

Capturing dark tourism through UGC: A qualitative content analysis of Instagram posts

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Abstract

Over the last few decades, dark tourism has emerged as a significant phenomenon within the travel and tourism industry, driven by travelers seeking unique and immersive experiences that connect them with history and provide new perspectives on the world. By analysing user-generated content (UGC) on Instagram, this study investigates the role of Instagram posts in the co-creation of dark tourism meanings, narratives, and collective understandings. The findings reveal that Instagram content significantly contributes to the co-creation of dark tourism meanings by allowing users to share their personal experiences, emotions, and reflections, thereby actively participating in the discourse surrounding dark tourism. Through qualitative content analysis and basic frequency analysis of hashtags and locations, the study demonstrates that Instagram users document and narrate their visits to dark tourism sites, expressing personal impressions and engaging in broader meaning-making processes. Specific terms and themes identified in the content, such as cemeteries and abandoned places, highlight the diverse interests and framings expressed by Instagram users, contributing to the collective meaning-making around dark tourism. This research contributes to the body of knowledge on dark tourism by illustrating how UGC shared via Instagram contributes to the co-creation of dark tourism experiences, enhancing the design and delivery of more engaging and memorable dark tourism offerings.

Keywords: Dark tourism, co-creation, experiences, user-generated content (UGC), Instagram.

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1. Introduction

The phenomenon of dark tourism has been growing in the travel and tourism industry over the past few decades. There is a growing contemporary trend for people to visit places or attractions associated with death, pain, or something seemingly macabre, or sites where a tragedy or calamity has occurred (Cai *et al.*, 2022; Powell *et al.*, 2018). The term “dark tourism” was first coined by Foley and Lennon in 1996 to describe this phenomenon (Biran & Hyde, 2013). For Yoshida *et al.* (2016), this trend is principally related to the production and consumption of real and commercialized death- and disaster-related sites. The growth of dark tourism has led the tourism sector to pay more and more attention to dark tourism attractions as a novel product. Dark tourism has thus become increasingly popular as travelers seek unique experiences that enable them to connect with history and understand the world in new ways.

Many dark locations visitors are usually characterized as curious people seeking new sensations with specific motivations that drive them to make reservations and line up at the entrance to dark places (Edwards, 2020). A wide range of motivations drives people's engagement with dark tourism, and these motivations are closely linked to the different forms of dark tourism experiences. Depending on whether a person is seeking historical knowledge, emotional reflection, or even thrill-seeking, the type of dark tourism they engage in can vary from lighter forms, such as visiting historical battlefields, to more intense forms, like exploring sites associated with recent tragedies. For example, for Biran and Hyde (2013), dark tourism consumers range from the “lightest” incidental visitors who go sightseeing and enjoy tranquil green areas to the “darkest” visitors who interact intensely with and have a deep spiritual or personal connection to a location (such as mourners and pilgrims). Dark tourism consumers today see a significant number of products in which death is a commodity, tragic histories are exploited, and ethical issues are raised (Stone & Sharpley, 2008).

Concurrently, academic interest in dark tourism motivation, consumption, and experience (Iliev, 2021) has been increasing since the mid-1990s, with steady growth since 2011 in academia publications (Rajasekaram *et al.*, 2022). Nonetheless, dark tourism is a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon (in terms of both supply and consumption) that still has theoretical flaws and requires further research to clarify its conceptualization (Biran & Hyde, 2013). Light and Ivanova (2022) remark that additional research is necessary to explore how visitors respond to and make sense of death and dying within the context of tourism, and how more qualitative methodologies are particularly well-suited for conducting this type of detailed investigations.

Previous research on the dark tourist experience demonstrates the need to concentrate future research on co-creation of dark tourism experiences (Golz, 2022; Rajasekaram *et al.*, 2022). Co-creation refers to the act of creating products and services through collaboration between customers, managers, employees, and other beneficiaries of the company (Ramaswamy and Gouillart, 2010, p. 4). In dark tourism, co-creation happens when visitors engage with the site in a way that goes beyond passive observation -i.e., they may interpret the historical or emotional significance of the site through their own personal experiences, emotions, or motivations-. Since Instagram is widely used for sharing personal experiences, emotions, and reflections, it can facilitate the co-creation (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2015) of dark tourism experiences by enabling users to share their journeys, engage in discussions, and shape the narratives and meanings of dark tourism sites.

Recent scholarship highlights a significant disconnect between conceptual framings and the lived realities of practitioners who shape visitor experiences and site interpretation (Wight *et al.*, 2025). In the study of Wight *et al.* (2025), practitioners offer context-rich insights that challenge rigid classifications and invite a more dialogical, co-created understanding of dark tourism. Building on this critique, the present study addresses this gap by incorporating user-generated content (UGC) from Instagram as a form of grassroots interpretation, including everyday representations and meanings

constructed by different users. Furthermore, Lin, Zhang and Yhang (2024) note that there remains a clear need for research that examines the role of storytelling within dark tourism contexts.

Tourists express their perceptions, emotions, and experiences through Instagram captions, making them a valuable yet underutilized source for understanding travel behaviour and destination image—especially in niche segments like dark tourism; despite its popularity among tourists, Instagram remains underexplored in tourism research (Egger & Yu, 2022). This study explores how Instagram content contributes to the co-creation of dark tourism experiences by analysing UGC linked to dark tourism experiences (Assiouras *et al.*, 2019; Lember *et al.*, 2019). This study contributes to that area by combining qualitative content analysis with basic frequency analysis of hashtags and location mentions. Rather than offering a comprehensive account, the study provides an exploratory insight into how dark tourism is framed and discursively co-created through Instagram posts. Based on this approach, we pose the following research questions:

RQ1. How does Instagram contribute to the co-creation of dark tourism meanings?

RQ2. What narrative structures emerge from Instagram posts related to dark tourism, and how do they frame dark sites and emotional responses?

RQ3. How do specific terms and themes in dark tourism-related Instagram posts reflect and shape collective understandings of dark tourism?

This paper contributes to the body of knowledge on dark tourism in several ways. First, this study examines UGC by merging qualitative content analysis with text analytics for hashtags, thereby elucidating how users curate and convey dark tourism experiences in publicly shared content. This approach complements previous research reliant on questionnaires, interviews, and survey data (Cui *et al.*, 2020) and offers a thorough understanding of how dark tourism is framed, experienced, and co-created on Instagram through user narratives. Second, we demonstrate how Instagram facilitates the co-creation of dark tourism narratives and meanings, where users actively shape the discourse through their personal experiences, emotions, and reflections shared on the platform. In addition, our findings highlight the role of UGC on Instagram in fostering ethical and reflective discussions about dark tourism, influencing collective memory and perceptions, and contributing to a deeper understanding of the emotional and cognitive engagement with dark tourism sites. These results can help tourism organizations design and co-create dark experiences that are more interesting and memorable.

2. Literature review

People have been visiting places related to death for various reasons since ancient times (Hartmann *et al.*, 2018). While some traveled for religious or philosophical reasons, others sought leisurely and entertainment experiences (Stone, 2011). For example, medieval pilgrimages to sites of martyrdom may be associated with this type of tourism (Edwards, 2020). Dark pilgrimages were part of a late 18th- and 19th-century Western trend in which people attended public executions and toured the Paris morgue (Stone & Sharpley, 2008). After World War I, people began to travel to dark places out of sheer curiosity. In the 20th and early 21st centuries, dark tourism gradually evolved into mainstream tourism; people continue to visit locations associated with death, but not for religious or philosophical reasons (Dancausa Millán *et al.*, 2021). It can thus be argued that the attraction of death entered tourism prior to other tourism offerings (Cornell, *et al.*, 2019) but that interest in disaster and death-related sites has grown exponentially in recent decades. In hindsight, historical forms of travel may be considered a form of dark tourism even if we have only recently identified them as such (Bauer, 2021).

Edwards (2020) notes different types of curiosity that drive people to visit a dark tourism site—perceptual, epistemic, normal, and morbid curiosity, among others. For this author, eudemonic motivation is a higher-order urge to experience dramatic, sad, and violent stories that feature

inspirational human qualities such as fortitude, courage, perseverance, wisdom, and self-sacrifice. Similarly, Cai *et al.* (2022) argue that motivations such as patriotism can be fresh push factors encouraging travelers to visit post-disaster locations, and Cui *et al.* (2020) note that social-psychological forces (such as nationalist ideologies) can motivate others to visit these sites.

2.1. Dark tourism in the Digital Era: narratives, meaning-making, and co-creation

The study of dark tourism has evolved significantly over the past two decades, moving beyond site-specific analyses to encompass broader cultural, ethical, and communicative dimensions. A growing body of literature emphasizes the discursive construction of dark tourism, highlighting how meanings are not inherent to the sites themselves but are actively produced through narratives, media representations, and visitor interactions (Seaton, 2009; Biran & Hyde, 2013). Roberts and Stone (2014) argue that dark tourism occurs within constructivist realms of meaning-making, where sites are continuously negotiated and reinterpreted by visitors, institutions, and media.

In recent years, attention has turned to the role of digital media, particularly social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, in shaping public understandings of tourism (Javed *et al.*, 2025). These platforms can facilitate the circulation of UGC, which contributes to the formation of collective narratives and emotional framings around dark tourism experiences.

Ukpabi and Karjaluo (2018) demonstrated that UGC has redefined the role of online users, transforming them from passive recipients into active co-creators of digital experiences; through images, hashtags, captions, and visual storytelling, users shape how destinations are perceived, interpreted, and valued. UGC thus has emerged as a powerful medium through which people not only share their experiences but also actively participate in the construction of destination narratives, fostering a collaborative process in which value is co-created by both the content creators and the audiences who engage with their narratives. Lam *et al.* (2020) argue that UGC platforms facilitate a process of value co-creation, where users engage with both the content and the platform interface to shape their perceptions of travel destinations; this co-creation is not limited to information exchange but extends to emotional and cognitive image formation, which significantly influences travel satisfaction.

Wyatt and Rossetti (2024) claim that storytelling fosters placemaking and place attachment, particularly when narratives evoke emotional, sensory, or symbolic connections to a site. When users exchange content shaped by shared identities or values, they engage in a collective process of meaning-making that strengthens narrative coherence and belonging, this deepens the co-creation of travel experiences both before and during the journey via the online platform (Lam *et al.*, 2020). Recent research has demonstrated how storytelling is a central mechanism in dark tourism, one that not only conveys and interprets cultural and historical meaning but also fosters emotional connection and frames the dark tourism experience (Lin, Zhang, and Yhang, 2024).

The online co-creation of experiences is a crucial aspect of modern dark tourism. Digital platforms and social media allow people to share their experiences, reviews, and emotions, which collectively shape the perception of dark tourism sites (Solakis *et al.*, 2022). Through UGC, travelers communicate their experiences to others, influencing collective memory and emotional responses to these sites (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2015). Thanks to new technologies, customers may cooperate with businesses to create experiences that are more beneficial for them from an economic-functional and cultural-ideological standpoint (Buonincontri *et al.*, 2017). This process refers to co-creation, which is based on developing a product, service, or experience with the tourist. Meaningful and personal experiences are produced when participants are urged to participate rather than simply observe (Campos *et al.*, 2018).

Co-creation is thus a demand-centric, interactive process that involves actors producing something with or affected by others (Buonincontri *et al.*, 2017), leading us to view visitors as *actors* (active participants) in the co-creation of the experience (Golz, 2022). Golz (2022) conducted a recent study on the co-creation of experiences at goth festivals, a particular type of dark tourism event. Her preliminary findings indicate elements such as emotional involvement (feel the ambiance), authenticity, performance, and embodiment as important to the co-creation process. In addition to Golz, other researchers have explored co-creation and motivations in dark tourism. For instance, Packer and Ballantyne (2016) examined how emotional involvement and personal resonance contribute to meaningful visitor experiences at sites of death and disaster. Stone (2011) also highlighted the importance of authenticity and performance in the visitor experience at dark tourism sites. These studies collectively underscore the multifaceted nature of co-creation in dark tourism, influenced by emotional, authentic, and performative elements.

The implementation of online co-creation linked to dark tourism experiences is significant in the context of dark tourism because it illustrates how people actively shape the meaning and value of these places. Value is connected with dark tourists' motivation to visit these locations for information or entertainment (Biran *et al.*, 2011). Driven by a desire to understand the past and connect with history, dark tourists experience various emotions about the site, including curiosity, dread, and veneration. These feelings affect the significance of the encounter for everyone (Yan *et al.*, 2016).

3. Methodology

Instagram has become an important resource in tourism studies, offering insights into tourist behavior, destination image-building, and marketing strategies (Le Busque *et al.*, 2022; Mele *et al.*, 2021; Wijesinghe *et al.*, 2020). While prior research in tourism has predominantly relied on quantitative approaches such as text analytics and sentiment analysis (Calero-Sanz *et al.*, 2022; Gallego *et al.*, 2022; Mariani *et al.*, 2018; Orea-Giner *et al.*, 2022), qualitative content analysis allows for a deeper understanding of the meanings and narratives embedded in social media discourse. This approach enables an in-depth exploration of UGC and its role in co-creation strategies within tourism (Assiouras *et al.*, 2019; Lember *et al.*, 2019).

Building on this foundation, this inductive exploratory study employs qualitative content analysis to examine 5,814 Instagram posts under the hashtag #darktourism. This analysis investigates how Instagram users contribute to the co-creation of dark tourism meanings through captions, comments, and hashtags (RQ1). Rather than applying a predefined theoretical framework, themes emerged inductively through iterative coding (Assiouras *et al.*, 2019; Lember *et al.*, 2019). The analysis focuses exclusively on textual content, aligning with the study's scope. RQ2 was addressed through an interpretive analysis of textual patterns and discursive framings, with particular attention to how narratives around dark tourism sites and experiences are shaped. For RQ3, thematic coding was used to trace specific terms (e.g., "haunting", "memorial", "curiosity") and broader themes, exploring how they reflect and shape collective understandings of dark tourism.

This methodological choice ensures that the findings reflect the patterns and meanings inherent in the dataset rather than being imposed externally. Given the ethical considerations of working with publicly available social media data, we followed two key guidelines to protect user identities: (1) omitting sensitive personal data (e.g., usernames, identifiable details), and (2) ensuring all collected data originated exclusively from publicly accessible Instagram posts (Cui *et al.*, 2020). This approach upholds ethical research standards while allowing for a rigorous qualitative exploration of dark tourism narratives on social media.

3.1. Data collection and data base cleaning

The #darktourism hashtag was chosen due to its long-standing use in research and widespread recognition in tourism studies. It also had higher engagement than other hashtags associated with dark tourism (e.g., #paranormaltourism, #ghosttourism, and #cemeterytourism), which were excluded due to their niche nature and lower number of posts. Each post consisted of the following key elements: textual content, images, hashtag metadata and geolocation tags, date and time, number of likes and comments, and a URL link for reference.

Python was used to extract a total of 9,000 Instagram posts published between July 2022 and March 2023. This timeframe was selected to capture a robust dataset while avoiding distortions related to the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on travel trends. Every post consisted of three elements: digital images, textual explanations, and hashtags (Filieri *et al.*, 2021). We also recorded the date and time, number of likes and comments, account identities, and a URL link from each Instagram post.

After extracting the data, the research team created, inspected, and cleaned an Excel database to enable subsequent analysis. Next, we selected 5,814 Instagram posts for analysis, mostly posted by dark tourism visitors. Given that co-creation involves multiple stakeholders, including tourists, businesses, and destination managers, we intentionally did not exclude business-generated content. We eliminated 3,186 posts for various reasons, such as incorrect use of hashtags or inclusion of personal information. Each post was assigned an identifier (P+number) to link the text content to its corresponding post in subsequent analysis.

3.2. Data analysis

Previous studies have analyzed Instagram content (Mele, Kerkhof, & Cantoni, 2021) using thematic analysis and text analytics (Filieri *et al.*, 2021; Iglesias-Sánchez *et al.*, 2020; Le Busque *et al.*, 2022; Yu & Egger, 2022; Wight & Stanley, 2022). Various methods exist to analyze the content, but Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS) is recommended for its ability to enhance transparency, analytical rigor, and manage large, unstructured datasets effectively (Brower *et al.*, 2019; Davidson *et al.*, 2019). We therefore used Nvivo (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2020) to analyze the data in the two phases of the study explained below.

3.2.1. Phase 1. Text analytics

The first phase employed text analytics techniques (Filieri *et al.*, 2021; Li & Ryan, 2020) to provide a descriptive overview of the dataset and guide subsequent thematic exploration. Prior to analysis, the dataset was cleaned and standardized. The focus was on examining Instagram posts, comments, and hashtags to identify high-frequency terms associated with (1) dark tourism locations and (2) content tags. This initial quantitative mapping helped to surface core referents and keywords—e.g., “cemetery,” “haunted,” “memorial,”—frequently discussed in dark tourism scholarship (Stone, 2006; Lennon & Foley, 2000), thus grounding the subsequent qualitative phase. This phase was developed using Nvivo (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2020), as explained at the beginning of this section.

3.2.2. Phase 2. Qualitative content analysis

Phase two used inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell *et al.*, 2017), supported by NVivo, to explore how meanings and narratives were articulated across user-generated posts. Two researchers engaged in a manual coding process: one led the initial cycle of open coding and theme generation, while a second reviewed and refined the thematic structure for validity and coherence.

The themes were not set in advance but developed gradually based on important discussions in dark tourism literature—types of dark sites (Sharples, 2009), commercialization (Light, 2017), and emotional reactions to experiences related to death (Buda & Shim, 2015). The resulting thematic map aligned with

and extended the literature by identifying how users invoke concepts (e.g., “dark tourism industry”, “legend”, “ritual”) and contribute to meaning-making. Table 1 provides illustrative examples of the five main themes and associated codes derived from the corpus.

Following an inductive approach, the first step involved identifying initial lexical patterns, followed by iterative interpretive coding to move beyond surface-level metrics and uncover emergent themes within Instagram discourse on dark tourism. Table 1 outlines the text analysis process and presents the themes and codes that developed organically from the data.

Table 1. Text content analysis: themes and codes

Themes	Example of codes	Example of content
Dark tourism typologies	Cemetery, catacombs, haunted house, war, prison, etc.	<i>“At the cemetery Het Oude Kerkhof Roermond in Roermond, Netherlands you can see the linked tombstones holding hands.” (P532)</i>
Dark tourism concepts	Dark tourism market, definition, category, industry, etc.	<i>“Dark tourism, also known as thanatourism or grief tourism, refers to...” (P67)</i>
Information about attractions	Tour, book, tickets, museum, etc.	<i>“There are still some tickets left...” (P23)</i>
History, traditions, and legends	Century, history, tradition, legend, ritual, etc.	<i>“Legend has it that the devil spent his time tormenting the god Thor...” (P297)</i>
Personal experiences	Experience, feel, like, visit, travel, etc.	<i>“We experienced this ourselves during the nights we spent there...” (P1305)</i>

By combining qualitative content analysis with text analytics of hashtags and locations, this study offers a nuanced exploration of how dark tourism is framed, experienced, and co-created through Instagram user-generated content.

4. Findings and discussion

Following the data analysis, we constructed the results by integrating qualitative content analysis and text analytics of hashtags and locations. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of how dark tourism is framed, experienced, and co-created on Instagram. In this section, we present findings that analyze the debate surrounding the concept of dark tourism and explore the relationship between identified types of dark tourism and associated locations and examine how dark tourism experiences are narrated through co-creation based on UGC.

4.1. The concept of dark tourism revisited through Instagram posts

Through social media, users actively engage in the co-creation of meaning and narratives by sharing their experiences before, during, and after their travels, influencing both their personal networks and broader online communities (Buonincontri *et al.*, 2017). In sharing their experiences via social media, travelers produced UGC that is useful for analyzing and understanding how they emotionally and cognitively engage with dark tourism sites, thereby participating in the ongoing discourse on their significance. The results obtained from the text content analysis of the Instagram posts analyzed under the hashtag #darktourism show an interest in defining *what is* and *what is not* “dark tourism.” This discursive engagement exemplifies how tourists collectively shape the concept through social media interactions, contributing to the ongoing co-creation of knowledge. This phenomenon is particularly significant given Light’s (2017) observation that many studies fail to distinguish between general and dark tourism, specifically those involving mortality or suffering sites. The posts analyzed express interest in learning more about the term, while also offering a broader view of the economic implications of this classification. The following excerpt illustrates this issue:

“Dark tourism, also known as thanatourism or grief tourism, refers to the practice of visiting places that are associated with death, tragedy, or other forms of dark or macabre history. This includes places such as former concentration camps, battlefields, disaster sites, and other locations associated with death, tragedy, or suffering. The dark tourism market is not limited to any region or demographic, as people from all over the world and of all ages and backgrounds are interested in visiting these kinds of sites.” (P67)

This result aligns with previous approaches. The complex concept of dark tourism—considered a mixture of heritage, history, and disaster (Farmaki, 2013)—was initially largely unexplored and has now moved into mainstream tourism (Yoshida *et al.*, 2016). Dark tourism destinations are on the rise as a result of visitors' desire to see less well-known landmarks. The reinterpretation of these sites through UGC demonstrates how Instagram users co-create the meaning of dark tourism, influencing both their peers and the broader understanding of these places. Dark tourism is also defined as an experience linked to "dark" emotions such as pain, death, horror, or sorrow, many caused by violence and not typically associated with a voluntary entertainment experience. The following text explains this idea in detail:

“Dark tourism’ is often translated as “disaster tourism” - a buzzword that has far too many negative connotations for me. Moreover, it does not include many exciting locations. How about “dark travel” instead? Because: I prefer the broader definition of “dark tourism” for my trips. I don’t just visit the scenes of dramatic disasters. As destinations, I consider all dark places and those that deal with the dark sides of our history and society: Crime, war, (mental) illness, death, imprisonment, witch hunts, Urban Legends, suicide....” (P11).

This dynamic discourse reflects a form of co-creation, where Instagram users employ digital spaces to negotiate, redefine, and shape the meaning of dark tourism based on their perspectives and experiences. This previous definition of the term "dark tourism" based on co-creation is also linked to contact with locals. Dark tourism is a form of travel that exposes visitors to challenging moral situations at less-than-stellar locations (Kennell & Powell, 2021). People's reactions to a disaster and the emotions evoked by a dark tourist destination are frequently intertwined (Jordan & Prayag, 2022). The tragedy, local community, and tourists' spatial and temporal connections thus play a crucial role in dark tourism (Kennell & Powell, 2021). In fact, commercialization of dark tourism can benefit locals living in the destinations, as this type of tourism is seen not only as a personal experience but also as a socio-cultural trend. To understand this trend's sociocultural complexity, we must recognize that tourists benefit from cultural learning and the social aspects of travel, while locals also benefit from the tourists (Cornell *et al.*, 2019). The following paragraph helps us to understand this result:

“[...] while on Dark tourism, the tourists must be very watchful about the sentiment of the residents. The tourist must feel and respect the pain hanging in the air and must not make any rapturous expression of glee that may hurt the local people [...] Do not do anything to give the public the impression that you are turning the dark sites into merrymaking picnic spots. Having fun and engaging in boisterous amusement in the sites of suffering doesn’t sit well with the local sentiments.” (P504)

People sharing content related to dark tourism sites, publish their experiences through social media using hashtags. These digital interactions form part of the co-creative process by allowing individuals to collectively construct narratives around dark tourism, influencing broader perceptions and tourist behaviours. Our quantitative data enabled us to identify the Instagram hashtags most frequently used in Instagram posts about dark tourism (Table 3). We analyzed a total of 2980 hashtags, focusing on the 75 that occurred most frequently. The regularity with which these hashtags appear helps to create a description of dark tourism from the viewpoint of Instagram users who post about this topic. Not

considering the hashtag we used as a starting point for this research (#darktourism), #cemetery is the most popular term (freq.: 1179). The posts analyzed thus show a great interest in visiting cemeteries, as the following extract shows:

"Cemetery tours are a sub-category of dark tourism. They aim to respectfully explore history, legend, and lore, as well as the life stories of people buried at cemeteries. They are too often misunderstood as macabre disrespect for the dead and for the burial grounds themselves. That is not what cemetery tours represent. They are, in fact, the opposite. Rest assured: we are tourism professionals and approach everything we do professionally to maintain respect for tour content, tour sites, and for our industry. Cemeteries are full of story and lore that too often goes untold once decades pass. Our upcoming cemetery tour will approach the people, the grounds, and the folklore with the utmost sensitivity..." (P85)

Table 3. Hashtags associated with #darktourism

Hashtag	Frequ- ency	%	Hashtag	Frequ- ency	%	Hashtag	Frequ- ency	%
#darktourism	5814	10000	#decay	441	7.59	#funeraryart	266	4.58
#cemetery	1179	20.28	#adventure	380	6.54	#mexico	260	4.47
#urbex	1113	19.14	#gravestones	376	6.47	#cm_artesacra	256	4.40
#abandoned	937	16.12	#mementomori	374	6.43	#panteon	254	4.37
#travel	905	15.57	#necroturismo	368	6.33	#artetumular	253	4.35
#project_necropolis	838	14.41	#gothic	354	6.09	#artefunerariomexico	252	4.33
#cemeteryphotography	772	13.28	#cemeteryshots	345	5.93	#artefunerario	252	4.33
#cemeteryscapes	758	13.04	#chernobyl	338	5.81	#necroturismomx	252	4.33
#aj_graveyards	733	12.61	#graveyardphotograp hy	332	5.71	#tapophile	249	4.28
#lostplaces	689	11.85	#_click_gravestone	328	5.64	#exclusionzone	241	4.15
#taphophile	680	11.70	#haunted	320	5.50	#brutalism	240	4.13
#graveyard	672	11.56	#urbanexploration	317	5.45	#photography	238	4.09
#total_graves	585	10.06	#fever_gothic_world	312	5.37	#forgottenplaces	233	4.01
#abandonedplaces	580	9.98	#petcemetery	308	5.30	#aj_cemeteries	233	4.01
#taphophilia	562	9.67	#pripyat	305	5.25	#abandonedworld	231	3.97
#tv_churchandgraves	548	9.43	#rainbowbridge	302	5.19	#memories_of_decay	230	3.96
#history	544	9.36	#petloss	302	5.19	#urbexchampions	227	3.90
#graveyard_fanatics	518	8.91	#petmemorial	300	5.16	#chernobylexclusionzo ne	226	3.89
#urbexphotography	487	8.38	#creaturecrypts	300	5.16	#tourism	223	3.84
#cemeterylovers	479	8.24	#graveyard_dead	295	5.07	#folklore	222	3.82
#graveandbeautiful	478	8.22	#cimiteri_monument ali_	294	5.06	#grave_affair	221	3.80
#darktourist	470	8.08	#architecture	278	4.78	#transnistria	221	3.80
#cemeteries	467	8.03	#graveyard_freaks	275	4.73	#urbex_utopia	221	3.80
#cemeterywandering	459	7.89	#cementerio	272	4.68	#ghosttown	220	3.78

The prevalence of the term "abandoned" in various Instagram posts is also noteworthy (e.g., #abandoned, freq.: 937; #abandonedplaces, freq.: 580). Discovering places abandoned due to change is a characteristic that makes visitors feel they are having a real experience instead of a touristic one, as in the following example:

"Sometimes, the most beautiful things can be found in unexpected places. This old hospital may be abandoned, but it's still a stunning piece of history and a testament to the human desire to heal." (P259)

In addition, several labels describe dark tourism destinations (e.g., Transnistria, Chernobyl). These results highlight the importance of photography and social media sharing to dark tourists, contributing to the growth of the idea of dark tourism as a whole. The following excerpt illustrates the presence of these features:

"The exhibits, relics and remains may inspire you to take photographs. Before clicking your camera, ensure your co-tourists are doing the same. You may ask the local authority if photography is permitted and act accordingly" (P504)

"Phone photos are private memories, accessible at any time. They also capture that moment in a way that a memory does not. A phone also serves as a shield against the horror you are witnessing. Seeing a place through the camera lens is a coping mechanism, separating you and protecting you until you're ready to revisit the images. So, whether they know it or not, the people that take photos at 'dark tourism sites' may be more in tune with their own emotions, memory making and well-being than we give them credit for." (P3506)

The data analyzed show that "dark tourism" encompasses a wide range of topics and locations, from historic sites designed to cope with the darkest aspects of society to sites of natural disasters. This variety motivated the following analysis of the types of dark tourism connected with the places most commonly mentioned in the posts analyzed.

4.2. Dark tourism typologies and locations

Most dark tourism sites are visited for varied reasons. Some people like visiting dark places to better understand their history and culture, while others prefer only spooky places and dislike this other form of tourism (Cornell *et al.*, 2019). Through social media interactions, people sharing content related to dark tourism actively participate in the co-creation of meaning, shaping how these locations are perceived and categorized. This section presents the dark tourism locations most frequently cited in the posts' subject of study, based on the dark tourism typologies evaluated in the literature review (Bauer, 2021; Cai *et al.*, 2022).

These results (Table 4) show that the narratives shared by Instagram users on social media reinforce and redefine the meaning of dark tourism locations. Visiting cemeteries is the most common activity dark tourists share on Instagram (10.33%). Cemetery tourism, sometimes known as necro-tourism, is growing as a popular subset of dark tourism. It can also be classified as cultural tourism, however, if the visitor's primary goal is to learn about funerary tradition. Visitors explore cemeteries to learn about the artistic, architectural, historical, and scenic history that frequently abounds there, as well as to learn grim legends of violent deaths (Dancausa Millán *et al.*, 2019). For example, cemeteries like the Père-Lachaise Cemetery in Paris are among the most visited in the world, not only because of their historical value but also due to the narratives co-created by visitors who document and interpret their experiences online. Curiously, our findings show a high level of interest in visiting pet cemeteries (e.g., Angel View Pet Cemetery & Crematory and Pine Ridge Pet cemetery).

However, ethical arguments have been made regarding the commodification of dark sites in tourism discourse. Social media plays a key role in this debate, as people co-create discussions about the appropriateness and ethical dimensions of visiting these locations. In this sense, some experts have raised questions about the ethics of these visits and about modern methods for coping with the depiction of death in such places. A "death landscape" is created and marketed as an experience, and so-called dark tourists consume the traumatic episode in a safe environment. Users' engagement on social media contributes to shaping these ethical debates, questioning the boundaries of dark tourism and influencing potential visitors' perceptions. One such post reflects on this issue:

"What are your thoughts? Is it morally wrong to turn a cemetery into a paid tourist attraction?" (P257)

Table 4. Dark tourism typologies and locations identified.

Typologies	Location	Country	Frequency	%	Subtotal	%
Cemetery tourism	Panteón Municipal de Morelia	Mexico	108	2.50	446	10.33%
	Hartsdale Pet Cemetery	United States	73	1.69		
	Elmwood Cemetery	United States	37	0.86		
	Catacombs of Paris	France	22	0.51		
	Cimetière du Père-Lachaise	France	21	0.49		
	Pine Ridge Pet Cemetery	United States	18	0.42		
	Angel View Pet Cemetery & Crematory	United States	17	0.39		
	Laurel Hill Cemetery	United States	16	0.37		
	Highgate Cemetery	UK	11	0.25		
	Greyfriars Kirkyard	Scotland	10	0.23		
	Mount Moriah Cemetery & Arboretum	United States	10	0.23		
	Cypress Lawn Funeral Home & Memorial Park	United States	8	0.19		
	Old Post Cemetery	UK	8	0.19		
	Panteón de San Pedro Tlaquepaque	Mexico	8	0.19		
	Catacomb di San Gennaro	Italy	6	0.14		
Atomic Tourism	Chernobyl	Ukraine	221	5.12	221	5.12
History of conflict heritage tourism	Transnistria	Moldova	133	3.08	170	3.94
	Tiraspol	Moldova	17	0.39		
	Berlin	Germany	13	0.30		
	DMZ	Vietnam	5	0.12		
	Aleppo	Syria	2	0.05		
Fright Tourism	FEAR Avon Valley Scream Park	UK	36	0.83	72	1.67
	Fairfield County Infirmary	United States	26	0.60		
	Lizzie Borden House	United States	6	0.14		
	Transylvania	Romania	4	0.09		
Disaster Tourism	Pompeii	Italy	30	0.69	38	0.88
	Eyam the Plague Village	UK	5	0.07		
	Aral Sea		3	0.07		
Prison Tourism	Eastern State Penitentiary	United States	9	0.21	19	0.44
	Shrewsbury Prison	UK	7	0.16		
	Alcatraz Federal Prison	United States	3	0.07		
Pagan Tourism	The Witch House	United States	11	0.25	17	0.39
	Salem Witch Museum	United States	6	0.14		
Genocide Tourism	Choeung Ek Killing Field	Cambodia	4	0.09	4	0.09
Suicide tourism	Aokigahara Jukai Forest	Japan	2	0.05	2	0.05

Atomic tourism, with Chernobyl as the main attraction, is the second most common type of dark tourism (5.12%). As Bauer (2021: p.6) affirms, "large-scale accidents attract," and dark tourists like to visit destinations related to significant deaths. On the International Nuclear Event Scale, Chernobyl was the first significant nuclear catastrophe to receive a level 7 rating, and the effects of the radioactive radiation spill are still felt today. Only a few people with specific clearance were permitted to access the Chernobyl Zone prior to 2011. In the past few years, however, 10,000 travelers a year have entered the

restricted area thanks to the operations of large tourism businesses (Sun & Lv, 2021). This popularity may be due to the HBO *Chernobyl* miniseries and its impact in shaping cultural memory (Gambarato *et al.*, 2022).

The third typology that emerges from the analysis is “history of conflict heritage tourism” (Le & Pearce, 2011). The locations featured are Transnistria, Tiraspol, Berlin, the Vietnamese DMZ, and Aleppo. People sharing content related to dark tourism contribute to the co-creation of knowledge by sharing historical insights and personal reflections, positioning these locations within the broader discourse of dark tourism. Such posts are accompanied by historical descriptions, as the following example shows:

“Welcome to the country that doesn’t exist: Transnistria, the Russian-backed breakaway region of Moldova. One of the least understood unrecognized countries in the world... They have their own government, police, laws, currency, educational system, border checkpoints, license plates, everything. It’s a fascinating experience that takes you back to the USSR era in 1990. Locals were friendlier than what I expected and my (very) basic Russian even made them smile. Infrastructure also surprised me with some buildings and parks renovated or created in the last few years, despite the overall landscape being stuck in the past.” (P5292)

This type of engagement shows how the analysed content presents visitors as responsible of actively constructing narratives, shaping how others interpret and engage with these places.

As for the remaining categories, FEAR Avon Valley Fear Park (0.83) is included in “fright tourism.” The main goal of this site’s immersive experience, comparable to a theme park, is to provide terrifying encounters. These immersive experiences are enhanced by technology, and Edwards (2020) suggests that virtual reality blurs the boundaries between perceptual and epistemic curiosity. This virtual environment can be useful to further research on users’ experiences of dark tourism products. The park offers visitors the chance to attend an exorcism and specific theme nights. The following example shows how this attraction organized its offering using real-life dark stories:

“Trinity Tenebris was the UK’s most famous psychopath who was sent to the London Hacksash Hospital for the insane and detained in their St Julian’s ward for psychopaths sometime during 2008. Trinity remained in the high security facility until 2013 where she escaped and has been on the run ever since, never to have been found presumed dead, police gave up their search in 2018. Now found stalking the FEAR event site she is attributed with the disappearance of Frank... is anyone safe with her around?” (P2839)

The co-creation of horror narratives in dark tourism extends beyond traditional storytelling. Instagram users actively participate in shaping and reinforcing the mythology of these sites through their social media engagement. The other types of dark tourism are not as popular in the Instagram posts as the types analyzed in detail above: disasters, prison, pagan, genocide, and suicide tourism typologies appear less frequently. However, even within these categories, the process of co-creation remains evident, as users negotiate meaning, debate ethical concerns, and frame their experiences in ways that contribute to the evolving discourse of dark tourism.

4.3. Narratives of dark tourism experiences and co-creation

Consuming misery, pain, and tragedy as part of dark tourism elicits a range of emotional reactions to the experiences of death and is frequently driven by historical curiosity and learning (Cui *et al.*, 2020). However, these emotions are not experienced in isolation—people actively shape and reconstruct their understanding of dark sites through interactions, digital storytelling, and shared narratives, demonstrating the co-creation of meaning in dark tourism. Visiting dark tourism sites thus combines positive effects (reflection, spirituality, learning) and negative ones (sadness, anger, fear), cognitive and

affective experiences that vary from one person to another and across dark tourism destinations (Rajasekaram *et al.*, 2022). Qualitative content analysis enabled us to determine how these positive and negative impacts interact to facilitate the co-creation of knowledge and discourse around dark tourism experiences. Some posts included information about this emotional process and how the visit changed the tourist personally, as the following extract shows:

"Journeys through people's memories of wars, natural disasters, and other catastrophes have many possibilities, such as passing on lessons learned, reconsidering ways of life, and reflecting on the modern era we live in now. We believe that travelling with this kind of intention and lens has the potential to turn human misery and struggle into positive life lessons and impact." (P57)

Although many clichés are associated with dark tourism and dark tourists, the primary purpose of visiting dark places is not to enjoy pain or death, but rather to engage in a process of meaning-making and critical reflection. This process is co-created through social interactions, digital documentation, and shared discussions about the past. People who come to remember and consume death are expected to respect both the site's historical significance and the people who died. In practice, though, this is not always the case. Responses may be conditioned by the previous knowledge of the site's real history (Cui *et al.*, 2020). Social media plays a key role in shaping these responses by enabling individuals to engage with others, debate ethical considerations, and contribute to the development of collective memory. The following publication reflects on this engagement:

"For most of us, traveling is an opportunity to 'see the sights'. To see with our own eyes the wondrously beautiful landscapes, characteristic architecture, or exotic wildlife. However, beauty and wonder are not always the only things available on a travel menu, and there are some of us who are all too keen on it. Sometimes though, seeing the sights for some of us might really mean traveling to and witnessing places that are drenched in great human death, horror, misfortune, and tragedy. Things like mass grave sites or old battlefields watered by bloodshed. A desire to experience the more morbid areas of our history. It becomes less about splendid grandeur and more about understanding the suffering that other people once had to endure or engaging with and learning more deeply about human history." (P256)

Tourists may also associate personal experiences with these emotions. This personal connection serves as a driving force behind co-creation, as visitors actively interpret, frame, and contribute to discussions about the significance of the sites they visit. Some evidence suggests that dark tourists are attracted to a location due to an emotional connection. Biran *et al.* (2011) portrays one category of dark visitor as tourists who have personal ties to the location, who view it as a part of their personal heritage, and who have a strong interest in emotional experiences and feeling a part of their own history. The following publication represents this aspect of the attraction and demonstrates how personal narratives are integrated into the broader discourse of dark tourism:

"Every now and again I like to cycle along Erfurter Street in the Berlin borough of Schöneberg. My grandfather Ernst was born here in 1915. By the end of World War II, the street was in ruins, a pile of rubble. Like two thirds of Berlin's residential buildings, it was bombed beyond recognition. My grandpa survived. During his childhood, he lived as a tourist, the environment forever, and by the end of the war he could speak fluent Hebrew and Arabic, adapting to a faraway land - both geographically and culturally. In our secular society, we may have lost the ceremonial religious aspect of remembrance. In many ways, dark tourism provides a substitute. Or maybe it's just cool to imagine my grandpa riding his bike as a kid in Berlin." (P450)

Such personal storytelling is a fundamental aspect of the co-creation process in dark tourism. One of the main goals of dark tourism is to show what people, places, and cultures in the area are like. Visiting these scenes of death reveals ontological concerns about the past and future (Stone, 2013) and can even raise spiritually significant, existential questions about issues such as the meaning of life (Dancausa *et al.*, 2023). The Instagram content identifies such new ways of travelling as a dark tourist, being more present in the moment. We infer that dark tourists seek slow tourism experiences rather than overcrowded places. The following content highlights how digital platforms facilitate the co-creation of travel experiences by encouraging users to engage in self-reflection and community discussions:

“There's something quite powerful in knowing that you can never revisit the places you once saw. It leads me to reflect upon how we behave when travelling: Am I present enough to fully soak it up? In what ways do I experience a place? Can I rely on unreliable memories? What are my motivations for my visit?” (P3506)

Dark travelers wish to ponder weighty philosophical questions and accept that doing so may not always be comfortable or enjoyable. The narratives they share contribute to the evolving discourse of dark tourism, challenging preconceived notions and encouraging others to critically engage with these spaces. They recognize that these trips are not holidays and that the tourists themselves have no say in or influence over what happens to them along the way. Dark tourism packages should thus center on establishing an emotional connection with the visitor. Authors such as Cornell *et al.* (2019) argue that this type of eye-opening experience is enhanced through co-creation, as tourists contribute to raising awareness of historical tragedies and shaping future engagement with these sites. As Yoshida *et al.* (2016: p.1) state, “educational dark tourism stresses the authenticity of the dark tourism experience by emphasizing the story of the people who experienced the tragedy.” The following sentence expresses such feelings:

“I am interested in a profound examination of existential themes. One thing is clear, gloomy journeys are not “beautiful” and are not wellness holidays. I can't plan what I experience on the ground like a package holiday to the sea. Sometimes I burst into tears, and then again, a crime scene leaves me cold, even though a gruesome murder happened there.” (P11)

The phenomenon of dark tourism provides fertile ground for the co-creation of experiences, wherein tourists not only witness but actively engage with the narratives and histories presented through digital storytelling, social media interactions, and participatory acts of remembrance. This co-creation often manifests through immersive activities that allow visitors to personalize their engagement with the site, thereby influencing both their own experience and the collective memory of the tragedy. This interactive participation extends beyond passive observation to include actions like leaving mementos, participating in commemorative rituals, or contributing to ongoing storytelling efforts, enriching the emotional depth and personal significance of the visit.

This interactive participation extends beyond passive observation to include actions like leaving mementos, participating in commemorative rituals, or contributing to ongoing storytelling efforts online. These co-created experiences are critical as they facilitate a deeper connection between the individual and the site's historical narratives, promoting a reflective and transformative journey rather than a mere touristic encounter. This process not only deepens the visitor's understanding but also adds layers to the site's ongoing narrative, influenced by each unique personal interaction (Golz, 2022).

In sum, dark tourism is not just about visiting places associated with death and tragedy but also about learning from the past and developing a nuanced understanding of how to cope with extreme situations.

The emotional reactions to visiting these places are complex, encompassing both positive and negative experiences that vary from person to person and across different destinations.

Our study of dark tourism uses UGC (naturally occurring data) rather than researcher-generated data, enhancing the authenticity and reducing the bias in our analysis (Cui *et al.*, 2020). The findings of the study thus enabled us to address the research questions.

Lam *et al.* (2020) demonstrated the key role that UGC platform experiences play in the overall platform co-creation experience. In this vein, we found that Instagram content significantly contributes to the co-creation of dark tourism meanings by enabling Instagram users to share their personal experiences, emotions, and reflections about dark tourism sites (RQ1). Through UGC, the concept of dark tourism is continuously negotiated and shaped within the broader social conversation on Instagram. The analysis of Instagram posts under the hashtag #darktourism reveals that Instagram users are not merely passive observers but active participants in the discourse surrounding dark tourism. Visiting dark tourism sites produces a combined effect of reflection, spiritual learning, sadness, anger, and fear. They reinterpret and redefine what constitutes dark tourism by sharing their unique perspectives and experiences, thereby influencing both their peers and the broader understanding of these locations. This dynamic interaction on social media platforms fosters a collective meaning-making process, where the significance of dark tourism sites is continuously negotiated and co-created.

Dark sites are interpreted, represented, and consumed within contemporary society. As a result, dark tourism is not only about visiting sites of death or tragedy, but also about how these experiences are mediated and made meaningful through discourse and representation. The qualitative content analysis of Instagram posts indicates that Instagram users employ captions, comments, and hashtags to narrate their journeys, providing historical context, personal reflections, and emotional responses. This multifaceted and evolving discourse contributes to the co-construction of dark tourism narratives by allowing people to document and share their visits to dark tourism sites, thus creating a rich tapestry of stories and experiences (RQ2). The collective narrative of those shared stories encompasses various aspects of dark tourism, from historical tragedies to personal connections, thus enriching the collective memory associated with these sites. UGC serves as a tool to learn about dark tourism experiences and the way people involved in dark tourism activities see the world.

Specific terms and themes in dark tourism-related Instagram posts play a crucial role in reflecting and shaping collective understandings of dark tourism (RQ3). The text analytics of hashtags and locations reveals recurring themes such as *cemeteries*, *abandoned places*, and *historical conflict sites*, which are frequently mentioned in Instagram posts. These themes highlight the diverse interests and motivations of dark tourism, ranging from curiosity about historical events to a desire for authentic and immersive experiences. The prevalence of certain hashtags, such as #cemetery and #abandonedplaces, indicates a strong interest in exploring sites associated with death and decay. By consistently using these terms, Instagram users collectively construct a shared vocabulary and way for understanding dark tourism. This shared language and thematic focus help to shape the collective perception of what dark tourism entails, reinforcing its significance and expanding its scope.

5. Implications and limitations of the study

5.1. Theoretical implications

The main theoretical contribution of this study is to advance the understanding of dark tourism as a co-created phenomenon, shaped through collective interpretation, discourse, narrative, framing, and meaning-making (Figure 1) based on UGC published on social media (Instagram). These insights enhance the theoretical understanding of how users' interactions with UGC platforms contribute to the broader process of value co-creation, and how this, in turn, influences the development of dark tourism

destinations image and users' perceptions. The discursive engagement on social media illustrates how Instagram users collectively shape the concept of dark tourism through their interactions, contributing to the ongoing co-creation of knowledge. By reinterpreting these sites through user-generated content, Instagram users collectively contribute to the co-creation of dark tourism meanings, shaping both peer perceptions and broader public understandings of these locations.

Figure 1 depicts the co-creation of dark tourism through collective interpretation, as reflected in user-generated content discourses, using a Triquetra or Trinity Knot, a pagan symbol with origins in Celtic culture and used by Wiccans and White Witches. We use this symbol because it represents unity and protection. This model incorporates emotions and feelings as a central theme, reflecting the complex emotional responses—ranging from sadness and fear to spiritual enlightenment—that tourists often experience. These emotions are pivotal for tourists to extract deeper meanings and insights from their visits. The overlapping areas within the figure such as immersive experience, connection and empathy, personal attachment, and the sense of belonging and memories—highlight how these interactions are not just adjacent but deeply interwoven. These connections enhance the understanding of dark tourism as a dynamic interaction among the tourists, the locales, and the communities involved, rather than merely a visitation of dark sites.

The narratives, comments, and stories gathered from Instagram posts thus help construct a more comprehensive picture of how dark tourism is discursively represented and made meaningful within social media contexts. User-generated content and photographs of experiences posted online are recognized as storytelling media that shape perceptions and influence engagement; storytelling occurs through various means and mediums, including oral narratives, visual arts, music, digital content, and embodied performances (Wyatt and Rossetti, 2024). These forms are used to communicate messages, foster cultural transmission, and enhance audience engagement. “In the realm of dark tourism, storytelling can be characterized as the interaction among dark tourism destinations, tourists, storytellers, and narrations, showcasing dark tourism to visitors through various linguistic and nonverbal methods (Lin *et al.*, 2024, p.3)”. This co-creation process has enhanced our understanding of what dark tourism entails. Figure 1 visually encapsulates how dark tourism experiences emerge through the dynamic interplay among dark tourists, local communities, destination managers and tourism professionals, and the dark sites themselves. At the centre, dark sites—spaces marked by historical trauma, memory or tragedy—anchor the experiential process. Dark tourists engage with these sites through emotional, reflexive and digitally mediated practices. The local community contributes cultural memory, personal attachment and place-based knowledge, co-creating meaning alongside visitors. Destination managers and tourism professionals act as mediators, curators, and facilitators, shaping immersive experiences and structuring narratives around the sites.

This co-creation process involves the dissemination and learning of local traditions and legends, the sharing of photos and other materials on social media, and the immersive experience that evokes diverse emotions and feelings among visitors and residents. Additionally, it fosters a greater personal attachment and connection to the place for all involved. This holistic view encourages seeing dark tourism not just as traveling to certain locations but as a complex interaction of different stakeholders that fosters a communal narrative and collective memory, thus enriching the experience and perspective.



Figure 1. Dark tourism experiences co-creation and narratives —an overview

5.2. Practical and managerial implications

This study contributes to a better understanding of the different experiences linked to dark tourism by examining the phenomenon from different perspectives. Persuasive factors beyond media encourage people to visit dark attractions, including friends, opinion leaders, and online influencers (Edwards, 2020). Information on social media that is perceived as "novel, aesthetic, accurate, genuine, relevant, and reliable" could drive users' intentions (Lam *et al.*, 2020: p.2). Emotional engagement is thus essential to facilitate reflection and understanding among visitors as they make sense of their dark tourism experiences (Sigala & Steriopoulos, 2021). Customized marketing strategies can thus be developed by analyzing user-generated content on platforms like Instagram to identify popular themes and sentiments, tailoring campaigns to resonate with specific dark tourism audience segments. In the context of dark tourism, organizations can enhance visitor engagement, for example by incorporating augmented reality and virtual reality technologies to create interactive and immersive experiences at dark tourism sites.

This paper also highlights several managerial challenges that need further exploration from the supply-side perspective. The results suggest that dark tourism packages should focus on making an emotional connection with the visitor to gain new insights into the past and raise awareness about horrific past events, helping to prevent future massacres by raising educational awareness. Educational programs and workshops can be developed to focus on the historical and cultural significance of the locations, partnering with schools and universities for field trips and learning modules. Additionally, collaboration with local communities can co-create respectful and beneficial experiences, such as guided tours led by local historians. Ethical considerations and sensitivity training for staff can ensure respectful handling of sensitive topics, while sustainable tourism practices, such as limiting visitor numbers and supporting local economies, can ensure the long-term preservation of dark tourism sites.

Similarly to Belo and Gustavo (2024), our results can provide managers of dark tourism products with valuable insights to enhance and optimize experiences, thereby increasing participant satisfaction and further boosting their interest in these experiences.

5.3. Limitations of the study and future research lines

This research focused exclusively on UGC shared on Instagram, without distinguishing between different types of user profiles (e.g., visitors, tourists, influencers, institutions). As such, the analysis does not account for variations in content creation patterns or motivations based on user identity or profile type. Besides, our collection of English-language posts only for this study is a major limitation. Cross-cultural studies remain essential to understanding variations in the consumption and representation of dark tourism across national and cultural contexts (Biran & Hyde, 2013; Cui *et al.*, 2020; Rajasekaram *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, it is essential to note that the results cannot be generalized to all Instagram users.

Future research could examine the role of specific user categories—such as influencers, institutions, or casual users—in shaping dark tourism discourse by integrating ethically sourced demographic and profile-based metadata. This would enable a more differentiated understanding of how diverse actors contribute to meaning-making on social media. Additionally, expanding the volume of analysed content and incorporating interviews with key stakeholders involved in the development of dark tourism experiences (e.g., policymakers, government agencies) would offer deeper insight into the supply side of the phenomenon. We also advocate for an integrated perspective that simultaneously considers both supply and demand, as recommended in recent literature (Rajasekaram *et al.*, 2022).

Given that this research focused solely on UGC shared via Instagram, future studies should explore how dark tourism experiences are communicated on emerging platforms such as TikTok. This could yield valuable insights into generational shifts—particularly among Gen Z—in the emotional framing, narrative construction, and social engagement around dark tourism.

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