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ILLUMINATING DARKNESS THROUGH VACATIONS

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Abstract: Dark tourism is fascinating because it unifies cultural heritage, history, and travels with death. Travels usually refer to hedonism and relaxation, but this niche tourism brought to the stage new dimensions: death and morbidity. Knowing that death is one of the greatest human fears, the authors investigated the domestic tourists' perceptions of dark tourism and its development in Serbia. The research was conducted using an online survey. The questionnaire included three units: 1) sociodemographic characteristics, 2) familiarity and understanding of the dark tourism phenomenon, and 3) motivation for engaging in dark tourism. The results revealed that domestic tourists support dark tourism development, mainly due to its educational role. Tourists marked the acquisition of new knowledge, curiosity, and compassion as the primary motivators. Therefore, the older male population particularly expressed a dominant positive attitude toward the development of dark tourism. Once again, the important role of the local community in tourism development is confirmed, especially in "sensitive" forms of alternative tourism. Finally, the research contributes significantly to the theoretical framework and provides valuable guidelines for the planning and further development of dark tourism in Serbia.

Keywords: dark tourism; domestic tourists; perception; motivation; Serbia

1. Introduction

Dark tourism has become popular during the last decades. It has been promoted chiefly through social media postings, thematic websites, blog posts, and newspaper articles. There are important dark tourism destinations around the world. The most important European sites are the Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland; Anti-War Museum, Holocaust Memorial, Berlin Wall, and many others in Berlin; Chernobyl and its Exclusion zone in Ukraine, etc. In Asia, the top attractions are Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan, Phnom Penh in Cambodia, Ho Chi Minh City in Viet Nam, etc. The 9/11 Memorial & Museum or "Ground Zero" in New York is the most visited dark tourism attraction in the USA (6,6 million visitors in 2018; Shalomov, 2019). Well-known sites include Robben Islands in South Africa and four genocide memorials in Rwanda, which are on UNESCO World Heritage list (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.).

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Besides these most visited sites, dark tourism attractions are present in most countries worldwide, so they also exist in Serbia. Special interest tourism, which encompasses different niche products, is emphasized as a potential tourism product in the Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia for 2016–2025 (Vlada Republike Srbije, Ministarstvo trgovine, turizma i telekomunikacija, 2016), so dark tourism should be given particular attention. During its history, Serbia has faced war events and political turmoil, leaving numerous tangible and intangible pieces of evidence which could attract many tourists. Hence, it is surprising that this topic does not attract a greater academic audience in Serbia. Therefore, this paper will contribute substantially to researching the dark tourism phenomenon in former Yugoslavia, specifically on Serbia's territory. The research gives insights into domestic tourists' perspectives. Specifically, it aims to determine whether Serbian residents perceive dark tourism and its development as a desirable tourism perspective. The development of this niche tourism could contribute to the creation of complex tourism offer in Serbia. It could also provide economic opportunities for the local community, which should align with the principles of sustainability.

2. Theoretical background and research hypotheses

Death has been the focus of human attention since ancient times. It has always occurred in different forms, but the term itself did not exist (Magano et al., 2023). The dark tourism concept itself started to be investigated before the closing decades of the 20th century. Among the first scholars who highlighted the relationship between death, the macabre, and traveling were Uzzell (1989), Rojek (1991), Foley and Lennon (1996), and Seaton (1996). Foley and Lennon (1996) presented the term dark tourism for the first time in 1996 as a broader phrase that refers to any travel related to death, macabre, and tragedies in general.

There are many dark tourism subcategories or new tourism products which partially overlap with this umbrella term, such as: horror tourism (tourism connected to the visit of the castle dungeons or other sites related to recent atrocities and disasters; Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996), conflict tourism (travels to places marked by political dispute; Warner, 1999), tragic tourism (visiting destinations where tragic events happened; Lippard, 2000), morbid tourism (the type of tourism related to the places of the sudden and violent death which instantly attracts large numbers of visitors, together with the fabricated attractions; Blom, 2000), grief tourism (recreational grieving at the sites where celebrities died; West, 2004), fright tourism (attraction to destinations that are historically related to death and disaster; Bristow & Newman, 2005), trauma tourism (visiting places where traumatic events happened; Clark, 2006), and paranormal tourism (travels to sites that are attractive due to belief systems beyond rational views; Pharino et al., 2018), etc. Based on the analyzed literature and the existing definitions of dark tourism, for the purpose of this paper, dark tourism is perceived as travel to sites connected to death and various tragedies in order to better understand the personal relationship to death, pay tribute to the victims, and learn about tragic events.

Dark tourism is associated with different types of places—memorials; former camps, prisons, and battlefields; locations of the sudden death of famous people; thematic museums; political tours; sites associated with magic and vampires; etc. These sites can be classified as primary or in situ (actual locations of disasters and tragedies) and secondary or created (commemorative) sites (Cohen, 2011; Smith, 1998; Wight & Lennon, 2007). There were numerous attempts to create a typology of dark places by the sites' characteristics or

possible activities (Ashworth, 2004; Dann, 1998; Miles, 2002; Seaton, 1996; Sharpley, 2005; Stone, 2006). As Raine (2013) argues, it is necessary to evaluate and understand both supply and demand to be able to comprehend this complex phenomenon.

Stone's dark tourism continuum is one of the most comprehensive typologies (Stone, 2006). He presented a dark tourism framework based on the earlier research in the field of dark tourism conducted by Miles (2002), Sharpley (2005), and Seaton (1999). The author considered a difference in the shades of darkness among the dark tourism products, for instance, between the sites associated with death (e.g., ex-situ memorial museums) and authentic sites where the actual death happened (e.g., former concentration camps). The temporal dimension of the events is also emphasized because some recent events with living witnesses are considered darker. The purpose of the site presentation is another aspect of dark tourism supply that was observed, such as commemoration, education, entertainment, etc. Bearing in mind the mentioned aspects of the dark tourism products, Stone (2006) defined the dark tourism spectrum, i.e., "Seven Dark Suppliers". It included seven categories of dark tourism sites: dark fun factories, dark exhibitions, dark dungeons, dark resting places, dark shrines, dark conflict sites, and dark camps of genocide. The dark fun factories are positioned on the lightest side of the spectrum. They are made with the purpose of entertainment and commercialization of real or fictional death. The dark camps of genocide are positioned on the opposite side of the spectrum. These sites are situated in the actual locations of the genocide. They are created with the purpose of education and commemoration, and they also offer a deeply emotional experience.

Another significant aspect of the dark tourism phenomenon is traveling motivation. Namely, travel behavior depends on various motives determining when and where a person will travel. It is the first step in understanding tourist behavior (Lewis et al., 2022). The pioneering studies detected broad scope of motivations in dark tourism. The same trend was detected in recent studies, but some common motivators could be outlined (Urbonavicius, 2021). Several scholars proposed models and theories to help explain the broad and specific dark tourists' motivation (Blom, 2000; Dann, 1998; Lewis et al., 2022; Raine, 2013; Tarlow, 2005). Various dark tourism sites and related events impeded the understanding of the motivation at the core of these travels. The motivation behind dark tourism differs from other types of travel due to the common negative perception of death. It is not only reflected in the lure of death and the macabre (Seaton, 1996; Stone & Sharpley, 2008) because it is multifaceted and riddled with various social and psychological factors. According to Rojek (1997), "sensation seeking" is one of the pull factors. Other authors highlighted "voyeurism" as a strong motivator (Buda & McIntosh, 2013; Lisle, 2004). Sometimes, it may be a "must-see site" (Hughes, 2008).

The presented theoretical concept of dark tourism indicates the multilayered nature of the phenomenon. It can provide various tourist experiences, but also raises an ethical dilemma—is it morally acceptable to pack, promote, and sell stories about human tragedies (Kang et al., 2012)? This dilemma stimulates moral reflection (Light & Ivanova, 2022) and could demotivate people to travel to dark tourism destinations because they find it inappropriate to build a business on someone else's suffering, especially because some definitions and dark tourism typologies emphasize entertainment as a motivation for engagement in dark tourism (Best, 2007; Foley & Lennon, 1997).

This research's main aim and specific goals have been defined from the current achievements in dark tourism investigation. Therefore, it aims to investigate how Serbian domestic tourists perceive dark tourism activities, considering the usual dialectic relationship between the terms tourism and death and the ethical dilemma that hovers the concept itself. Domestic tourists' perspective on dark tourism has been investigated from different aspects to gain a deeper insight. The defined hypotheses have been divided into three subgroups as follows:

- Understanding the phenomenon
 - Hypothesis 1 (H_1): *Most Serbian domestic tourists are not familiar with the dark tourism concept;*
 - Hypothesis 2 (H_2): *Familiarity with the dark tourism phenomenon depends on the achieved level of education;*
 - Hypothesis 3 (H_3): *Domestic tourists perceive dark tourism as a morbid activity;*
 - Hypothesis 4 (H_4): *Domestic tourists are interested in the attractions positioned on the lighter side of Stone's dark tourism continuum;*
- A motivation for engagement in dark tourism
 - Hypothesis 5 (H_5): *Dark tourism attractions are not decisive factors in destination selection;*
 - Hypothesis 6 (H_6): *The main motive for engaging in dark tourism travels is education;*
- The support for the inclusion of dark tourism in the Serbian tourism offer
 - Hypothesis 7 (H_7): *Domestic tourists do not support dark tourism development in Serbia; and*
 - Hypothesis 8 (H_8): *Younger domestic tourists participate more in dark tourism than other groups.*

3. Materials and methods

Even though mass forms of tourism (e.g., city-break, spa tourism, mountain tourism, and, recently, rural tourism) represent the basis for tourism development, Serbia has the potential for many alternative forms of tourism. There are numerous monuments from different epochs, the remnants of concentration camps, sites of historically significant battles, theme museums, and memorial complexes, which could attract a notable number of tourists. At the global level, some Serbian heritage sites have been recognized as dark tourism attractions. The most numerous are sites from the Second World War: Šumarice Memorial Park in Kragujevac, the 12th of February Memorial Museum at Crveni Krst in Niš, the Museum of Banjica Concentration Camp, Topovske Šupe and Staro Sajmište Concentration Camps in Belgrade; Kadinjača in Užice, Bujanj in Niš, and the Memorial Park "Kraljevački Oktobar" in Kraljevo. Apart from the ones mentioned, there are significant sites such as: the Monument to the Unknown Hero (commemoration of the victims from the First World War), the Military Museum (1878), the complex of the New Cemetery (1886), and the Nebojša Tower (1460) in Belgrade, Skull Tower (Ćele-Kula) in Niš (1809), and the Memorial Complex of Gazimestan near Priština (1389).

The research is focused on the case study dealing with domestic tourists in Serbia and their attitude toward the development of dark tourism in general and specifically in their homeland. The study's objectives were achieved using an online survey as a data collection method. The authors used a structured self-administered questionnaire developed according to the relevant dark tourism literature. The trial version of the questionnaire was improved based on the

insights obtained from the pilot survey. Scholars from the field of tourism were consulted to evaluate the first draft of the survey. The suggestions were related to the simplification of the question and avoiding disambiguation. The final questionnaire had three sections. In the first part, the basic sociodemographic characteristics of domestic tourists were examined. The questions were defined in close-ended form and aligned with the accepted 2011 Census methodology of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2022). A specific section of the questionnaire was dedicated to the familiarity and understanding of the phenomenon of dark tourism. The third part is dedicated to the investigation of the motives for engaging in dark tourism. The questionnaire was closed with questions examining the attitudes toward including dark tourism in the Serbian offer. Except for the first section, the mix of open-ended, close-ended, and 5-point Likert-scale questions (1 = *I completely disagree*, 5 = *I completely agree*) was used in all survey sections. Therefore, research has quantitative and qualitative characteristics because it enables a deeper understanding of the respondents' perception of the phenomenon, thus achieving the case study's primary objective.

The research was conducted among domestic tourists in Serbia. The simple, randomly selected sample included 266 respondents from different sociodemographic groups, while 249 responses were valid for interpretation. The discrepancy between the total sample size and the proper responses is present due to missing data, technical errors, or contradictory answers. The data were collected using an open online survey. Even though the earlier studies that compared online and pen-and-paper surveys (Kittleston, 1995; Schuldt & Totten, 1994) indicated higher response rates and quality of the pen-and-paper surveys, the latter research (Ball, 2019; Dolnicar et al., 2009; Evans & Mathur, 2018) showed the opposite. Generally, there are several advantages of online research: cost-efficiency, flexibility, accuracy, time-saving, accessibility, objectivity, anonymity, etc., thanks to technological innovation (Ball, 2019; Evans & Mathur, 2018).

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents

Demographics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Sex		
Female	133	53.5
Male	116	46.5
Age		
20–29	73	29.3
30–39	78	31.5
40–49	76	30.4
≥50	22	8.8
Highest education achieved		
High school diploma	44	17.6
Associate degree (Applied studies)	22	8.9
Bachelor's degree (Academic studies)	55	22.3
Master of Science degree	97	38.6
Doctoral degree	31	12.6
Occupation		
Student	22	17.5
Employed	199	70.8
Retired	5	2.1
Unemployed	23	9.4

Detailed information about the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents is provided in Table 1. It includes different variables which helped in creating the profile of the respondents. A high share of the respondents has achieved the third level of education (82.3%), which confirmed the findings from the previous studies that specific types of tourism attract a segment of tourists that is more educated (Brankov et al., 2022; S. S. Kim et al., 2008). Most respondents were employed (70.8%), which aligns with the statement that specific types of tourism attract a smaller, but economically stronger, part of the tourism demand (Carey et al., 1997). Regarding the spatial distribution of the respondents by the place of permanent residence, most of them are settled in Beogradski Region and Region Šumadije i Zapadne Srbije (74.4%), as the most densely populated regions in Serbia. The respondents from Region Vojvodine and Region Južne i Istočne Srbije made a smaller share (25.6%).

Different research techniques were used for data processing. First, the authors used descriptive statistics and results were presented in the form of tables and graphs. Further, the tests for group comparison were conducted. Considering the used scales in data collection (nominal and ordinal) and the absence of normal distribution in the analyzed data, the authors used non-parametric tests, specifically the Mann-Whitney *U*, Kruskal-Wallis, and Friedman tests. A Spearman's rank correlation was performed to detect the link between the primary motivators and different dark tourism attractions. The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences for Windows, version 21.0, and Microsoft Excel 365, version 2206.

4. Results

4.1. Understanding the phenomenon

In the first section, the respondents were offered statements and open-ended questions regarding their knowledge of the phenomenon. Most respondents (56.0%) stated that dark tourism is unknown to them. When those who answered "not familiar" or "neither known nor unknown" were added, the percentage rose to 81.0%. It shows that most Serbian domestic tourists are not familiar with the concept of dark tourism.

Spearman's rank correlation was used to analyze the connections between demographic variables (gender, age, and education) and familiarity with dark tourism. The conducted test indicated a statistically significant, but relatively low, positive correlation between familiarity with the phenomenon and the achieved level of education ($r = .3$, $n = 249$, $p < .005$). It indicates that respondents with a higher education level (degrees within the third level of education) have a better knowledge of dark tourism, i.e., familiarity with the phenomenon of dark tourism depends on the achieved level of education.

Even though the respondents stated they were unfamiliar with the term "dark tourism", the results showed that Serbian domestic tourists participated in dark tourism travels. All the respondents visited at least one dark tourism attraction in Serbia, but also 51.6% visited some of the famous foreign attractions (most visited—Berlin Wall, Germany: 20%, Pompei, Italy: 10.6%). The most frequently visited attractions in Serbia included the Monument to the Unknown Hero in Belgrade (82.8%), Šumarice Memorial Complex in Kragujevac (69.8%), and the Skull Tower in Niš (64.1%). More than half of the respondents visited the main dark tourism attractions in Belgrade: the Nebojša Tower (59.2%), the Military Museum (56.5%), and the New Cemetery (56.7%). A more detailed distribution of the most visited dark tourism attractions in Serbia has been shown in Figure 1.

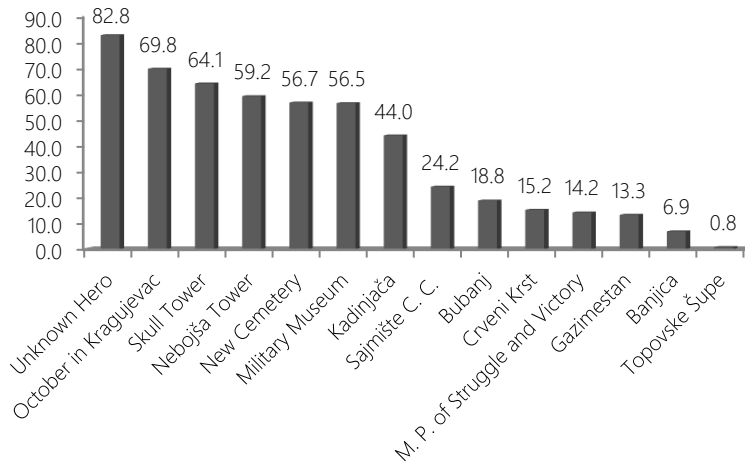


Figure 1. The most visited Serbian dark tourism attractions (%).

Furthermore, the authors wanted to determine how domestic tourists perceive dark tourism. The respondents were offered several explanations based on the relevant literature and the existing dark tourism definitions. The findings indicated that most of the respondents perceived dark tourism as “learning from the mistakes that have occurred in the past” (37.0%), “compassion with the victims” (27.9%), and “satisfaction of curiosity” (15.8%). The smallest number of respondents believed that dark tourism represents enjoying the tragedy and suffering of others (0.3%).

Subsequently, using Stone’s dark tourism continuum (2006), visitors’ interest in specific categories of dark tourism attractions was also examined. The respondents assessed the attractions belonging to different spectrum parts on the five-point Likert scale. The conducted Friedman’s test revealed the difference in the attractiveness of the proposed attractions ($\chi^2 = 381.910$, $p = .000$). The most significant interest was shown toward theme museums (71.2%, $Mdn = 4$), battlefields (65.8%, $Mdn = 4$), and memorial complexes (65.8%, $Mdn = 4$). The political tours were the least interesting attractions (17.7%, $Mdn = 3$). The results indicated that the respondents are more interested in the attractions on the darker side of the continuum.

4.2. A motivation for engagement in dark tourism

The following section examines the centrality of dark tourism attractions in travel decisions and the primary motivators for engaging in dark tourism. Bearing in mind that dark tourism is a specific type of travel, the authors wanted to investigate whether dark sites are the main factor in the decision-making process. The results revealed that 78.3% of the respondents stated that dark tourism attractions were not the main factor in destination selection. The minor part considers that these attractions were crucial in the destination choice. Furthermore, the Mann-Whitney U test showed a statistically significant difference between men and women regarding this motivational dichotomy ($U = 6,515$; $z = -2.47$; $p = .014$, $r = -.16$). Specifically, dark tourism attraction was the only travel goal for more than 62% of men.

Moreover, the results of Friedman’s test indicated that the incentive factors were rated differently ($\chi^2 = 761.095, p = .000$). The essential motivators were “education” (83.8%, $Mdn = 4$), “the understanding of the event” (79.8%, $Mdn = 4$), and “curiosity” (72.9%, $Mdn = 4$). The visitors were the least motivated by “prestige” (2.2%, $Mdn = 1$) and “entertainment” (11.5%, $Mdn = 2$). Further, the Mann-Whitney U test revealed a statistically significant difference in the level of motivation of males and females by “curiosity” and “entertainment” (Table 2). It implies that there is a market segment that is more supportive to the possibility of the dark tourism development in Serbia. The results also showed that the importance of specific motivators’ changes among different age groups, but education and curiosity are not dependent on age. Likewise, there is a significant statistical difference regarding motivators among the groups of respondents with different levels of education. The exception is “empathy”, which does not depend on the level of education.

Table 2. The results of gender, age, and education differences regarding incentive factors

Variable	Gender ^a			Age ^b			Education ^b	
	U	z	p	r	χ^2	p	χ^2	p
Education	6,689.50	-1.59	.113	-.10	8.532	.036	26.701	.000*
Nostalgia	7,069.50	-0.81	.420	-.05	12.764	.005*	26.179	.000*
Curiosity	5,819.00	-3.21	.001*	-.20	5.793	.122	35.670	.000*
Entertainment	5,326.00	-4.16	.000*	-.26	10.797	.013*	18.381	.001*
Empathy	7,169.00	-0.63	.531	-.04	11.854	.008*	7.758	.101
Prestige	6,723.50	-1.64	.101	-.10	24.473	.000*	14.692	.005*
Understanding event	7,165.00	-0.65	.514	-.04	19.657	.000*	16.963	.002*

Note. ^a Mann-Whitney U test; ^b Kruskal-Wallis test; * $p < .05$.

The relationship between motives for dark visits and interest in certain dark attractions was also examined (Table 3). The respondents whose primary motive for participation in dark tourism was prestige are less interested in the darkest attractions (memorial complexes, thematic museums, and concentration camps). On the other hand, these attractions appealed to the respondents whose primary motive for the visit was education.

Table 3. The results of the correlation between the motives and the types of dark tourism attractions

Variable		A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Education	rho	0.445	0.391	0.311	0.373	0.343	0.099	0.321
	p	.000*	.000*	.000*	.000*	.000*	.120	.000*
Nostalgia	rho	0.286	0.311	0.354	0.296	0.296	0.289	0.334
	p	.000*	.000*	.000*	.000*	.000*	.000*	.000*
Curiosity	rho	0.397	0.344	0.476	0.472	0.300	0.385	0.366
	p	.000*	.000*	.000*	.000*	.000*	.000*	.000*
Entertainment	rho	0.066	0.119	0.233	0.147	0.177	0.342	0.155
	p	.305	.063	.000*	.021	.005*	.000*	.015*
Empathy	rho	0.358	0.387	0.262	0.287	0.243	0.195	0.275
	p	.000*	.000*	.000*	.000*	.000*	.002*	.000*
Prestige	rho	-0.139	-0.178	0.023	-0.094	0.127	0.144	0.004
	p	.029*	.005*	.714	.143	.046*	.024*	.952
Understanding event	rho	0.317	0.443	0.410	0.376	0.250	0.164	0.376
	p	.000*	.000*	.000*	.000*	.000*	.010*	.000*

Note. A = Memorial complexes; B = Theme museums; C = Former prisons; D = Concentration camps; E = Political tours; F = Vampire and magic tours; G = Battlefields; rho = Spearman’s rho; * $p < .05$.

4.3. *The support for the inclusion of dark tourism in the Serbian tourist offer*

The last part is dedicated to the investigation of the Serbian domestic tourists' perception toward dark tourism development in their home country. Serbia has considerable potential for developing dark tourism due to its turbulent historical and contemporary circumstances, which left numerous material pieces of evidence. Still, the support of the local community is highly important for tourism development in general, especially for this niche product. The findings revealed that the majority (68.5%) perceived that Serbia could be recognized as a dark tourism destination and that they support the development of this specific tourism product. On the other hand, 6.2% were completely against it. A closer analysis of the attitudes showed that the male group ($N = 116$) has a higher mean rank (139.21) than the female group of the respondents ($N = 133$, mean rank = 104.70) toward the statement "Serbia can be an important dark tourism destination". This difference is statistically significant, confirmed by the Mann-Whitney U test ($U = 5398.50$; $z = -3.983$; $p = .000$, $r = -.25$). Additionally, the Kruskal-Wallis test showed a statistically significant difference in attitudes toward this statement between the four age groups ($\chi^2(3, n = 249) = 10.78$; $p = .013$). The median of the oldest age group (age ≥ 50) had a higher value ($Mdn = 5$) in comparison with other groups ($Mdn = 4$).

The qualitative responses were interpreted to understand respondents' attitudes better. The three groups of respondents were singled out based on their opinion: supporters, neutrals, and opponents. The supporters were the respondents who had a positive attitude toward dark tourism development and comprised the largest group. Some cases that depict the most common attitudes among this group were selected. For instance, "Historic suffering can be best valorized through dark tourism" (ID 51). Dark tourism represents an alternative to mass tourism because "the presentation of our history changes the image of Serbia" (ID 250). At the same time, it has "a strong educational role contributing to the creation of cultural identity" (ID 250). Ultimately, there is a consensus that Serbia has a rich history. Many war events took place in this country, so these mistakes must not be repeated, and lessons should be learned even through the travel experience.

On the other hand, the second group of respondents (neutrals) had a vague attitude toward this topic. Their opinion is embodied in the following statements. "It is necessary to affirm the existing forms of tourism with an infrastructure basis and staffing potential. After that, we should invest in developing other forms, such as dark tourism", was one of the answers (ID 81). The third and the smallest group (opponents) had a pronounced negative attitude toward the development of dark tourism. As respondent with ID 16 expressed: "I think people are bombarded with the news of death and suffering, and therefore this type of tourism should not be promoted. Dark tourism is the last thing according to which Serbia needs to be recognized and advertise its tourism". This group does not support the development of the proposed tourism product in their homeland.

5. Discussion

Dark tourism and its recognition and popularization among the broader audience have attracted the attention of scholars for more than three decades. This study confirmed that dark tourism still belongs to the group of niche or alternative tourism products, which are small-scale and reserved for a specific type of tourists (allocentric to mid-centric; Weaver, 2006). It is not sufficiently present in the Serbian tourist market. One of the reasons could be

the domination of mass forms of tourism, especially sun, sea, and sand, spa/wellness, and mountain tourism. Therefore, a high share of uninformed respondents confirms H_1 . Although they were unfamiliar with the dark tourism concept, the study indicated that almost all respondents visited at least one dark tourism site. The younger segment of respondents visited these attractions mostly during excursions within the school curriculum. The organized trips or individual (family) visits in the form of day trips are dominant among the older respondents. On the contrary, similar research conducted in Croatia showed that only a small number of the local population were unfamiliar with the mentioned term (11.1%; Juranović et al., 2021). The statements mentioned above are closely related to H_2 , considering that most direct participants in dark tourism have a higher level of education. The obtained results are correlated with previous research in which the dominant participation had respondents with higher (college/university) education (Lewis et al., 2022; Magano et al., 2022; Millán et al., 2021; Qian et al., 2022). It should not be surprising because the dark tourism concept represents a mix of cultural studies, history, geography, and other related disciplines. Consequently, its “consumption” and understanding require multidisciplinary (pre)knowledge, which is mainly acquired within the official education system in Serbia.

Considering the character of dark tourism, the results show that domestic tourists did not perceive this type of tourism as a morbid activity. This finding does not align with previous research (Lewis et al., 2022; Robb, 2009; Stone, 2006; Stone & Sharpley, 2008), which pointed out the commercialization and conversion of death-related sites into entertainment locations and theme parks. Most respondents assert that education about the event and its reconstruction (Bhati et al., 2021; Fabros et al., 2023; Jang et al., 2021; Jureniene & Radzevicius, 2022) is the primary motivating factor behind dark tourism. Further, curiosity (Fabros et al., 2023), compassion (Oren et al., 2021), as well as spiritual experiences (Hosseini et al., 2024) are at the core of dark tourism, which implies its positive effects on the affirmation of positive life determinations. They seem to see dark tourism as an opportunity to expand their knowledge about a particular event. Thus, H_3 was not accepted as it was expected. This perspective certainly impacted the more significant interest toward attractions positioned on the darker side of Stone’s spectrum (education and morbid curiosity), which does not align with the proposed H_4 . The research has shown that respondents are more interested in attractions that have connections to higher political influence and ideology, together with death and suffering. As subsequent individual studies have shown, visiting places of mass killings, executions, and torture allows the acquisition of darker experiences. Finally, the knowledge of “deeper darkness” makes it easier to express their feelings (Jureniene & Radzevicius, 2022; Lv et al., 2022).

The second part deals with the motivation for participation in travel labeled as dark tourism, where the question about the centrality of dark tourism in destination choice arose. Following the results of the “understanding dark tourism phenomenon” section, the statement that dark tourism is not an essential element for travel should not be surprising, which confirms H_5 . Similar outcomes are supported in previous studies. Namely, the research conducted in Croatia indicated that the thanatological (dark) tourist attraction was not a primary factor in selecting a destination (Bittner, 2011; Juranović et al., 2021). However, there are some deviations, considering gender variables. The male respondents more often choose to visit these localities.

Furthermore, for the respondents for whom this type of travel is the primary choice, the main motive for engaging in dark tourism is acquiring new knowledge (information) to understand historical events. Thus, it was confirmed that H_6 correlates with H_2 regarding the educational level of the respondents. Other studies identified educational purposes as the main pull factor for traveling to dark tourism destinations (Bhati et al., 2021; Fabros et al., 2023; Hosseini et al., 2024; Miletić et al., 2023). In terms of dark tourism experiences, the most important is education (Iliev, 2021). This thesis once again confirms the educational potential of dark heritage. On the other hand, an important motivator is the act of curiosity, considering that such phenomena are associated with a certain amount of mysticism, secrecy, occultism, etc.

The final part considers the possibility of inclusion of dark tourism in the official tourist offer in Serbia. In that regard, H_7 was formulated—dark tourism is not a desirable option for tourism development. However, the results showed the opposite point of view, considering that over two-thirds of the respondents expressed a positive attitude towards dark tourism development. It is interesting to note that more men believe that Serbia has the potential to become a recognizable dark tourism destination. As Mair and Reid (2007) pointed out, local community support is crucial for any tourism product's successful development and long-term benefits, especially the specific ones that raise moral and ethical dilemmas. It seems morally acceptable to them to create dark tourism products, even with the vivid memories of unpleasant events.

On the other hand, the research by Dale and Robinson (2011) and S. Kim and Butler (2015) indicated that the local community is not eager to support dark tourism development, especially when the memories are fresh. This attitude of the Serbian residents is undoubtedly linked to their focus on the educational role of dark tourism. Besides, it indicates that allowing the present and future generations to learn about the mistakes made by the previous ones should be the purpose of dark tourism. Furthermore, market research conducted in the United States showed that the youngest population (< 25 years old) is the most interested in dark tourism (Woolf, 2023). Contrary to the expectations, this research suggests that older groups participate more in dark tourism and are more positively oriented toward developing this form of tourism. The explanation can be found in the fact that older respondents have more historical knowledge and experience than younger ones. Therefore, H_8 was not supported.

6. Conclusion

The presented study could be perceived as the stepping stone in creating a theoretical base that could help direct dark tourism development in Serbia. Considering that dark tourism has not been integrated in the national tourism product, we could designate dark tourism in Serbia as "circumstantial" (Weaver, 1991) alternative tourism. Hence, the opinion of the domestic tourists presented in this research should be utilized to create dark tourism products. Bearing in mind that domestic tourists in Serbia do not perceive dark tourism as enjoying the death and the macabre per se, the product should be created with the focus on the educational role of this niche tourism. Furthermore, some products should be specifically developed for the older population, which showed the most enthusiasm for dark tourism. Additionally, this type of tourism should be better promoted to become recognized by a wider audience and help create a diversified offer.

This research should be also perceived as a basis for systematically planning and developing dark tourism in the Balkan region. It makes an essential contribution to disseminating the mentioned topic because it has attracted almost exclusively the attention of Western researchers (S. Kim & Butler, 2015). On the other hand, it has some limitations. The respondents had doubts about understanding a few questions, mainly because they were not familiar with the term dark tourism. Some remarked that the questionnaire was time-consuming. As it was pointed out, the authors investigated only domestic tourists. Hence, it is necessary to incorporate research on foreign tourists, the whole local population, and other stakeholders (local authorities, tourism organizations, etc.) included in the development of dark tourism.

The future research should be elaborated in several directions. Firstly, it should be directed to the investigation of the entire territory of the former Yugoslavia and the study of dark tourism sites that originate from recent civil wars from the closing decade of the 20th century. The insights from this research could support the education of the local community and would help mutual understanding between these nations. Besides, the research could be expanded to the territory of Southeastern Europe to create a dark tourism network that will be recognized in the global tourist market.

In theoretical terms, future research could be directed to filling the gaps in the literature on dark tourism motivation and experience. Specific attention should be devoted to the lighter side of Stone's dark tourism spectrum (Stone, 2006), where motivational factors significantly vary. Also, more attention should be paid to the reasons for avoiding dark tourism sites. The various social and cultural backgrounds of visitors must also be considered in this process. For instance, the reactions and experiences of those with personal and family connections should be thoughtfully observed. In this respect, the further research focus should be directed toward on-site experience, i.e., anticipation or expectations (pre-visit).

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