

Managing motivations and satisfaction in Dark Immersive Theatre Experiences

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Abstract

Dark Immersive Theatre Experiences (DITE) have been growing in popularity in recent years as an innovative product that combines darkness with immersive theatre, attracting individuals all over the world who seek new and enticing experiences. This study aims to develop predictive models of participant satisfaction in DITE based on their underlying motivations. Based on Principal Component Analysis, we were able to identify five motivational components: "dark intensity", "survival", "immersion", "theatre", and "unwinding", which explained 66.7% of the motivation's variation. Furthermore, we performed multiple linear regression models to predict participants' overall satisfaction in DITE. The final predictive models allowed to explain 66.0% of satisfaction's variance, composed by six independent variables: "novel experience", "captivating plot", "push limits", "to have fun", "coparticipation", and "hyper-realistic experience". Our work contributes for optimizing DITE by presenting specific factors that allow to enhance satisfaction. Our data provide DITE managers useful information to improve and optimize experiences in such a way that enhances participant's satisfaction and further increase their interest to such experiences.

Keywords: Dark Immersive Theatre Experiences (DITE); Dark tourism; Tourist satisfaction; Tourist motivations; Portugal.

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1. Introduction

Technological advancements in transportation, namely the emergence of low-cost airlines, improvements in economic and social quality of life, accomplishments in the realm of leisure in relation to work, and the development of information and communication technologies have collectively contributed to the generalization of tourism practices, transforming tourism into a universal phenomenon (Silva, 2013). Over the past few decades, with the growth of tourism demand, tourists have become more and more diverse, sophisticated, and demanding. As so, the emergence of innovative and specialized products has become a response to meet travellers' heightened expectations (Pikkemaat et al., 2019). Current social dynamics are redirecting tourism motivations towards more specific forms of consumption, therefore sustaining the development of novel products (World Tourism Organization, 2019). Should tourism destinations fail to diversify and innovate their product portfolios, they face the risk of losing competitiveness and, consequently, reducing their level of attractiveness (Martin-Rios & Ciobanu, 2019). Moreover, in tourist destinations where the number of visitors is increasingly significantly, such is the case of Portugal (WTTC, 2018), the lack of measures can jeopardize its sustainability (Losada & Mota, 2019).

Immersive theatre has gained significant popularity in the tourism sector as an innovative product (Alston, 2016b). While traditional theatre events maintain the so-called fourth wall, i.e., an imaginary boundary that separates the audience from the performers, setting, and plot, immersive theatre events remove this barrier. As a result, immersive theatre not only allows, but actively promotes interaction between the audience and the performers, as well as with the unfolding narrative (White, 2012). This focus on participant's experience places the audience at the heart of the production (Machon, 2016). As a result, immersive theatre tends to intensify the overall experience, resulting in higher levels of absorption and engagement (Hogarth et al., 2018). In immersive theatre productions, participants have the opportunity to shift from mere passive observers to actual co-creators of the narrative and, ultimately, the experience itself (Alston, 2016a).

The market of immersive entertainment seems to demonstrate remarkable growth potential. According to the "Immersive Entertainment Industry Annual Report" of 2019, immersive entertainment market in the United States was evaluated at 9.7 billion euros, reflecting a substantial 116% increase compared to the previous year (Brigante & Elger, 2020). In the United Kingdom, the "The immersive economy in the UK 2019" report identified the existence of 4,500 immersive companies, with 58% of them reporting revenue growth compared to the previous year, while only 13% reported a decline in revenue during the same period (Kilkelly, 2020). Notably, the British government allocated a funding of 2 million pounds for projects in the immersive entertainment sector in 2019 (JTB Tourism Research & Consulting, 2022).

There seems to be an important trend in immersive productions, with a focus on constructing experiences centred around darkness. In fact, the market for horror has been growing in recent years, with tourists seeking new and enticing experiences (Wright, 2018). A study conducted by Brigante and Elger (2020) not only emphasizes immersive theatre as the preferred form of entertainment, but also places darkness, particularly mystery, drama, and horror, among the most favoured categories. Therefore, by concentrating on the synergies between immersive theatre and darkness, DITE have the potential to align with the prevailing trends in the contemporary tourism practices, providing unique and engaging experiences (Belo & Gustavo, 2020). The inception of DITE can be traced back to the early 2000s and has since proliferated worldwide, evolving into a global phenomenon. One of the most significant examples is Punchdrunk's "Sleep No More," which attracted over 2 million participants in New York and more than 400,000 participants in Shanghai in the last decade (JTB Tourism Research & Consulting, 2022).

However, there is a noticeable gap in existing research, as studies have yet to address into the dynamics, nuances and challenges specific to DITE, which is essential for the sustained and successful introduction of novel products into the market (Diviseker & van Nguyen, 2018). Understanding the heterogeneous nature of the market is a fundamental requirement for the contemporary tourism practices (Novelli, 2018), and producers should adapt their offerings to align with the specific motivations of the respective market segments (Robinson & Novelli, 2005). The aim of this study consists therefore in assessing the motivations that lead individuals to engage in DITE and to analyse how these motivations influence their overall satisfaction with the experience.

This study brings novelty in at least three distinct ways, encompassing important implications for both the scientific community and managerial decision-making. First, as far as our knowledge extends, this is the first study that comprehensively addresses the role of participants' motivations on shaping overall satisfaction in DITE, addressing an important gap in the literature. Second, through the application of an analytical approach, this study is able to provide a parsimonious explanation of satisfaction with DITE, using a reduced number of independent variables. Third, the identification of specific items capable to predict participants' satisfaction in DITE offers valuable insights for DITE managers, enabling them to enhance and optimize the way they construct these experiences.

2. Literature review

2.1. Motivations and satisfaction in tourism

Oliver (1980) introduced the Expectation Confirmation Theory (ECT), which suggests that satisfaction results from the comparison between consumers' perceived performance of a given product or service and their initial expectations. According to the ECT, after consuming a product or service, the initial degree of expectations becomes the reference in which the performance is then evaluated (Lai & Hitchcock, 2015). This implies that, to assess their satisfaction, the consumer compares the outcome of the experience with against their initial expectations (Zehrer et al., 2011). As so, there are three possible outcomes: i) when the level of performance exceeds the initial expectations, it results in satisfaction, or positive confirmation; (ii) when the level of performance falls below the initial expectations, it leads to dissatisfaction, or negative confirmation; (iii) when the level of performance is neither higher nor lower than the initial expectations, it does not generate satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Zhang & Chan, 2016). Therefore, the ECT significantly highlights that analysing expectations and performance separately would be ineffective for improving products or services. As suggested by Sever (2015), isolating the analysis of performance would imply that attributes associated with low ratings require intervention. However, if the attributed importance is even lower, it indicates that consumers are actually satisfied with that specific attribute, and resource allocation should be directed toward other priorities.

Motivations have played a central role in understanding and predicting tourist behaviours (Yi et al., 2018). Crompton (1979) defines motivations as the desires and needs of an individual, representing a key variable for accessing the factors that stimulate, direct, and integrate individuals' behaviours and activities. Therefore, motivations are typically considered in explaining and predicting behaviours (Mill & Morrison, 1998). According to Albayrak and Caber (2018), by understanding consumers' underlying motivations, creators can effectively restructure their experiences to meet the desires of the demand. Tourist motivations have been recognized as a significant predictor of tourist satisfaction (Alexander et al., 2015).

Satisfaction has been emphasized as a determinant of the success of tourism products (Yoon & Uysal, 2005) and is described as the ability of the product to meet tourists' motivations (Sato et al., 2018). In the context of services, an organization cannot be viable without ensuring customer satisfaction (Han & Hyun, 2018). Oliver (2010: p. 8) describes satisfaction as "a judgment that a product/service feature,

or the product or service itself, provides a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfilment”, referring to how well the product meets the consumer’s expectations from both an emotional and cognitive perspective (Joo et al., 2020). While there is no single way to measure satisfaction, several researchers have suggested a general or cumulative perspective of satisfaction, which considers the overall experience, or its main components based on subjective judgments following consumption (Shakoori & Hosseini, 2019). In tourism, various studies have used a single item to measure overall consumer satisfaction (e.g., Jarvis et al., 2016; Milman & Tasci, 2018). Jarvis et al. (2016) assessed tourist satisfaction by analysing how economic, social and environmental factors influenced overall satisfaction. In turn, Milman and Tasci (2018) identified the factors driving satisfaction in the context of theme parks, by examining the experiential consumption dimensions of sense, feel, think, relate, and act.

2.2. The relationship between darkness and immersive theatre

Dark tourism can be described “where the tourist’s experience is essentially composed of ‘dark’ emotions such as pain, death, horror or sadness, many of which result from the infliction of violence that are not usually associated with a voluntary entertainment experience” (Ashworth, 2008, p. 234). Traditional forms of tourism seem to predominantly focus on pleasure, suggesting that this pleasure is not associated with darkness themes. However, in some context of voluntary entertainment, tourists willingly seek out risk, in contrast to more conventional tourist activities that assume the supposed absence of risk (William & Baláž, 2015). Therefore, tourism practices, and specifically dark tourism, currently represent a broad and complex spectrum of emotions associated with different motivations (Light, 2017). For example, the quest for meaning or a sense of purpose from experiences aligns with the main global trends in tourism (World Tourism Organization, 2019). As so, the pursuit of intense experiences that evoke strong emotions and adrenaline rushes seems to connect with the willingness to embrace risk as part of these experiences (Hoffner & Levine, 2005).

Immersive theatre experiences appear to share common ground with darkness, as they are designed and produced to intensify the overall experience. The designation of an experience as immersive is primarily related to the depth of its characteristics, rather than the typology of the characteristics (Alston, 2013). These productions are highly versatile and flexible, where all attributes are important and collaborate together for the overall effect of the experience (White, 2012). Immersive theatre amplifies intensity and participant engagement through unique procedures and invitation processes that challenge the norms generally expected in traditional performances (Machon, 2016).

This dynamic affects both creators and participants. Creators are responsible with creating an environment that transforms spectators into active participants (Heddon et al., 2012) and for the productions to be built around the participant’s experience and structures the production around the participant’s experience (Hogarth et al., 2018). Participants, on the other hand, are expected to be alert, engaged, immersed, and prepared for vigorous and intense participation (Alston, 2016a). In immersive contexts, participants assume an active role, in contrast to mere observers, and become part of the experience (Biggin, 2017; Turnbull, 2016). When immersive theatre reaches its full potential, it fosters a sense of effort and mutual support between actors and participants in a co-creative context that maximizes the theatrical event (Soloski, 2016). Participants often assume a heightened, hyper-self-role, an amplified version of themselves (Alston, 2013). Bayly (2011) characterizes this hyper-self as displaying hyperactive symptoms, which range from bouts of laughter to coughing, sniffing, sweating, writhing, fidgeting, murmuring, whispering, creaking, screaming, and crying.

In immersive theatre settings, the audience is not confined to distant, designated seating areas separated from the action; they have the freedom to move through the spaces (Alston, 2016a; Wiseman et al., 2017). In most immersive theatre experiences, participants move either individually or in small groups, typically consisting of two or three people (White, 2012). However, merely placing the audience

in a large-scale, panoramic setting is not sufficient to guarantee immersion. Immersive theatre productions must actively create a comprehensive and coherent environment that fosters exploration, investigation, and interaction with the space itself (Alston, 2016a; 2016b). The physical design of immersive experiences revolves around manipulating space and the environment to elicit an emotional response from participants (Biggin, 2017). To achieve a sense of presence in the space, the interactive and dialogical relationship between creators and participants is crucial (Alston, 2016a). Hogarth et al. (2018) describe the actor-participant relationship as a responsive and dialogical collaboration, involving verbal or expressive internal discourse, in the creation of a shared experience. This relationship depends on trust, commitment, and willingness from both parties for it to succeed.

In the perspective of Blyth (2016), the popularity of immersive theatre can be attributed to its ability to provide unique and memorable experiences, driven by the idea that the audience consists of unique individuals, leading to productions that offer personalized experiences. In immersive theatre, individual experiences vary, resulting in multiple narratives corresponding to the number of participants present (Biggin, 2017; Belo, 2016).

2.3. The concept of Dark Immersive Theatre Experiences

A study conducted by Brigante and Elger (2020) clearly highlights immersive horror theatre contexts as one of the main global trends in immersive entertainment. These contexts are characterized by a proliferation of recent productions and a strong and growing interest from global audiences. DITE represent a new type of product that combines darkness and immersive theatre. In other words, these contexts build upon the fundamental characteristics of immersive theatre while incorporating an additional crucial element: the invitation to participate through dark themes (Belo & Gustavo, 2020).

In this sense, the significant role played by the dark theme suggests that these contexts justify a specific conceptualization, as evident in the practices of dark tourism worldwide (Light, 2017). In a plural, subjective, complex, and diverse world, the trends of specialization and segmentation in tourism (Soldatenko & Backer, 2019) imply that it would be simplistic to consider that the motivations behind participants' engagement in immersive theatre experiences do not differ from those driving their participation in DITE (Belo & Gustavo, 2023).

We face ourselves with a set of experiences that evoke intense emotional states associated with dark elements, such as fear, which represents the most basic definition of terror, without necessarily being terrifying in terms of using traditionally employed horror elements in the media (Clasen et al., 2018; Clasen et al., 2019). Hence, DITE can be described as a voluntary entertainment practice that results from the compatible combination of the fundamental characteristics of immersive theatre and the premises, themes, and effects of darkness.

3. Methodology

Participants of this study focused are consumers of DITE in Portugal who were travelling, or alternatively a willingness to travel, purposely to engage in these experiences. Self-reported pre- and post-experience questionnaires were administered, with completion times ranging from 5 to 15 minutes, depending on individual response times. All questionnaires were then entered into a prepared database. Data was collected in two different DITEs in Portugal: 'Muzeum', during the months of June and July of 2019, and 'O Matadouro' ('The Slaughterhouse'), in September and October of 2020.

'Muzeum' was created by Check-in Management in a former agricultural school. Participants walked in groups generally composed of three individuals, collaborating to escape from a house where the lines between reality and fiction blurred through a variety of environments, bizarre situations, and unsettling

sensations, including intense moments with the characters, facing spooky challenges and witnessing sinister scenes. Each session lasted approximately 100 minutes, guiding participants through a sequence of nine different rooms, each with its own unique ambiance, storyline, and actor. Sessions were available from Thursday to Sunday, featuring two sessions per night. Entrance was restricted to individuals aged 18 and above, and ticket prices ranged from 20€ to 30€.

'O Matadouro' ('The Slaughterhouse') was produced by Teatro Reflexo in a former slaughterhouse. Participants engaged with a dysfunctional family that owned the slaughterhouse, characterized by patriarchal, religious, and disconcerting dynamics. This experience delivered powerful emotional impact, featuring group challenges, puzzle-solving, tests of courage, and adrenaline rushes. Sessions were held on Friday and Saturday nights, with seven sessions per day. The age limit for participation was set at 16 years. Admission tickets were priced at a fixed rate of €16.

Both DITEs considered in this study were based in Portugal for three main reasons. First, Portugal is a relevant European tourist destination, being recognized by several awards in this category. Second, the pursuit of niche products in Portugal is warranted, given the growing number of visitors. Niche strategies seem to be able to counter the adverse effects of overtourism, spreading tourism activities across the region, and ultimately not jeopardizing the sustainability of the destination (Novelli, 2018). Third, Portugal was the most viable option to ensure on-site data collection due to its proximity to the research team. It's worth noting that the experiences analysed encompassed all DITEs that were active in Portugal during the data collection phase of this research. This is justified by the inherent dynamics of the phenomenon, as DITEs typically remain active for extended periods, often during several months.

The pre-experience questionnaire was composed of two distinct sections. The first section aimed to test 26 items as motivations to DITE, with each item being formulated as a sentence centred on the individual and its motivations for engaging in DITE. Participants rated their level of agreement with each statement on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree). The items were obtained from a netnography analysis (see Belo & Gustavo, 2020), and are available in appendix 1. Netnography analysis was defined as an "an online participatory observation technique based on user-generated online content that enables market researchers to observe natural consumer behaviours" (An & Alarcón, 2021: p. 1), being therefore an adequate way to access to the fundamental attributes of a certain product or service (Chen et al., 2022). The last section of the questionnaire included basic sociodemographic variables, including age and gender.

The post-experience questionnaire contained two main sections. The first section accessed the consumer overall satisfaction, measured in a single item (Jarvis et al., 2016; Milman & Tasci, 2018) on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (extremely dissatisfied) to 7 (extremely satisfied). The second section focused on participants' perceived performance of DITE, using the same 26 items from the pre-experience questionnaire on a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 corresponded to extremely dissatisfied and 7 referred to extremely satisfied.

For data analysis, the process of composing predictive models of participant satisfaction in DITE based on their underlying motivation was divided into three phases. The first step involved validating the 26 items as actual motivations to engage in DITE. This validation was based on the following criteria: a) obtaining an overall score higher than the midpoint of the scale, and b) obtaining an overall score above the average overall score of the items. In the second phase, a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) with orthogonal varimax rotation and Kaiser normalization was conducted on the previously validated items to identify motivational components explaining individuals' motivation for engaging in DITE. The final stage involved testing the items associated to the motivational components, but in regarding to the perceived performance, as predictors of overall consumer satisfaction, ultimately sustaining the

creation of a predictive model for DITE satisfaction. It is important to note that data from the pre-experience questionnaire was meant to elucidate participants' motivations, while data from the post-experience questionnaire intended to evaluate perceived performance and overall satisfaction.

4. Data analysis

4.1. Sociodemographic information

A total of 610 participants were considered for analysis. The post-experience questionnaire was also completed by 344 participants. Table 1 presents the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants. The average age of the participants was 32.0 years old, with a standard deviation of 7.9 years old. The age ranged from 18 to 70 years old. In terms of gender, 54.1% of participants identified themselves as females, while 45.9% as males. Most participants have a bachelor's degree (43.1%) and are working (81.1%). Lastly, 43.6% of participants reported having participated in DITE before.

Table 1. Sociodemographic variables

Variable	N	%
<i>Age</i>	610	100.0
18-30 years old	288	47.2
31-40 years old	255	41.8
41+ years old	67	10.9
<i>Gender</i>	610	100.0
Female	330	54.1
Male	280	45.9
<i>Education background</i>	610	100.0
Basic or high school	181	29.7
Bachelor's degree	263	43.1
Master's or Doctorate degree	164	26.9
Prefer not to answer	2	0.3
<i>Job situation</i>	610	100.0
Active	495	81.1
Inactive	29	4.8
Full-time student	70	11.5
<i>Previous experience in DITE</i>	610	100.0
Yes	266	43.6
No	344	56.4

4.2. Motivations in Dark Immersive Theatre Experiences

To explore the underlying motivational factors driving participation in DITE, a PCA was conducted. This analytical approach facilitates a more concise examination of motivations as it allows to reduce the initially considered items while preserving meaningful information by grouping them into motivational components.

From the initial pool of 26 considered items, a preliminary screening was conducted to identify items that would be retained for the PCA. The inclusion criterion was based on the average response value for each item, as participants responded to the items on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree). Only items with an average response pattern higher than 5.38, surpassing the midpoint of the total composite of motivations, were included to ensure the incorporation of items reflecting significant motivational aspects relevant to participants engaged in the considered DITE experiences. Consequently, the items "confront personal fears" ($M = 4.67$), "venue"

(M = 4.87), "achieve collective goals" (M = 4.95), and "Select scenes" (M = 4.62) were excluded from the PCA. The full descriptive statistics of the motivational items in DITE are included in the appendix 2.

Therefore, a final set of 22 items was considered for the PCA. The analysis employed an orthogonal varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization. The adequacy of the sample size for the PCA was assessed using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure, which yielded a value of 0.939, indicating an "excellent" level of adequacy (Hutcheson and Sofroniou, 1999). Additionally, Bartlett's test of sphericity ($\chi^2 (231) = 7550.093, p < 0.001$) demonstrated a significant correlation among the variables, further validating the suitability of the conducted PCA.

To determine item selection and subsequent aggregation into components, a criterion was applied. Only items with communalities exceeding 0.6 after extraction were retained. Components were retained if they exhibited eigenvalues greater than 1, and items were assigned to each component if their loadings after rotation exceeded 0.6 and their second loading was less than 0.4. The decision-making process for item retention or exclusion in DITE is presented in the Table 2.

Table 2. *Criteria for retaining motivational items in Dark Immersive Theatre Experiences*

Item	Component					Decision
	1	2	3	4	5	
Hyper-realistic experience	0.679			0.343		Retain
Coherent narrative	0.602			0.531		Exclude
To have fun			0.153		0.808	Retain
Captivating plot	0.280			0.744		Retain
Push limits		0.641		0.379		Retain
Challenging experience		0.517			0.502	Exclude
Frightening experience	0.838	0.145				Retain
Mobility			0.296	0.579		Exclude
Quality of the cast				0.763	-0.301	Retain
Leave comfort zone	0.434	0.554				Exclude
Solve riddles		0.339	0.514			Exclude
Novel experience	0.371		0.670			Retain
Coparticipation			0.796		0.153	Retain
Multisensorial experience	0.285		0.575			Exclude
Intense emotions	0.755	0.295				Retain
Atmospheric suspense	0.779			0.240		Retain
Full absorption	0.626			0.404		Exclude
Overcome barriers	0.344	0.656				Retain
Visceral fear	0.697	0.424				Exclude
Dynamic spectacle		0.340	0.548			Exclude
Self-discovery		0.776	0.212			Retain
Adrenaline rushes	0.739	0.375				Retain

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. Rotation converged in 9 iterations.

As presented in Table 3, the PCA identified five components that met the criteria established. These components collectively accounted for 67.55% of the variance in the "motivation" construct. Therefore, a total of 13 motivational items out of the initial set of 22 included in the PCA will be considered.

Table 3. Factor analysis of motivations in *Dark Immersive Theatre Experiences* ($n = 610$)

	M	DP	Communality (after extraction)	Loading factors	Eigen- value	% of variance explained	Cronbach's α
Motivational component "Dark intensity"	5.55	1.27			5.223	23.74	0.90
Frightening experience	5.39	1.68	0.735	0.838			
Atmospheric suspense	5.69	1.46	0.752	0.779			
Intense emotions	5.57	1.47	0.765	0.755			
Adrenaline rushes	5.62	1.53	0.730	0.739			
Hyper-realistic experience	5.47	1.42	0.650	0.679			
Motivational component "Survival"	5.11	1.35			2.964	13.47	0.80
Self-discovery	5.16	1.57	0.714	0.776			
Overcome barriers	5.10	1.53	0.697	0.656			
Push limits	5.07	1.69	0.701	0.641			
Motivational component "Immersion"	5.60	1.09			2.645	12.02	0.59
Coparticipation	5.10	1.49	0.673	0.796			
Novel experience	6.11	1.07	0.654	0.670			
Motivational component "Theatre"	5.36	1.41			2.642	12.00	0.64
Quality of the cast	5.25	1.77	0.745	0.763			
Captivating plot	5.46	1.51	0.680	0.744			
Motivational component "Unwinding"	5.54	1.68			1.388	6.31	-
To have fun	5.54	1.68	0.703	0.808			
% of total variance explained						67.55	

KMO sampling adequacy test = 0.939; Bartlett's Test of Sphericity: Approx. X^2 : 7550.093; df: 231; $p < 0.001$;

Items were retained based on the results of factor analysis (eigenvalue > 1) and highest factor loading > 0.6 and second highest factor loading < 0.4 .

Extraction Method: PCA. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. Rotation converged in six iterations

The first component includes five items: "frightening experience", "atmospheric suspense", "intense emotions", "adrenaline rushes", and "hyper-realistic experience", explaining 23.74% of the variance of motivations. These items represent aspects of the DITE experience characterized by dark elements and the emotional/physiological activation they elicit. Consequently, this component is labelled as "dark intensity". Participants emphasized the desire to be frightened, to feel intense emotions and adrenaline rushes, within an atmosphere of suspense and a hyper-realistic context that blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality. This pursuit of intensity often involves a willingness to embrace risks for the sake of the experience, as posed by Hoffner and Levine (2005). Furthermore, by seeking dark elements for purposes of voluntary entertainment, the findings reinforce the multiplicity, plurality, and subjectivity of contemporary tourist practices, sustaining forms of consumption that were not traditionally associated with voluntary entertainment contexts (Ashworth & Isaac, 2015).

The second component consists of the items "self-discovery", "overcoming adversity", and "push limits", explaining 13.47% of the variance of motivations. These items relate to the participants' inner exploration, their ability to overcome barriers, and their desire to test their personal limits. Thus, this component can be interpreted as reflecting an intrapersonal dimension and is named "survival". Participants expressed a desire to feel that they managed to survive DITE, which are able to achieve when they do not give up to fear and successfully reach the ending of a challenging experience. As so, DITE managers should design their experiences in a way that entices participants to push beyond personal limits and overcome mental and physical barriers, on a journey of self-discovery and personal growth. This relates with a trend between tourism motivations and the pursuit of meaningful

experiences (World Tourism Organization, 2019). In a globalized world, innovative and specialized tourism products have been representing diversity and differentiation (Novelli, 2018), often enabling tourists to embrace experiences associated to a deeper sense of purpose on a personal level (Marson, 2011).

The third component comprises two items: "coparticipation" and "novel experience", explaining 12.02% of the variance in the construct. These items capture the characteristics of the DITE experience itself, specifically related to the unique aspects that distinguish DITE from other forms of entertainment. Therefore, this component is named "immersion". This motivational component reflects the emergence of novel immersive theatre models, emphasizing the active role of the audience and the prospect of engaging on an experience unique. This aligns with the fundamentals of immersive theatre as a growing trend within contemporary performances that focuses on participants' engagement (Alston, 2016), placing them at the heart of the experience (White, 2012). The active and dynamic role of participants transforms them into co-creators, transcending the traditional role of passive observer (Turnbull, 2016). Immersive productions empower individuals through the power of choice (Machon, 2016), enabling a feeling of forming distinctive and personal experiences, based on their own decisions (Wiseman et al., 2017). Considering that individual experiences change from participant to participant, in immersive theatre, there is not a singular narrative, but rather as many narratives as the number of participants (Belo, 2016).

The fourth component also consists of two items: "quality of the cast" and "captivating plot", explaining 12.00% of the variance of motivations. These items pertain to aspects inherent in theatrical performances and align with the nature of DITE experiences, which share similarities with theatre. As a result, this component is labelled as "theatre". Despite the emphasis on the distinctive characteristics of immersive theatre, participants of this study do not forgo central elements of traditional theatre, namely the quality of the cast and the construction of a compelling narrative. In immersive theatre, the relationship between performers and participants is critical, as a responsive collaboration through verbal or expressive dialogue that results in a co-created and shared experience between both parties (Biggin, 2017; Hogarth et al., 2018). These interactions can culminate in intimate one-on-one encounters, creating moments of profound connection between the actor and the participant. As for the narrative, it can encompass both realistic or surrealistic elements (White, 2012), but it should be coherent with the environment of the overall experience in terms of space, scenography, sound duration and action at all times to successfully construct a self-created world (Machon, 2016).

The fifth and final component consists of a single item related to "to have fun" and is named "unwinding". Although this component only includes one item, it explains 6.31% of the variance in the construct and is retained for consideration. This motivational component reinforces the subjectivity and plurality of the contemporary tourist experience. In dark tourism practices, individuals voluntarily seek enticing and novel experiences (Wright, 2018) that include or are based on dark elements for the purposes of entertainment (Williams & Baláž, 2015).

An important note should be considered related with the "immersion" and "theatre" components. Each component is composed by only two items, exhibit Cronbach's α values below 0.7. However, in previous studies on tourism motivations, Bu et al. (2021) and Alexander et al. (2015) retained components with Cronbach's α values below the recommended threshold based on significant Pearson correlations between the items. In this study, significant Pearson correlations were found for both the items in the "immersion" motivational component ($r = 0.44, p < 0.001$) and the items in the "theatre" motivational component ($r = 0.48, p < 0.001$). Therefore, both components were retained despite their lower Cronbach's α values.

4.3. Satisfaction in Dark Immersive Theatre Experiences

The first section of the post-experience questionnaire accessed the consumer overall satisfaction, measured in a single item on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (extremely dissatisfied) to 7 (extremely satisfied). On average, participants exhibited a satisfaction level above the midpoint of the scale ($M = 4.80, \pm 1.33$).

To examine the predictive role of the performance items on participants' overall satisfaction in DITE, linear regression models were performed. Among the various motivational items that attracted participants to the DITE experiences considered in this study, 13 items demonstrated an average value higher than the overall composite of motivations. Subsequently, through the PCA procedure, these items were associated with specific components. The perceived performance of these motivational elements by participants in DITE was then incorporated into the linear regression models. Hence, a total of 13 factors were included in the models as predictors of satisfaction, which served as the dependent variable, i.e., the variable predicted by the model. A stepwise procedure was applied to iteratively exclude non-significant predictor variables, resulting in a final model that included the fewest significant factors while explaining the highest percentage of variance in satisfaction. The full descriptive statistics of the perceived performance items in DITE are included in the appendix 3.

The final model accounted for 66.0% of the variance in satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.66$) and consisted of six statistically significant performance variables as predictors. The identified relevant predictors were "novel experience" ($\beta = 0.39$; $SE = 0.04$; $p < 0.001$), "captivating plot" ($\beta = 0.12$; $SE = 0.04$; $p = 0.007$), "push limits" ($\beta = 0.14$; $SE = 0.03$; $p < 0.001$), "To have fun" ($\beta = 0.14$; $SE = 0.03$; $p < 0.001$), "co-participation" ($\beta = 0.14$; $SE = 0.03$; $p < 0.001$), and "hyper-realistic experience" ($\beta = 0.12$; $SE = 0.03$; $p = 0.004$). The multivariate model for predicting satisfaction is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. *Multivariate model for predicting participants' overall satisfaction in DITE (stepwise) (n = 344)*

Variables	β	SE	p	Model	
				R ²	p
Novel experience	0.39	0.04	< 0.001	0.66	.004
Captivating plot	0.12	0.04	0.007		
Push limits	0.14	0.03	0.001		
To have fun	0.14	0.03	< 0.001		
Co-participation	0.14	0.03	< 0.001		
Hyper-realistic experience	0.12	0.03	0.004		

5. Conclusion

By developing predictive models of participants' satisfaction in DITE based on their underlying motivations, this paper makes significant contributions to both the scientific field and DITE managers. The identification of five motivational components were able to explain 67.6% of the variance in DITE's motivations. Based on the underlying motivational items, the predictive models of participants' satisfaction in DITE were able to predict 66.0% of the variance in satisfaction with six independent variables. This offers valuable insights for DITE managers, empowering them to enhance and optimize the constructing of their experiences.

The study's findings underscore the significant role of the "dark intensity" motivational component in shaping participants' motivations in DITE. Participants show a strong inclination toward intense emotions and adrenaline rushes, within suspenseful and hyper-realistic settings. This highlights the consumption of themes that were not traditionally associated with voluntary entertainment contexts

(Ashworth & Isaac, 2015) and suggests a willingness to embrace risks for the sake of the experience (Hoffner & Levine, 2005; William & Balaz, 2015). Additionally, it was reported a desire for feeling that participants overcame the physical and mental challenges posed by the experience, pushing beyond personal limits. This aligns with the trend of seeking meaningful experiences in tourism (World Tourism Organization, 2019).

Two additional motivational components relate to the realm of theatre. "Immersion" reflects the popularity of immersive theatre innovative models, where participants are active co-creators of the experiences, which aligns with the fundamentals of events that focus on participants' experience and empowerment (Alston, 2016; Turnbull, 2016; White, 2012; Wiseman et al., 2017). Traditional elements of theatre, such as the quality of the cast and the presence of a compelling narrative, remain important in immersive theatre. The synergy between performers and participants can foster profound connections, with the narrative integrating with the overall environment of the experience (Biggin, 2017; Hogarth et al., 2018; Machon, 2016;).

Lastly, the "unwinding" motivational component, represented by the item "to have fun," underscores the subjective and diverse nature of contemporary tourist practices, particularly in the context of dark tourism. Participants willingly seek out novel and enticing experiences, even when they involve darker themes, all in the pursuit of entertainment and enjoyment (Williams & Baláz, 2015; Wright, 2018).

This study was able to develop a model to predict participants' satisfaction in DITE with only six items. The identification of these elements is crucial for the future optimization of DITE, allowing the creators of these experiences to efficiently allocate resources. In this context, it is worth noting that the identified items are associated with all five previously recognized motivational components. The item "hyper-realistic experience" is associated with the motivational component of "dark intensity." Two items originate from the motivational component of "immersion", specifically "novel experience" and "coparticipation." An item is related to the motivational component of "theatre", namely "captivating plot." Lastly, the item "to have fun" from the motivational component of "relaxation" was also integrated into this model. Thus, a main finding of this study is the combined contribution of all motivational components in predicting the satisfaction of DITE participants.

Given the exploratory nature of this research, which is to the best of our knowledge justified by an absence of theoretical body on DITE, this study adopted the conceptual and methodological fundamentals of the ECT. This theory has been used as a referential model in several areas, including tourism, to understand the relationship between motivations and satisfaction. This analytical approach facilitated the development of a parsimonious multivariate model, which allowed to explain satisfaction in DITE using a reduced number of independent variables. This approach generated additional knowledge and contributed to the enrichment of the existing literature by identifying specific elements that predict participant satisfaction in DITE. Consequently, this research aids in identifying specific factors that can enhance satisfaction and thereby contribute for the restructuring and optimization of DITE. As we observe through the conceptual framework of the ECT, it is evident that the participants of the DITE under consideration here exhibit a level of satisfaction lower than their expectations, revealing the significant enthusiasm behind these experiences, but also indicating the importance of initiating some improvements in them.

This work has some limitations. One limitation worth discussing is the focus on two specific DITE in Portugal, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. However, it is important to acknowledge that this limitation is inherent to the nature of the phenomenon itself, as DITE are often characterized by limited availability, with productions typically running for a limited period. Nevertheless, the experiences considered in this study encompassed all DITE productions available during the data

collection period. Another methodological limitation pertains to the treatment of satisfaction-related aspects. In this study, satisfaction was treated as a uniform construct across different DITE experiences by combining data collected from the two distinct DITE. This decision was based on the conceptualization of DITE as an integrated product within the domain of dark tourism, which has been increasingly recognized and valued. Consequently, formulating recommendations from an integrated perspective adds greater value compared to examining individual DITE. Another methodological limitation is associated with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which the researchers implementing contingency plans for data collection, including the use of online questionnaires and digital channels for conducting interviews in the case of 'The Slaughterhouse'. Finally, it is worth noting that there was a smaller sample size for the post-experience phase compared to the pre-experience phase. Although the potential extent of bias in the results cannot be fully ascertained, this reduction in observed cases is inherent to the adopted longitudinal methodology.

For future research, two considerations stand out. Firstly, future studies should aim to address other DITE contexts to enhance the generalizability of this study's findings. Secondly, given the limited existing literature on the motivations and satisfaction in DITE, this pioneering study assumes an exploratory nature. By clarifying the motivations and satisfaction in DITE, this research serves as a stepping stone for future studies, which can build upon these findings to advance knowledge in the field.

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Appendix 1. Items tested as motivations in Dark Immersive Theatre Experiences

Item	Variable
I seek an experience so hyper-realistic that blurs the limits between fiction and reality.	Hyper-realistic experience
I seek an experience with a coherent narrative.	Coherent narrative
I am engaging in this experience to have fun.	To have fun
I seek an experience with a captivating plot.	Captivating plot
I seek an experience that pushes my personal limits.	Push limits
I seek an experience that challenges me.	Challenging experience
I seek an experience that scares me.	Frightening experience
I seek an experience where I can freely move in the scenario.	Mobility
I seek an experience with high-quality actors.	Quality of the cast
I seek an experience that makes me to step out of my comfort zone.	Leave comfort zone
I seek an experience where I can solve riddles.	Solve riddles
I seek an experience where I can experience something unique.	Novel experience
I seek an experience that allows me to play an active role in its scenes.	Coparticipation
I seek an experience that appeals my several senses, such as sight, smell, touch, hearing or taste.	Multisensorial experience
I seek an experience that makes me confront my personal fears.	Confront personal fears
I seek an experience that induces intense emotions.	Intense emotions
I seek an experience with an atmospheric suspense.	Atmospheric suspense
I seek an experience where I can be fully absorbed.	Full absorption
I seek an experience with a high-quality venue.	Venue
I seek an experience that allows me to address and overcome adverse situations.	Overcome barriers

I seek an experience where I can team up with other participants to achieve collective goals.	Achieve collective goals
I seek an experience and promotes a visceral fear, and not a simulated fear.	Visceral fear
I seek an experience where I can choose a scene from a range of several scenes.	Select scenes
I seek an experience with a unique dynamic.	Dynamic spectacle
I seek an experience that allows me to learn more about myself in unusual situations.	Self-discovery
I seek an experience that induces adrenaline rushes.	Adrenaline rushes

Appendix 2. Descriptive statistics of the motivational items in Dark Immersive Theatre Experiences

Variable	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Hyper-realistic experience	610	5.47	1.42	1	7
Coherent narrative	610	5.75	1.29	1	7
To have fun	610	5.54	1.68	1	7
Captivating plot	610	5.46	1.51	1	7
Push limits	610	5.07	1.69	1	7
Challenging experience	610	5.85	1.32	1	7
Frightening experience	610	5.39	1.68	1	7
Mobility	610	5.37	1.46	1	7
Quality of the cast	610	5.25	1.77	1	7
Leave comfort zone	610	5.48	1.47	1	7
Solve riddles	610	5.51	1.39	1	7
Novel experience	610	6.11	1.07	2	7
Coparticipation	610	5.10	1.49	1	7
Multisensorial experience	610	5.61	1.34	1	7
Confront personal fears	610	4.67	1.77	1	7
Intense emotions	610	5.57	1.47	1	7
Atmospheric suspense	610	5.69	1.46	1	7
Full absorption	610	5.87	1.25	1	7
Venue	610	4.87	1.93	1	7
Overcome barriers	610	5.10	1.53	1	7
Achieve collective goals	610	4.95	1.64	1	7
Visceral fear	610	5.12	1.63	1	7
Select scenes	610	4.62	1.50	1	7
Dynamic spectacle	610	5.62	1.36	1	7
Self-discovery	610	5.16	1.57	1	7
Adrenaline rushes	610	5.62	1.53	1	7
Average		5.38	0.94		

Appendix 3. Descriptive statistics of the perceived performance items in Dark Immersive Theatre Experiences

Variable	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Hyper-realistic experience	344	3.45	1.67	1	7
Coherent narrative	344	3.93	1.58	1	7
To have fun	344	4.58	1.87	1	7
Captivating plot	344	4.73	1.49	1	7
Push limits	344	3.49	1.97	1	7
Challenging experience	344	4.26	1.77	1	7
Frightening experience	344	3.75	1.85	1	7
Mobility	344	4.69	1.64	1	7
Quality of the cast	344	5.47	1.48	1	7
Leave comfort zone	344	4.21	1.89	1	7
Solve riddles	344	4.28	1.75	1	7
Novel experience	344	4.54	1.76	1	7
Coparticipation	344	3.64	1.76	1	7
Multisensorial experience	344	4.39	1.79	1	7
Confront personal fears	344	2.99	1.85	1	7
Intense emotions	344	3.75	1.81	1	7
Atmospheric suspense	344	4.78	1.69	1	7
Full absorption	344	4.12	1.68	1	7
Venue	344	4.91	1.54	1	7
Overcome barriers	344	3.80	1.79	1	7
Achieve collective goals	344	4.32	1.71	1	7
Visceral fear	344	3.41	1.81	1	7
Select scenes	344	2.96	1.68	1	7
Dynamic spectacle	344	4.40	1.64	1	7
Self-discovery	344	3.75	1.92	1	7
Adrenaline rushes	344	3.93	2.02	1	7
Average		4.09	1.26		

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