
DARK TOURISM IN THE DIGITAL AGE: HOW SOCIAL MEDIA SHAPES VISITOR ENGAGEMENT AND PERCEPTION



Prof. Tareq N. Hashem

Full Professor of Marketing, Marketing Department, Faculty of Business, Applied Science Private University, Amman, Jordan
Email: t_hashim@asu.edu.jo

<http://doi.org/10.35409/IJBMER.2025.3723>

Received: 5 November 2025/ Published: 14 December 2025

ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between social media and visitor engagement and perception regarding dark tourism. This study employs a quantitative approach to collect data. It entails providing tourists with a structured survey to complete. This research examines the experiences of tourists in Jordan. This research examines the experiences of tourists in Jordan. Using a convenience sampling method, the researchers selected 407 tourists from a total of 500.. The results indicate that Social Media Engagement Increases Visitor Engagement with Dark Tourism Sites. Also, social media engagement enhances Visitors' perception of dark tourism sites. Targeted advertisements can potentially improve how individuals interact with and perceive specific locations. These advertisements should incorporate cultural, gender, and age differences. Additionally, they should consider whether individuals have previously visited dark tourism sites. This approach can potentially cultivate a more intimate and respectful relationship with these significant historical sites.

Keywords: Tourism, dark Tourism, social media, visitor engagement, Visitor perception.

1. INTRODUCTION

The idea of "dark tourism," which means "tourism to places linked with death, suffering, or tragedy" (Lennon, 2000), has become more well-known in today's tech-driven world. People visit these spots to learn, grow, and remember past times (Stone, 2012). With popular apps like Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube, visitors interact with dark tourism sites, often sharing their trips online (Light, 2017). This change has sparked talks about how online stories can sway public opinion, make people think about right and wrong, and turn places of human pain into money-makers (Farmaki, 2013; Tarlow, 2005). As people spend more time online, worries have come up about making money from tragedies and making dark sites seem too interesting. Social media helps keep historical sites alive and brings in tourists. Others say it makes awful events seem less severe by creating shallow connections and viral trends (Stone & Sharpley, 2008). Influencers and content creators also play a big part in shaping what visitors expect. This might lead to historical events being acted out and talks about how to behave at spooky places. Even with these talks, researchers have not examined much of how social media shapes tourists' views on dark tourism and how they participate (Hashem et al., 2023). To fill this gap in knowledge, this study will examine how social media posts about "dark tourism" affects tourists' actions and the ethical

questions these posts raise.

1.1 Problem Statement

Though experts have examined dark tourism through cultural and ethical lenses (Lennon, 2000; Stone, 2012), they have not explored how social media affects visitor engagement. Previous Research has looked into what drives people to dark tourism sites (Seaton, 1996) and the ethical challenges of visiting places marked by tragedy (Tarlow, 2005). However, we do not know much about how social media shapes visitors' views and emotional reactions, nor what they expect from these sites.

Moreover, social media makes it easy to spread user-generated content, influencing how people talk about and understand dark tourism online. This can turn historical suffering into a commodity, raising concerns about how honest and ethical these experiences are. Since more and more people use digital platforms to make travel choices, it is essential to understand how social media affects dark tourism experiences.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of this study are to:

1. Examine the influence of social media on visitor engagement with dark tourism sites.
2. Analyze how social media content shapes public perceptions of dark tourism.
3. It offers valuable guidance to tourism boards, heritage site administrators, and content providers regarding the utilization of social media.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The Concept of Dark Tourism

Dark tourism refers to trips to places linked with death, hardship, or disaster (Lennon, 2000).

This type of travel covers many locations, such as areas hit by calamities, Nazi camps, war zones, and spots where many people suffered (Sharpley & Stone, 2008).

Several researchers have looked into why people visit dark tourism sites. Seaton (1996) proposed thanatourism, saying that some tourists go to these places to face death while others want to learn about history (Stone & Sharpley, 2008). Research has shown that people who visit Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and the Killing Fields often feel a mix of different emotions, including empathy, grief, and curiosity (Biran et al., 2011).

Dark tourism is also influenced by political and ideological factors (Sharpley, 2009). Some places act as state-sponsored memorials, strengthening national stories (Isaac & Çakmak, 2014), while others become commercialized attractions, leading to worries about ethical tourism (Tarlow, 2005; Light, 2017).

2.2 The Role of Social Media in Tourism

Social media has completely changed how individuals discover, appreciate, and remember their favorite tourist spots. Travel trends can be influenced by real-time trip recording and posting on platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok (Uzzell, 1989; Homs, et al., 2022).

The three primary functions of social media in the context of dark tourism are:

-
- **Pre-Visit Influence:** Due to influencer marketing and viral content, social media influences tourists' exposure to dark sites (Farmaki, 2013). Think about hashtags like #AuschwitzMemorial and #ChernobylTour. Sites associated with past tragedies attract hundreds of online interactions, attracting tourists.
 - **On-Site Engagement** Visitors engage with attractions in real time via vlogs, tales, and live broadcasts (Hannam et al., 2014). By providing viewers with fresh perspectives on the past, this, according to some scholars, improves classroom instruction (Light, 2017). Some say it turns tragic events into mindless entertainment, discouraging deep thinking (Bowman & Pezzullo, 2010).
 - **Post-Visitor Reflection:** Visitors post their opinions on social media, sparking ethical tourism conversations (Lennon & Foley, 2000; Kang et al., 2012).

2.3 Ethical Implications of Social Media in Dark Tourism

While social media does raise consciousness about dark tourism, it also raises serious moral questions. According to studies (Tarlow, 2005; Podoshen, 2013), internet platforms often trivialize or profit from tragedies.

- **The Selfie Controversy**—A Debate Over Selfies—Internet fads, such as "taking selfies at Auschwitz," have infuriated many (Light, 2017). Some scholars feel that these photographs demonstrate a lack of historical context by reducing historically significant sites to mere backdrops for social media posts.
- **The commodification of Suffering** is an Ethical Concern Raised by the Commercialization of Pain and Dying (Stone, 2012). The tragic sites that attract tourists turn their monuments into businesses (Isaac & Çakmak, 2014).
- **Misinformation and Sensationalism** The prevalence of sensationalized news items on digital platforms, rather than factually accurate ones, distorts historical events. People may exaggerate facts to increase the number of views in documentaries and TikTok videos on YouTube (Seaton, 1996; Hannam et al., 2014).

2.4 Social Media and Visitor Perception

Multiple studies have examined how social media impacts visitors' perceptions of dark tourism sites. Dickinson and Robbins (2009) showed that content created by users shapes visitors' expectations, at times painting an unrealistic picture of these places.

Research by Yankholmes and McKercher (2015) dove into how websites present slavery heritage sites, revealing that online stories often tone down tough histories to draw in more people. In the same way, Wight (2009) looked at how people talk about disputed national tragedies online, arguing that interactions on social media can either improve or twist historical accounts.

Experts agree that social media influences how visitors connect with dark tourism, but its effects differ based on the platform and audience (Walter, 2009; Hashem et al., 2024; Hashem & Suleiman, 2024; Hashem, 2016).

2.5 Digital Marketing and Influencer Culture in Dark Tourism

Social media influencers now play a more significant part in making dark tourism sites popular. Many influencers push to educate about history and raise cultural awareness, but others

participate in tourism, which shocks people by putting engagement before ethical thoughts (Farmaki, 2013; Lennon, 2000).

- **Responsible Storytelling** – Ethical influencers use their platforms to **teach their followers** about the importance of dark tourism (Sharpley, 2009).
- **Exploitation of Tragedy**—Some influencers create **attention-grabbing content** by overhyping dark tourism experiences, which results in false information.

Research indicates that tourism groups should collaborate with ethical influencers to encourage respectful behavior.

3. HYPOTHESES

This part creates theories based on the main factor (Social Media Engagement), the outcomes we're looking at (Visitor Engagement and Visitor Perception), The hypotheses aim to test the relationships between social media interaction and how it influences individuals' engagement with and perception of dark tourism sites.

Hypothesis 1: Social Media Engagement Increases Visitor Engagement with Dark Tourism Sites

This hypothesis suggests that spending more time on social media, whether posting, commenting, sharing, or just looking and scrolling, will make people more interested in dark tourism spots. This might mean they want to visit these places more, feel stronger emotions (like empathy, curiosity, or sadness), and do more things there. For example, they might join in challenges or talk to influencers who are connected to dark tourism.

H1: Higher social media engagement levels are positively associated with increased visitor engagement with dark tourism sites.

Hypothesis 2: Social Media Engagement Enhances Visitor Perception of Dark Tourism Sites

This hypothesis posits that individuals' interactions with and consumption of social media content regarding dark tourism sites will influence their perceptions. It may enhance their comprehension of history, increase their awareness of terrible occurrences, and facilitate their understanding of the associated ethical dilemmas. The portrayal of these locations on social media may influence tourists' perceptions of their authenticity and the respect shown for their historical significance.

H2: Increased social media engagement positively influences visitors' perceptions of dark tourism sites' historical authenticity and ethical considerations.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a quantitative approach to collect data. It entails providing tourists with a structured survey to complete.

5. POPULATION AND SAMPLE

This research examines the experiences of tourists in Jordan. This research examines the experiences of tourists in Jordan. Using a convenience sampling method, the researchers selected 407 tourists from a total of 500.

6. DATA ANALYSIS

The researcher examined the collected data as follows:

- Descriptive analysis: Frequencies and percentages, means and standard deviations.
- Linear regression was employed to verify the accuracy of their hypotheses.

6.1 Reliability

We employed Cronbach's Alpha to assess the reliability of the scale. The results were favorable, exceeding the accepted threshold of 0.70. (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016)

You can see a summary of what we found in the table below:

Table1. Cronbach Alpha test

Variable	α	Q
Social Media Engagement	0.794	1-3
Visitor Engagement	0.898	4-7
Visitor Perception	0.748	8-12

7. RESULTS**7.1 Sample Characteristics:**

The research examined 407 tourists, with males comprising 62.9% and females 37.1% of the sample. Also (43.2%) had more than 2000\$, and (41%) held a bachelor's degree..

7.2 Descriptive Statistics:

Mean and Standard Deviation were used to describe attitudes toward the variables. Table 2 summarizes the results:

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	μ	σ
Social Media Engagement	2.812	1.133
Visitor Engagement	3.469	.926
Visitor Perception	3.803	.663

Social Media Engagement

Above table shows that there is a medium level of Social Media Engagement since its mean is between 2.33-3.66. also, it is found that there is a medium level of Visitor Engagement has the highest mean (3.469) whereas, there is a high level of Visitor Perception since it mean is between 3.67-5

7.3 Hypotheses Testing:

H1: Higher social media engagement levels are positively associated with increased visitor engagement with dark tourism sites.

Table 3. H1 Testing

Model Summary						
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate		
1	.417 ^a	.174	.172	.84237		

ANOVA						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	60.532	1	60.532	85.306	.000 ^b
	Residual	287.381	405	.710		
	Total	347.913	406			

Coefficients						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error			
1	(Constant)	2.510	.112		22.439	.000
	Social Media Engagement	.341	.037	.417	9.236	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Visitor Engagement

Linear Regression was employed to assess the main hypothesis. The F value was determined to be statistically significant at the 0.05 level. That means Higher social media engagement levels are positively associated with increased visitor engagement with dark tourism sites. A correlation coefficient of 0.417 suggests a moderate correlation. The independent variable accounted for 17.4% of the variations seen in the dependent variable.

H2: Increased social media engagement positively influences visitors' perceptions of dark tourism sites' historical authenticity and ethical considerations.

Table 4. H2 Testing

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.566 ^a	.320	.318	.54754

ANOVA					
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	Sig.

1	Regression	57.138	1	57.138	190.590	.000 ^b
	Residual	121.418	405	.300		
	Total	178.556	406			

		Coefficients				
		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
Model		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	2.872	.073		39.494	.000
	Social Media Engagement	.331	.024	.566	13.805	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Visitor Perception

Linear Regression was employed to assess the main hypothesis. The F value was determined to be statistically significant at the 0.05 level. That means Increased social media engagement positively influences visitors' perceptions of dark tourism sites' historical authenticity and ethical considerations. A correlation coefficient of 0.566 suggests a moderate correlation. The independent variable accounted for 32% of the variations seen in the dependent variable.

8. DISCUSSION

The hypotheses outlined in this study aim to explore the relationship between social media engagement and visitor engagement and perception of dark tourism sites. This section discusses the findings from each hypothesis and their broader implications for understanding the impact of digital interactions on the dark tourism sector.

Hypothesis 1: Social Media Engagement Increases Visitor Engagement with Dark Tourism Sites

The first hypothesis suggests a relationship between more tourists visiting dark tourism spots and higher social media activity. New studies show that social media plays a more significant role in sparking interest and creating emotional ties to places (Sharpley & Stone, 2008). We found out that both active (posting, commenting, sharing) and passive (viewing, scrolling) types of involvement lead to visitors being more engaged. This might show up as a feeling of more interest or sadness for others, which could make someone more likely to visit the site.

Social media has an impact on people by helping them feel connected to a place before they even get there. This happens because sites like Instagram or TikTok create eye-catching posts that grab and hold users' attention. These experiences build a bond with the location, making visitors more likely to get involved. This idea matches Biran et al.'s (2011) research on dark tourism, in which emotional ties played a big part in drawing people to these spots. Social media posts lay the groundwork for feeling attached to a place, boosting involvement in ways that old-school marketing can't match.

Hypothesis 2: Social Media Engagement Enhances Visitor Perception of Dark Tourism Sites

According to the second hypothesis, increased social media engagement improves tourists' perceptions of dark tourism destinations' historical accuracy and ethical concerns. The results support this idea by showing that interacting with social media content can boost visitors'

understanding of why dark tourism sites matter. Presenting information via narratives that increase historical understanding and sensitivity on social media channels can enable travelers to transcend essential tourism and relate to loss and suffering more deliberately and respectfully (Seaton, 2021).

This result shows how social media affects ethical and educational concerns. Including stories, historical truths, and thoughtful social media portrayals helps contextualize dark tourist sites. Perception is shaped by what people read online. For instance, it could motivate people to advocate for victim memory and other ethical concerns (Sharpley, 2009). Interactions on social media could minimize or overlook the sad history of the site. It is, hence, crucial to examine how such content is sensationalized and monetized (Stone, 2012).

9. IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In the coming years, experts may conduct additional Research to address the ethical concerns associated with dark tourism content on social media, such as the exaggeration of incidents or the generation of profit. By investigating the impact of social media engagement on individuals' opinions following their travels, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of how online interactions influence not only the decision to visit, but also the long-term perceptions of dark tourism. These findings impact dark visitors. They demonstrate the necessity of involving others and utilizing social media. Targeted advertisements have the potential to enhance how individuals interact with and perceive specific locations. These advertisements should incorporate cultural, gender, and age differences. Additionally, they should consider whether individuals have previously visited dark tourism sites. This approach can potentially cultivate a more intimate and respectful relationship with these significant historical sites.

10. CONCLUSION

Social media has a significant impact on dark tourism. This study shows how online platforms change how people experience places linked to tragic events. Social media spreads the word, making more people want to visit dark tourism sites. It lets people worldwide learn about key historical events (Stone, 2012). Online information helps people think about the past, grasp history better, and remember details. Users make sites more lively by sharing travel photos and talking about what they saw.

We must look hard at how social media affects dark tourism. When influencers and viral posts make money from tragedies, it raises ethical concerns (Lennon & Foley, 2000). Overblown news reports, fake social media stuff, and too many selfies and viral events might numb people to historical events (Stone, 2012). While it could make light of disasters, social media puts "dark tourism" spots in the spotlight. This makes us question respecting victims and keeping these places intact (MacCannell, 2013).

REFERENCES

1. Biran, A., Poria, Y., & Oren, G. (2011). Sought experiences at (dark) heritage sites. *Annals of tourism research*, 38(3), 820-841.
2. Farmaki, A. (2013). Dark tourism revisited: A supply/demand conceptualisation. *International Journal of Culture, tourism and hospitality Research*, 7(3), 281-292.

-
3. Hashem, T. (2016). The impact of social media on customers' image for mobiles. *Journal of Advances in Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2(5), 269-277.
 4. Hashem, T., Alotoum, F. J., Allan, M., & Ali, N. (2023). Employing metaverse marketing through gaming and its impact on customer experience: evidence from multiple online gaming platforms. *Calitatea*, 24(196), 193-206.
 5. Hashem, T. N., Albattat, A., Valeri, M., & Sharma, A. (Eds.). (2024). *Marketing and Big Data Analytics in Tourism and Events*. IGI Global.
 6. Hashem, T. N., Suleiman, H. (2024). *Promotion of Jordan's Golden Triangle via Recreational and Religious Tourism Marketing Strategies*. GoodFellow Publishers.
 7. Homsy, D., Freihat, S. M. S. S., Hashem, T. N., & Alshayyab, A. A. (2022). Touristic marketing through blogging and vlogging; does it attract customers' trust?. *Calitatea*, 23(190), 170-178.
 8. Isaac, R. K., & Çakmak, E. (2014). Understanding visitor's motivation at sites of death and disaster: the case of former transit camp Westerbork, the Netherlands. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 17(2), 164-179.
 9. Lennon, J. (2000). Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster. *Continuum*, 3.
 10. MacCannell, D. (2013). *The tourist: A new theory of the leisure class*. Univ of California Press.
 11. Seaton, A. V. (1996). Guided by the dark: From thanatopsis to thanatourism. *International journal of heritage studies*, 2(4), 234-244.
 12. Seaton, T. (2021). Remembrancing, remembrance gangs and co-opted encounters: loading and reloading dark tourism experiences. In *Routledge Handbook of the Tourist Experience* (pp. 328-350). Routledge.
 13. Sekaran, & Bougie. (2016). *Research methods for business: A skill building approach*. John Wiley & Sons.
 14. Sharpley, R. (2009). Dark tourism and political ideology: Towards a governance model. *The darker side of travel: The theory and practice of dark tourism*, 145-163.
 15. Stone, P. R. (2012). Dark tourism and significant other death: Towards a model of mortality mediation. *Annals of tourism research*, 39(3), 1565-1587.
 16. Stone, P., & Sharpley, R. (2008). Consuming dark tourism: A thanatological perspective. *Annals of tourism Research*, 35(2), 574-595.
 17. Tarlow, P. (2005). *Dark tourism: The appeal of death and disaster*. *Aspects of Tourism*, 8, 47-58.
 18. Uzzell, D. (1989). *Heritage Interpretation: The Natural and Built Environment*. Belhaven Press.