approach dark heritage with greater critical awareness, social media can shift from being a space of spectacle to a space of thoughtful, mediated learning. Equally important is giving local communities a voice in shaping digital representations. Their perspectives are often overshadowed in global digital narratives. Involving them in the curation process can ensure that online portrayals of traumatic histories are more accurate, respectful, and rooted in local cultural contexts. Despite risks, digital spaces can also:

- democratize access,
- preserve survivor testimonies,
- support educational projects,
- engage younger audiences responsibly.

Another alternative is involving circular economy in dark heritages sites. Circular economy helps to rethink how resources, materials, symbolic and digital – are produced, consumed and reused.

5. Conclusions

Digitalizing the dark tourism, dark heritage sites involve a tension between visibility and sensitivity. The key question is not whether to digitize trauma, but how to do so without reducing it to spectacle, commodification, or aesthetic consumption. The responsibility lies with all the actors involved: platforms, creators, cultural institutions, and the public, to build a digital culture of memory that respects suffering and grief, the survivors and their families, preserves the meaning of the sites and invites them to reflection, not just reaction. This paper has shown that digital platforms reshape dark heritage by favoring visibility over depth, emotion over context, and spectacle over substance. Even so, dark tourism still holds strong educational potential—especially when supported by ethical mediation, thoughtful contextualization, and responsible digital practices. By bringing together slow tourism principles, digital literacy, curated archives, and the active participation of local communities, the reflective and educational value of dark heritage can be revitalized in the digital era. Looking ahead, interdisciplinary approaches will be essential to balancing technological innovation with ethical remembrance, ensuring that traumatic histories are not just seen, but genuinely understood.

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