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Published in:
Tourism Geographies

DOI:
[10.1080/14616688.2020.1713877](https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2020.1713877)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2020

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Sharma, N. (2020). Dark tourism and moral disengagement in liminal spaces. *Tourism Geographies*, 22(2), 273-297. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2020.1713877>

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Tourism Geographies

An International Journal of Tourism Space, Place and Environment

ISSN: 1461-6688 (Print) 1470-1340 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rtxg20>

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To cite this article: Nitasha Sharma (2020) Dark tourism and moral disengagement in liminal spaces, *Tourism Geographies*, 22:2, 273-297, DOI: [10.1080/14616688.2020.1713877](https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2020.1713877)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2020.1713877>

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Published online: 16 Jan 2020.

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Dark tourism and moral disengagement in liminal spaces

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ABSTRACT

Dark tourism, which deploys taboo subjects and commercially exploits the macabre, has always raised moral conflicts at a collective and individual level while providing new spaces in which morality is communicated, reconfigured and revitalized. Although earlier studies in dark tourism have focused upon the collective notions of morality with a considerable amount of discussion on the comprehension and the manner in which the history and information of dark tourist attractions are presented for tourist consumption, the individual differences of tourist morality and how tourists morally engage with death and its various forms of representation, has been neglected. In order to understand morally transgressive behavior displayed by tourists at emotionally sensitive or controversial sites and the various ways they justify their actions, the narratives of international tourists who are interested in death-related rituals at a cremation ground in India were collected and analyzed. Drawing upon a socio-cognitive theory, the moral mechanisms involved in tourist judgment towards photography of death-related rituals are discussed. It was observed that the cremation ground offers a liminal space for tourists to exercise their moral agency in an inhibitive form, as well as proactive form and that transgressive behavior among tourists is likely if they disengage from processes related to moral conduct using various moral disengagement mechanisms. This behavior arises due to an obscuring and fragmentation of human agency during moral disengagement thereby making it possible for tourists to not take ownership of the consequences of their actions.

摘要

黑暗旅游业利用禁忌主题和商业性的恐怖行为, 总是在集体和个人层面引发道德冲突, 同时为道德的交流、重构和振兴提供新的空间。虽然黑暗旅游早期的研究集中在道德的集体的观念, 广泛讨论与阐释了针对旅游消费黑暗旅游吸引物历史与信息的展示方式, 但是一直忽略了旅游者道德的个体差异以及游客道德层面接触死亡以及死亡的各种展示形式。为了了解游客在情感敏感或有争议的地点所表现出的道德越轨行为, 以及他们为自己的行为辩护的各种方式, 我们收集并分析了对印度火葬场与死亡有关的仪式感兴趣的国际游客的叙述。根据社会认知理论, 讨论了游客对死亡相关仪式摄影的道德机制。研究发现, 火葬场提供了一个阈

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 22 October 2018
Accepted 8 December 2019

KEYWORDS

Agency; Dark tourism; India; liminality; moral disengagement; transgressive behavior

关键词

黑暗旅游; 阈限; 道德脱离; 代理; 越轨行为; 印度

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限空间, 让游客以抑制性和主动性的形式来发挥道德能动性, 如果游客使用各种道德解脱机制来脱离与道德行为相关的过程, 就有可能发生违反道德的行为。这种行为产生是由于道德脱离过程中人类行为主体的模糊和碎片化, 从而使游客有可能不对其行为的后果承担责任。

Introduction

Morality is a socially constructed set of values that are agreed upon by individuals and societies (Pennycook, 1994). It differs within and between cultures and is embedded in relations of power and spatial contexts. According to Caton (2012), morality refers to the “human imaginative and discursive capacity for considering how things should be, as opposed to describing how things are—what is sometimes referred to as the “is” versus “ought” distinction” (p. 1906). Dark tourism is a social phenomenon where the notion of morality has been subjected to extensive interrogation, especially by the media. While the tourist motivations to visit sites of a sensitive nature may be diverse, dark tourism remains a morally relevant issue that involves a questioning of moral judgment (Rojek, 1997; Stone, 2009). It has always raised issues of how morality is collectively conveyed and individually constructed. Dark tourism provides new spaces in which not only immorality is (re)presented for contemporary consumption, but also in which morality is communicated, reconfigured and revitalized (Stone, 2009). It deploys taboo subjects, commercially exploits the macabre and offers the tourist a liminal space for reassessment and reflexivity and may even allow a reconfiguration of moral reasoning and outlook (Stone, 2009).

Prior research in dark tourism has focused upon the collective notions of morality (e.g., moral issues related to collective memory, politics, commodification of tragedy and atrocity) and its institutional reconstruction through dark tourism but not much on the individual differences of tourist morality and moral consumption (Stone, 2009, 2011; Seaton & Lennon, 2004; Wight & Lennon, 2007). The discussions on morality in dark tourism have been about the comprehension and manner in which the history and information of dark tourist attractions are presented for tourist consumption but not much on how tourists morally engage with death and its various forms of representation. The process of individualization (in which traditional meaning systems and values diminish in importance in favor of personal considerations and decisions concerning values, norms and behaviors) has made “people more reliant upon themselves for moral instruction” (Stone & Sharpley, 2013, p. 62). Hence consumer behavior at an individual level is useful for understanding how individuals within contemporary society (and when placed in diverse situations) construct and reconstruct moral meanings and behave accordingly. Currently, there is a substantial amount of theoretical research available on dark tourism and morality or ‘deviant leisure’ (Stebbins, 1996; Stebbins, Rojek, & Sullivan, 2006). However, there are very few academic articles that explain the topic of morally transgressive behavior displayed by tourists at emotionally sensitive or controversial sites and the various ways the tourists justify their actions (Hodalska, 2017).

Dark tourism provides ample spaces to tourists who regularly find themselves in morally challenging situations, some of which they handle well, others, not (Fukui,

2015; Lawther, 2017). Consequently, the current study aims to understand the moral identity and mechanisms of moral judgement with respect to tourist consumption of death at a cremation ground. In doing so, the study demonstrates how tourist narratives at a cremation ground represent selective moral disengagement and why certain tourists act as conscientious moral agents when it comes to justifying transgressive behavior. Tourists can perform a place in different ways but transgressive behavior in dark tourism implies partaking in social, cultural and legal taboos which, in turn, are institutional prohibitions placed on determining what constitutes good or bad. There are numerous examples of tourist transgressive behavior reported in the media that have sparked moral outrage time and again. Examples include: tourists touching the dead bodies at Trunyan cemetery in Bali; tourists holding an inflatable sex doll at the 9/11 Memorial in New York; tourists taking selfies on the railway tracks at Auschwitz; tourists taking photographs with inappropriate poses at the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe; tourists indulging in artwork or graffiti and defacing sacred monuments and buildings, and other acts of vandalism. In fact, an upsurge of photos on social media of tourists posing on the train tracks leading to the main gate of the Auschwitz Memorial forced the museum authorities to issue a statement on Twitter asking tourists to be more respectful while taking photos (Drury, 2019). While Sontag (1977) points out that photographs act as a screen or defense against anxiety in the face of horror, Hodalska (2017) states that tourists have been taking, stealing or buying souvenirs from sites of death, but today selfies have become the innovative way to demonstrate their presence in the places where others perished. In January 2017, an artist from Israel created a digital project called “Yolocaust” that involved photos taken from social media websites showing tourists posing or taking selfies at ‘dark tourism’ sites and superimposing these photos onto real archival footage of the Holocaust. This project was met with mixed reviews worldwide but it managed to highlight the moral issues associated with taking ‘inappropriate’ photos at sensitive dark tourism sites and the problem of tourist transgressive behavior.

The process by which individuals determine what is morally correct is an increasingly complex one (Treviño, Den Nieuwenboer, & Kish-Gephart, 2014). Nevertheless it is a topic worth exploring because dark tourism itself is somehow aberrant in both its production and consumption of taboo topics such as death and the (re)presentation of the dead. Using a socio-cognitive approach, the mechanism that enables otherwise considerate people to commit transgressive acts without experiencing moral distress and guilt, the objective of this research is to understand how tourists morally justify their transgressive behavior at emotionally sensitive sites such as a cremation ground. Transgressive behavior in this case implies taking photographs of the dead bodies and the mourners at a cremation ground despite a prohibitory warning and a local understanding that the dead should be respected. Scarles (2013), while explaining the ethics of the seemingly fleeting relationships between tourists and host communities that emerge during photographic encounters, states that photographing becomes a delicate balance— a series of compromises that often rely upon intuitive moral judgement, reasoning and reflective justification. It is this moral judgement, reasoning and the mechanisms behind it that this study focuses on. The tourist narratives explore the socio-psychological reasoning that underpin tourists’ moral considerations on

whether to click photographs or not. In doing so, the study focuses on the emergent tourist narratives which are an outcome of the interactions between tourists, death-ritual performers and locals who are photographed.

Literature review

Dark tourism has often been labelled as deviant and troubling and, in some cases, a source of moral panic by the media (Seaton & Lennon, 2004) suggesting that the commercialization of the macabre and tragedy is full of moral ambiguities. Clearly, dark tourism, despite its typological, interpretative, political and moral dilemmas, has (real and representative) death at its core and is often referred to as a postmodern phenomenon with an emphasis on spectacle (Foley & Lennon, 1996; Rojek, 1993). Stone (2009) suggests ethical ambiguities inherent within dark tourism are systematic of broader secular moral dilemmas in conveying narratives of death. In particular, he proposes dark tourism sites act as contemporary communicative spaces of morality. Further, he states that “dark tourism may not only act as a guardian of history in heritage terms, but also as moral guardian of a contemporary society which appears to be in a midst of resurgent effervescent moral vitality” and it can provide a new moral basis, because it has a variety of subtypes and can offer a range of morals and values. (Stone, 2009, p. 62). This means that dark tourism sites enable tourists to negotiate issues of moral concern and in the process, morality is revitalized in a society at a collective level.

The ethical dimensions of dark tourism have often been debated upon (Potts, 2012; Stone, 2009; Clark, 2014). Dark leisure experiences located within dark tourism, which are often perceived as morally suspect and deviant, might be viewed as legitimate and healthy when the broader cultural condition of secular society is taken into account (Stone & Sharpley, 2013). On the other hand, scholars (e.g., Dale & Robinson, 2011; Lennon, 2010; Lennon & Foley, 2000) have raised concern about the moral representation, acceptability and propriety of dark tourism sites. Most of the ethical discourse on morality within dark tourism has focused on how places associated with death and suffering are presented to their visitors. According to Robb (2009), the tourist has “long been derided in academic literature as a shallow thrill seeker, a consumer of inauthentic images of foreign lands, content to mistake simulacra for true knowledge of the cultural other” (p. 51). Light (2017) argues that claims of tourists being shallow thrill-seekers and behaving inappropriately at dark tourism sites, are founded on particular stereotypes of tourists that are rarely supported by empirical research with visitors. He points out that “while some instances of inappropriate behavior have attracted widespread media coverage, recent research indicates that many visitors are deeply engaged with the places of death and suffering that they visit” (p. 283).

During the mid-2000s, when the focus of research gradually moved to understanding visitor motivations to dark attractions and places, it was found that motivations of tourists could be diverse and there is little evidence that morbid curiosity and voyeurism is an important reason for visiting dark tourism sites (Dunkley, Morgan, & Westwood, 2007; Seaton & Lennon, 2004; Sharpley & Stone, 2009; Stone, 2005, 2006). Studies on tourist experience revealed that visiting dark tourism sites allows one to

reflect on their own morality and behavior (Lisle, 2004; Stone, 2009). Despite the wide-ranging motivations and deeper connections that tourists develop with respect to dark tourism sites, transgressive acts and deviant behavior by tourists is a reality especially in this age of digital narcissism (e.g., provocative selfies at dark sites) and cannot be simply brushed aside as a form of “moral panic” created by the media. The outcome of this attitude and media blaming has mostly involved a vilification of the tourist without an actual attempt at understanding the psychological process that influences transgressive behavior and moral configuration among tourists. The following section describes moral disengagement and its relationship with human agency and liminality.

Moral disengagement and moral agency

Morality and moral behavior have been a widely discussed topic among scholars. There are several psychological theories on moral behavior such as the Theory of Moral Development (Kohlberg, 1971) and Moral Foundations Theory (Haidt & Graham, 2007) as well as sociological theories on morality (Durkheim, 1965; Goffman, 1959; Weber, 1978; Collins, 2004). While sociologists have studied the larger societal frameworks and morality at a collective level, psychologists have focused on the individual as a unit and the source of moral action. Over the years, psychological studies have demonstrated the centrality of moral identity in determining moral action while investigating the relationship between moral judgments, moral behavior, and emotions. (Aquino, Freeman, Reed, Lim, & Felps, 2009; Frimer & Walker, 2009; Haidt, 2001; Hoffman, 2000). However, when it comes to understanding how individuals engage in cognitive strategies to change meanings in a particular situation or use psychosocial maneuvers to disengage from immoral behavior, it is the process of moral disengagement which seems to offer an explanation.

A psychological mechanism that plays an important role in unethical decision making is moral disengagement that operates at both individual and collective levels (Bandura, 1999). Moral disengagement refers to the cognitive deactivation of moral self-regulatory processes in decision making. It mediates the relationship between the moral principles that individuals hold and their behavioral transgressions. Through this process, unethical decisions can be made without individuals feeling apparent guilt or self-censure (Bandura, 1999). In the context of tourism, these moral disengagement mechanisms are useful in explaining how tourists reconstruct their actions to appear less immoral resulting in shifting of ethical boundaries.

According to Bandura (2002), individuals adopt standards of right and wrong that serve as guides and deterrents for conduct in developing moral agency. Moral disengagement is a self-regulatory process “where people monitor their conduct and the conditions under which it occurs, judge it in relation to their moral standards and perceived circumstances, and regulate their actions by the consequences they apply to themselves.” He adds that “morality is rooted in a self-reactive selfhood, rather than in dispassionate abstract reasoning” and “moral actions are the product of the reciprocal interplay of cognitive, affective and social influences.” (p.102). This implies that the ideological orientations of societies influence the form of moral justifications for an

Figure 1. Mechanism through which moral self-sanctions are selectively activated and disengaged from detrimental behavior at different points in the self-regulatory process (Bandura, 1986).

individual, but the individual also has the capacity to alter the social system through an exercise of his/her agency. This holds true for tourists who come from diverse cultural backgrounds, social realities and ideological systems that shape their moral perceptions and justifications. Therefore, the justification of moral judgements is relative rather than absolute (Bandura, 2002). Moral disengagement is believed to be a personal characteristic suggesting that people differ in their propensity to morally disengage (Moore, Detert, Klebe Treviño, Baker, & Mayer, 2012). These differences influence how individuals translate moral intentions into behavior (Martin, Kish-Gephart, & Detert, 2014; Moore et al., 2012). Analyzing how these psychological mechanisms of moral disengagement work in the dark tourism sector can help to understand implications for moral conduct of tourists and devise better management strategies at dark tourism sites to avoid conflicts, minimize tourist transgressive behavior and promote sober and respectful touristic engagement. Moral disengagement theory has already been used for empirical research across a number of disciplines and contexts such as child psychology (Obermann, 2013), organizational behavior (Martin et al., 2014; Cohen, Panter, Turan, Morse, & Kim, 2014), criminology (Cardwell et al., 2015), military behavior (McAlister, Bandura, & Owen, 2006), and sports psychology (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2008).

Moral disengagement is the process by which individuals rationalize engaging in transgressive behavior (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Bandura, 1999, 2002) and through certain mechanisms that disengage self-sanctions from the behavior, they seek to validate or rationalize their decisions. These self-sanctions- guilt, shame, self-condemnation, etc. arise when personal moral standards are violated but once these self-sanctions are disengaged, individuals tend to indulge in transgressive acts (Bandura, 1999, 2002). According to Bandura (2002), individuals have moral standards but these do not function as fixed internal regulators of conduct. There are self-regulatory mechanisms which operate only when they are activated by surrounding activities or events. This selective activation and disengagement of self-sanctions may induce people to behave in diverse ways despite having similar moral standards. Figure 1 shows the points in the process of moral control at which moral self-sanctions can be disengaged from reprehensible conduct.

The process of moral disengagement unfolds through eight mechanisms grouped under four major sets of disengagement practices that individuals rely on to justify

unethical behavior (Bandura, 1999). There are four loci of moral disengagement: behavioral, agency, effects and victim (Bandura, 2016). The first set of mechanisms involves cognitive construal and reconstruing the conduct so that it is not considered immoral (Bandura, 2002). The second set of mechanisms involve minimizing personal involvement or obscuring personal agency. The third mechanism involves misrepresenting or discounting the resulting negative consequences while the fourth set involves blaming or devaluating the recipients of the unethical act. Through these disengagement mechanisms, individuals, who view themselves as ethical, deactivate the self-regulatory processes that would normally inhibit unethical behavior (Detert, Treviño, & Sweitzer, 2008; Tillman et al., 2018).

Further, human activities cannot be properly understood without taking into consideration the role of agency. Agency is the conscious and deliberate ability to act and implicitly no persons (at least those who are considering travelling) are without 'agency' (Lovelock, 2014). Moral agency is "an individual's ability to make moral judgments based on some notion of right and wrong and to be held accountable for these actions" (Taylor, 2003, p. 20). Within tourism, the notion of moral agency attributes to the tourist the capacity to process social information across different cultural milieus, engage in the construction of their own social context and experiences and devise different ways of justifying their actions, when confronted with moral dilemmas. Bandura's social cognitive theory is a robust and replicable model of moral agency where moral thought, self-evaluative reactions, moral conduct, and environmental influences operate together. Within this triadic model of reciprocal causation, moral agency is exercised through self-regulatory mechanisms (Bandura, 2016; Zsolnai, 2016). He also mentions that the regulation of moral conduct involves much more than moral reasoning because it is through the translation of moral reasoning into actions using self-regulatory mechanisms, that an individual's agency is exercised (Bandura, 1991). He asserts that personal moral agency determines if actors will engage in anti-social or pro-social behaviors (Bandura, 2004). According to Rachels and Rachels (2010), a responsible or conscientious moral agent is one who is concerned with the interests of everyone affected by what he/she does. The following paragraphs explain the role of liminality in moral configuration and its connection with moral agency.

Lovelock (2014) states that selective moral disengagement in tourism is easily possible due to the notion of liminality where moral agency also gets obscured by the neoliberal context that provide a structure in which immoral behavior is both expected and rewarded. This idea applies well to dark tourism which is considered as the correspondence of the neoliberal dispositive within the tourism sector (Korstanje & George, 2017). Biran, Poria, and Oren (2011) mentions that dark tourism may be perceived as a rite of social passage, given its transitional elements and its potential to influence the psychology and perception of individuals. Turner (1973) defined liminality as "any condition outside or on the peripheries of everyday life" (p. 47). Liminality has also been "frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness ..." (Turner & Abrahams, 1969, p. 359). It is a transitional state, space or place and tourists become liminal people, "between places, times and conventions" (Pritchard & Morgan, 2006). Liminal times and spaces offer the possibilities for freedom, release and escape from quotidian constraints, routines and disciplines (Pritchard

& Morgan, 2006). In the context of tourism, liminal spaces offer the tourist a potential for adopting behaviors and identities that are outside the norm. Within the context of dark tourism, liminal spaces are those where tourist identity, moral perceptions and behavior are put to test. Moral decisions made within a liminal space are not conducive to 'staying within the rules'—where we are free to ignore any moral script that may be provided by wider society (Lovelock, 2014). Most importantly, they are also opportunities for transgression, subverting the social structure and an inversion of normal behavior.

A dark tourism site such as a cremation ground can be considered as a complex, culturally contested and ideologically laden liminal place. The cremation ground at Varanasi inclusive of all the death-related rituals is a threshold of transition and transgression - a place in between life and death, between the exotic and the familiar, the mundane and the extraordinary and between serenity and anxiety. It is a betwixt place, the crossing point of life's journey into the unknown. Although it is connected to experiences of death, dying and darkness but it is also connected to the possibility that it is just a temporary stop and the tourist will be back home safely and lead his daily life. Such a liminal, threshold place may offer freedom and peace for some, but are likely to cause anxiety, constraint or threat for others. As a liminal space, the cremation ground offers "the spatial presence and practice outside of the norms of the prevailing (enforced) social spatialization" (Shields, 1991, p. 210) and can become sites of 'resistant bodies' where normal rules and conventions can be temporarily suspended.

Bandura (2002) describes moral agency to be socially situated and exercised and moral actions being the products of the reciprocal interplay of personal and social influences. However, socio-structural theories and psychological theories represent different levels of causation with the explanation that human behavior cannot be understood fully in terms of social structural factors or psychological factors alone. Bandura (1986, 1997) advocates using a social cognitive theory that rejects a dualism between social structure and personal agency where socio-structural influences affect action via self-regulatory mechanisms within a unified causal structure. Therefore, using this socio-cognitive theoretical perspective in the context of dark tourism, it can be said that socio-structural practices at a site create liminal conditions (an in-between position) favorable for moral disengagement, where the tourist is in a flux and is torn between a set of (current and previously held) moral beliefs.

Methodology

The city of Varanasi in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India was chosen to be the study area. Varanasi, according to Hindu belief, is considered to be a holy city in India and attracts scores of both domestic and foreign tourists. Situated on the banks of the Ganga River, it is known as the "Great Cremation Ground" (Eck, 1983, p. 30) or the "Microcosm of the Universe" (Parry, 1994, p.11). Although formally labelled as a Hindu pilgrimage destination, the city has several spaces associated with death in the form of cremation grounds (Figure 2) and death hospices. With respect to the cremation ground, two death-related rituals within the domain of Hindu philosophy were

Figure 2. The cremation ground at Manikarnika ghat, Varanasi.
(Source: Author).

analyzed. The first type, the Hindu death ritual, broadly involves burning the deceased over a funeral pyre.

The second is a death-related ritual practiced by a group of ascetics, known as the Aghoris (Figure 3). This small sect of Hindu ascetics are rigid renouncers and worshippers of the Hindu deity, *Shiva*. Their rituals include performing austerities at the cremation ground, using skulls as food bowls, smearing one's body with ashes from the dead, coprophagy and necrophagy and meditating on top of corpses. In popular culture, Aghoris have also found mention in television media. Renowned documentaries on the Aghoris include 'Sadhus-India's Holy men', 'Varanasi, India: Beyond', 'The truth about Aghori', National Geographic's 'Aghoris' and CNN's documentary series 'Believer'. In 2017, journalist Reza Aslan ran into controversy for his alleged unethical portrayal of the Aghori sect as representing Hinduism and for consuming human brains during an Aghori ritual. Aslan followed up the episode's debut with a promotional post on Facebook, writing: "Want to know what a dead guy's brain tastes like? Charcoal. It was burnt to a crisp!" Several Indian and American Hindu groups claimed that the CNN series was "hinduphobic" and sensationalized aspects of the world's third largest religion (Safi, 2017).

For both the rituals mentioned above, the cremation ground (directly or indirectly) forms an integral part of the ritual space and involve a complex negotiation of sacred and profane. Moreover, both these rituals spark an interest among international tourists. The international tourist interest in the death-related rituals is supported by the fact that several privately-owned tour companies and operators offer "walking tours" that provide opportunities for tourists to witness the cremation grounds, popularly referred to as the 'Burning Ghats', and see the Aghoris and death-ritual performers.

Figure 3. An Aghori near the cremation ground in Varanasi.
(Source: Author).

A multi-method approach was adopted which predominantly involved collecting qualitative data and analyzing secondary sources of data, tourist narratives collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation and a content analysis of tourist blogs, travel forums and travel websites (government and private). The field-work was carried out in May-August 2015 and December 2015– March 2016. The secondary sources of literature included background information about the Aghoris, information on Hindu society, death rituals and tourism inflow and outflow in Varanasi (Bakker, 1993; Barrett, 2008; Bloch & Parry, 1982; Doron, 2013; Eck, 1983; Parry, 1982, 1994). Participant observation was useful to ascertain the facial expressions and body language (Kawulich, 2005) of tourists and their behavior at the cremation ground as well as understand the nature of the death rituals. The sub-groups who were interviewed are the local people (performers) associated with death-related rituals and tourism (the Aghoris, the funerary workers and priests who perform death rituals at the cremation ground in Varanasi, local businessmen, tour operators and travel guides) and the international tourists who visit the cremation grounds to see these rituals. The semi-structured interviews were part of a larger study aimed at understanding tourist perceptions towards death. However, only the responses that involve taking photographs at the cremation ground and justification offered by the tourist have been considered for this analysis.

A convenience sampling technique was used, whereby the sampling population was present during field visits at the specific site. The target population consisted of those tourists who participated in tours taking them to the cremation ground. The respondents were international tourists predominantly from USA (16%), UK (19%),

Australia (15%), Canada (9%) and the rest from countries such as the Netherlands, Germany, Argentina, Italy, Russia, Spain, France, Switzerland, Colombia and Turkey. About 200 tourists were interviewed comprising 102 women and 98 men, out of which 120 tourist narratives were considered for the analysis as they admitted taking photographs at the cremation ground. The interview respondents were approached directly at the site and the purpose of the study was explained to them in detail. The respondents were given the choice to leave the interview at any point of time if they felt uncomfortable with the questions. The interview respondents were also given the assurance that their answers would be used solely for academic purpose and their personal information would be kept confidential. All the respondents that were approached agreed to participate in the interview except one. The tourists who admitted taking photographs were asked to describe the nature of the photographs they took and their reasons for doing so. Besides the tourists, the respondent sample also included two local death photographers. A deductive content analysis (Mayring, 2014) was carried out for the narratives obtained from the interviews, travel forums and private blogs. The content from websites of a few popular tour companies and agencies in Varanasi such as Varanasi Walks, Heritage Walks, Roobaroo Walks, Streetwise Varanasi Tours, Manglam Travels and Groovy Tours was also analyzed. The disengagement mechanisms were identified and sorted according to the categories mentioned by Bandura (1999, 2002).

Results

Contextualizing the model from Figure 1 with respect to the cremation ground in Varanasi and for the sake of simplicity in analysis, the following have been categorized as reprehensible conduct, detrimental effect and victim:

Reprehensible conduct: Taking photographs of the deceased and their relatives without permission and ignoring the prohibitory warning, mockingly participating in the Aghori rituals and disrespecting them, etc.

Detrimental effects: Encroaching the personal space and privacy of mourners and the dead, purposeful or unintended construction of a negative public image of the ritual performers especially the Aghoris.

Victims: Family members of the deceased, dead bodies and the ritual performers.

Regarding the different moral mechanisms outlined by Bandura (1999), it was observed that in Varanasi, the most used were euphemistic labeling, moral justification, dehumanization and misrepresenting consequences while the rest of the mechanisms exhibited a lower percentage. The moral mechanism referred to as attribution of blame was found to be missing in the tourist narratives. The following sub-sections demonstrate how tourist behavior indicates an operation of the various mechanisms of moral disengagement at the cremation ground.

Euphemistic labelling

This is a means of reconstruing one's conduct by distorting language in such a manner that a seemingly unethical act appears respectable or ethical. This disengagement

Walk 6 Death & Rebirth in Banaras

BOOK THIS WALK

Walk with us through the city of learning & burning and see Banaras when it is known as 'Mahashamstana', the great cremation ground of Shiva. It is here will you will traverse from the land of the living to the houses of the dying.

Perhaps an encounter with a black-clothed flesh-eating sadhu of the Aghor Ashram will give you will a taste of death and rebirth! If you chose the daytime version a small puja at the Sankata Devi Temple (the goddess of sorrows & a demon slayer) is participated in. If you chose to do this walk at night it ends with a visit for the 10:30 – 11:15pm Sankata Devi ritual worship service!

Figure 4. Death tour offered by the tour agency-Varanasi Walks.

Source: <http://varanasiwalks.com/> ..., Accessed 3rd May 2014.

practice is significant in dark tourism marketing and plays an important role in presenting provocative narratives of a site to tourists in a manner that does not appear transgressive or unethical. Dark tourism markets in most cases, are quite well-developed especially those that involve a fun component such as ghost tours, dungeon tours, etc. In contemporary society it is normal to deal with topics like death more in private than in public. In Varanasi, the public display of death at the cremation grounds and the necrophagous rituals of the Aghoris along with associated moral concerns poses a problem to the tour operators and agencies who want to effectively utilize the Western curiosity and fascination. Amidst the morality concerns associated with the commodification of death, the tourist websites advertising tours to the cremation ground, reveal a common feature, i.e., euphemistic labelling.

Bandura (1999) states that language shapes thought patterns on which actions are based and activities can take on different appearances depending on what they are called. Euphemistic language involves intricate rephrasing which makes an otherwise immoral or taboo activity acceptable and people feel that they are spared of being guilty. Gambino (1973) identified the different varieties of euphemisms, one of which relies on sanitizing language. Through the power of sanitized language, even killing a human being loses much of its repugnancy. For example, bombing missions are described as "servicing the target" (Bandura, 2002, p. 104). In the context of dark tourism, language is sanitized in a way by marketers to present death in an aesthetically pleasing manner thereby covering up the commodification of death for personal and monetary gain. The dark tourism market in Varanasi comprises death tours such as the 'Death and rebirth walk in Varanasi' which sanitizes the description of the cremation grounds by relying on its religious value (by making a reference to the Hindu deity *Shiva*), by creating an aura of mystery and referring to the cremation grounds as the 'burning ghats' and Varanasi as the 'city of learning and burning' (Figure 4). Death tours also tend to eulogize the process of death. Manikarnika Ghat is also famous by the name of *Mahasmasana* which means the 'great cremation ground'. It is considered that the one who is cremated at this place will attain salvation. Therefore, euphemistic labelling is particularly useful for influencing tourist behavior in dark tourism.

An important exonerative tool under euphemistic labelling is the agentless passive voice or transferring the tourist agency to a place, an inanimate object or a nameless force. It creates the appearance that reprehensible acts are the work of nameless forces, rather than people (Bolinger, 1982). This way unethical or transgressive actions of tourists are justified by transferring the agency to inanimate objects pointing towards a loss of human agency. In Varanasi, a few tourists at the cremation grounds justified taking photographs by a transfer of agency to the place, i.e., the cremation ground itself.

"The complexity of Varanasi and the cremation grounds attracted me."

"The eternal fire burning almost pulled me towards it."

By placing the tourist agency on the complexity of the cremation grounds and the funeral pyre, tourists exonerate themselves of their guilt despite a clear and written prohibition of photography at the site.

The marketing of death and its representational forms constitute a substantive moral debate within dark tourism. Dark tourism entrepreneurs, site managers and tour operators have a growing concern that tourists may find a site or a tour experience too negative to be entertaining, or too morally ambiguous to be assimilated. The early studies of dark tourism have frequently mentioned commodification (Foley & Lennon, 1996, 1997; Lennon & Foley, 1999, 2000; Dann & Potter, 2001; Gould, 2014; Murphy, 2015) and "kitchification" (Sharpley & Stone, 2009) with respect to dark heritage sites. This not only leads to distortion, sanitization and misrepresentation of tragic historical events but also creates a spectacle, simulation and replication of death in popular culture (Sharpley & Stone, 2009). The marketing of sensitive dark tourism sites and construction of place identity or image (or destination branding) has its own challenges and is a key determinant of consumer behavior in tourism studies. Euphemistic labelling is useful to understand how provocative narratives and site representations are sold to tourists in a way that does not violate their moral principles.

Moral justification

It is the disengagement practice that operates on the reconstruction of the behavior itself or when detrimental behavior is portrayed as personally and socially acceptable, serving worthy or a moral purpose. This way, individuals can act on a moral imperative and preserve their view of themselves as moral agents while indulging in the unethical act (Bandura, 2002). In case of the cremation grounds, moral justification is evident in the narratives of local professional death photographers as well as tourists who photograph the dead. For the death photographers of Varanasi, photographing the dead is just another means of earning their livelihood. Although it is not uncommon for relatives to pay these photographers to take one last photograph of the deceased, it still raises moral quandaries among the international tourists as well as for the photographers themselves. The moral justification that ensues is:

"I don't like my job but if a photo brings some solace to the grieving family, I feel satisfied. It is also a way to create one last memory of the dead and sometimes these photos are also used in the obituary column of the newspapers and insurance claims. I also try not to click photos of children, teenagers and pregnant women."

On the other hand, international tourists who indulge in death photography without permission from the mourners, justify the act as:

"I have captured some stunning and rare images that give a remarkable insight into the last hours of the Hindu body at Manikarnika Ghats". After all, it is the largest cremation site in Varanasi."

"Funeral practices are different all over the world but the Hindu death rituals are so transparent and raw that I couldn't stop taking photos. It's fascinating that they believe that if a person dies in Varanasi, his soul will escape the cycle of rebirth and attain moksha."

Another example of moral justification was observed in the monetary exchange between the tourists and the ritual performers (funerary workers) at the cremation ground. The funerary workers and the local touts, depending on their mood, sometimes allow tourists to take pictures from a discrete distance in exchange for money which is justified as "a donation to help buy wood for the poor". On the other hand, a tourist who was willing to pay money to a local tout for allowing him to take photos, remarked,

"I was offended by his hypocrisy and money-grabbing approach and wondered aloud... How much does it cost to pay for a destroyed soul?" (Cooper, 2011)

In this case, moral justification occurs both ways during a tourist-host encounter where the local tout tries to morally justify taking money and the tourist tries to morally justify taking photographs. The above examples illustrate the commodification of death rituals and a reconstruction of a prohibited act (photographing the dead) to making it personally and socially acceptable by serving a greater purpose like "creating memories" or "capturing Hindu funerary practices". The narratives subtly and discreetly point towards the Western tourist's fascination with death rituals in the East which is possibly rooted in notions of exotic "othering", colonial discourse, historical events and ideological movements.

Dehumanization

This moral disengagement practice operates on the recipients of the unethical act (Bandura, 2002). The strength of moral self-censure in tourist behavior depends on how the tourist perceives the destination and the hosts. Dehumanization is the process through which a person or group of people are denied subjectivity, individuality, agency, or distinctively human attributes (e.g., Sherwin, 1987). Tipler and Ruscher (2014) mention that three distinct components of agency may be denied or ascribed to others - affective agency (the ability of the other individual or group to experience emotion and possess desires), cognitive agency (the ability of the other to hold beliefs and think rationally) and behavioral agency (the ability of the other to produce a behavior and exhibit activity).

The other person or outgroup is no longer viewed as one with feelings, hopes and concerns, but objectified as a lesser sub-human or sub-group (Bandura, 2002). They are portrayed as mindless "savages", "gooks" and other despicable wretches (Ivie, 1980; Keen, 1986). For example, Greek torturers referred to their victims as "worms" (Gibson & Haritos-Fatouros, 1986) and Nazis regularly compared the Jews to "rats".

According to Kelman (1973), dehumanization involves denying a person “identity”—a perception of the person “as an individual, independent and distinguishable from others, capable of making choices” (p. 301). Haslam (2006) adds that when people are divested of an agentic aspect of humanness they are de-individuated, lose the capacity to evoke compassion and moral emotions. This is why dehumanization justifies treating others with less moral concern and empathy, and therefore validating transgressive behavior, moral exclusion and delegitimization of others.

This is similar to the idea of moral exclusion (Opotow, 1990) which is the process by which people are placed “outside the boundary in which moral values, rules, and considerations of fairness apply” (p.1) and includes a form of social conflict and feelings of disconnectedness. It occurs when groups or individuals are excluded from an ingroup’s sphere of moral values, rules and beliefs. According to Haslam (2006), dehumanization is “just one of several extreme forms of moral exclusion, but Opotow (1990) described several milder processes like psychological distance (perceiving others as objects or as nonexistent), condescension (patronizing others as inferior, irrational and childlike), and technical orientation (a focus on means–end efficiency and mechanical routine)” (p. 254). Bandura’s work on selective moral disengagement focuses at an individual level of the cognitive and affective mechanisms involved in exercise of moral agency.

The notion of dehumanization can be observed in the narratives of certain tourists and tourist websites where the Aghoris are usually described as the “eaters of the dead”, “the legitimate cannibals of India”, “the terrifying Aghori sadhus”, “Aghori cannibals”, “the living dead Aghori monks”, “Aghori tantriks”, “Murderer Aghori”, “Necrophagous Aghori”, etc. A few tourists despite their curiosity in the rituals of the Aghoris, considered them to be freaks and dangerous to others. A tourist when asked what he felt after meeting the Aghoris replied,

“Crazy people! I do not see that they are a nice role model for young people, what with all the cannibalism and smoking marihuana all day.”

“Why is it necessary to have their presence in a (w)holy society?”

Another tourist said that he was scared of them and meeting them made him realize “that it’s possible to completely remove yourself from humanity”.

The narratives indicate the denial of civility and refinement in the Aghoris reducing them to an outgroup that is dangerous to the society and humanity. The aspect of dehumanization was also observed at the cremation grounds where one of the tourists described the cremation ground as.

“The smell was overwhelming. I saw a charred foot coming out of the fire. How am I supposed to act here? Look? Don’t look? What is the human body anyway? Humans are also meat at the end of the day. So what is the harm in taking photos?”

In this case, the tourist denies the human nature attributes to the dead bodies and does not discriminate them from inanimate objects which helps him justify taking photographs.

People may be dehumanized not as representatives of a social group but as distinct individuals or members of a “generalized other” from which other individuals wish to

distinguish themselves (Haslam, 2006). Hence, dehumanization is often mentioned in relation to ethnicity and race which also explains why the death of 'brown' bodies at the cremation ground in Varanasi is capable of evoking an interest among the 'white' tourists as well as challenging their emotions. Opatow (1990) also writes about the role of psychological distance as a form of moral exclusion linked to the objectification of others where people are seen as socially distant. In Varanasi, the tourists get an opportunity to compare their own culture, especially their religious and death-related rituals, with the culture of the host community. This has repeatedly been observed in the tourist narratives where the comparison between the death rituals in India and the West has been brought up. The 'Otherness' of dark tourism is universal, since every culture has its own way of handling the topic of death.

Disregarding or misrepresenting consequences

This method of disengagement disregards or misrepresents the consequences of action by generally minimizing the harm one causes or by avoiding the consequences. This involves selective inattention and subjectively cognitive distortion of effects of an action. This method of disengagement was also observed among tourists at the cremation ground where they justified taking photographs by saying:

"I took photos of only the fire, not the bodies"

"Only the animals wandering at the cremation ground"

"I did not take photos near the fire or funeral pyre. I just took photos from the boat."

The first two narratives represent a cognitive distortion of the action and the third represents the acceptability of a prohibited action by distorting the physical distance of the subject from the site, i.e., the cremation ground.

Advantageous comparison

It is the type of disengagement practice involving an advantageous comparison in which one's unethical behavior is compared with an equally or greater unethical behavior for the sake of exoneration. This practice uses the contrast principle to make the transgressive act of a tourist look righteous because it is being compared against an action which is worse. Bandura (1990) provides the example of terrorists who often label their behavior as acts of selfless martyrdom by comparing them with widespread cruelties inflicted on the people with whom they identify.

In Varanasi, a tourist from Morocco admitted that he was extremely interested in the Aghoris and their rituals. He said,

"I attended an Aghori ritual yesterday. I attended it but I did not participate in the proceedings because I do not like the idea of eating raw human flesh. I am fine with rituals or displays involving human skulls or bones but I don't like seeing stuff that involve the flesh and blood. I don't know how they do that."

The tourist here morally justifies his attendance at the ceremony by comparing his actions against the ritual performers. This restructuring of actions may at times, also lead to self-approval and self-valuation for the tourist.

Displacement of responsibility

This disengagement practice operates by obscuring or minimizing the agentive role of the tourist and by distorting the relationship between actions and the effects they cause. In this mechanism, the tourist agency is displaced to a legitimate authority in order to shrug off the responsibility of unethical actions and be spared of self-condemning reactions. People view their actions as legitimate because they are stemming from the dictates of authorities rather than personal judgement.

Despite the tourist exercising his/her agency in terms of choosing a destination representing death or meeting the Aghoris, the fact that dark tourism and the associated death tours legitimizes the public display and commodification of death, is a sufficient condition for tourists to feel less responsible or guilty by placing the moral agency on the tour guide, the tour company or the tourism niche market. For example, the responses of some tourists on being questioned why they took photographs at the cremation ground are:

"Because our tour guide said that we can do so."

"The tour company that I had contacted offers the cremation ground walk, so I thought I might as well make the most out of it."

These narratives demonstrate that the tourists view their act of clicking photographs as stemming from a legitimate authorization by the tour guide or the tourist agency. Another tourist who participated in the Aghori rituals said that:

"I tried to understand the complicated caste system in India and I tried to have empathy for the Aghoris who seemed to be in this life without choice. It's how the culture is where public display of death is acceptable."

In this case, the tourist justifies his act of engaging with the Aghoris and transfers his agency to the culture of the city which legitimizes the public display of death. He further blames an unknown authority (in this case, the caste system) that according to him, forces the Aghoris to practise these death-related rituals and considers his own behavior as an indirect act of obeying the social norms.

Diffusion of responsibility

In this mechanism, transgressive acts are attributed to group decisions instead of personal agency. This way personal agency is deliberately obscured and exercise of moral control is weakened exonerating the tourist from any form of personal responsibility or self-blame. According to Kelman (1973), personal agency may get obscured by social diffusion of responsibility which in turn, can be diffused by division of labour, group decision-making and collective action. This fragmentation of tourist agency and diffusion of responsibility is reminiscent of Turner's (1973) notion of *communitas* where tourists mingle with others beyond the normative bonds of home, classlessness ensues and relationships develop based on their common humanity and moral perceptions. It is liminality that leads to *communitas*, which is a firm 'social bond' occurring between those who share a liminal experience. A sense of *communitas* is demonstrated by different groups of tourists in multiple ways with respect to the

death-related rituals in Varanasi. For example, it is often observed that in tour groups comprising a large number of tourists, if one tourist starts taking photographs of the dead bodies, there are many others in the group who follow the lead.

This is slightly similar to the concept of deindividuation in social psychology which refers to the diminishing of one's sense of individuality or loss of self-identity, when present in a group and the effect of a crowd or group on the behavior of an individual (Diener, 1980; Festinger, Pepitone, & Newcomb, 1952; Zimbardo, 1969). The authors claimed that an individual is "able to indulge in forms of behavior in which, when alone, they would not indulge" (p. 382). Consequently, this loss of self-identity is likely to encourage transgressive or deviant behavior (Diener, 1980; Zimbardo, 1969). Diener (1980) argued that deindividuation is facilitated by anonymous conditions within a group setting that cause individuals to lack awareness of who they are. It implies that anonymity provides an individual with protection from "the social disapproval or rejection likely to follow from non-adherence to the norm" (Mann, Newton, & Innes, 1982, p. 261). It has been found that anonymity influences negative social behavior (Zimbardo, 1969). The idea is that when everyone is responsible, no one really feels responsible and "any harm done by a group can always be attributed largely to the behavior of others". (Bandura et al., 1996, p. 365).

Discussion

The cremation ground in Varanasi offers the dark tourist a liminal space to perform activities that involve letting go of their moral and social restrictions. The moral dilemmas and uncertainty of tourists get compounded by the Aghori rituals, lifestyle, their philosophy of breaking social hierarchy, norms and taboos and engagement with the concept of death. It is an ethically and politically charged space providing the possibility of significant social and personal transformation amidst conflicts arising between moral self-sanctions and social sanctions. The tourists have the agency to decide what is right or wrong and act accordingly but sometimes, this agency tends to get obscured or fragmented, resulting in transgressive behavior. Bandura (1999) adds that the exercise of moral agency has dual aspects—inhibitive and proactive. While the inhibitive form, is manifested in the power to refrain from indulging in transgressive behavior, the proactive form of morality is expressed in the power to behave otherwise. This might explain why certain tourists exercise their moral agency and sometimes call out or reprimand fellow tourists if the latter are found violating moral standards and laws at a tourism site. Thus, liminal spaces in dark tourism allow tourists to exercise their moral agency in an inhibitive form as well as proactive form using various moral mechanisms.

Tourist transgressive behavior especially at emotionally sensitive sites is an important and controversial phenomenon. Until now, no study has attempted to analyze the psychological underpinnings or justifications that tourists have to offer in order to explain their acts of transgression. From describing dark tourists as craving for social media credibility to terming their behavior as downright disrespectful, previous studies and media articles on dark tourism have mostly vilified the dark tourist without an empirical investigation of their moral actions. Without defending the transgressive acts

committed by the tourists, this article is the first attempt in dark tourism literature to classify collected tourist narratives and use those narratives to understand the psychological mechanisms that influence transgressive behavior at a sensitive site. Although reprehensible behavior cannot be easily caught and punished, analyzing how these psychological mechanisms of moral disengagement work in the dark tourism sector can help to understand implications for moral conduct of tourists and devise better management strategies and policies at dark tourism sites to avoid moral conflicts and minimize tourist transgressive behavior. For example, the moral mechanism displacement of responsibility reveals that tour operators and guides may sometimes, unconsciously play a role in encouraging tourists to break rules and hence, an important factor that needs to be incorporated in tour guide training and strategies to promote tourist awareness.

Finally, the study has its limitations in terms of using only Bandura's psychological theory to understand tourist transgressive behavior despite the theory being the only compelling one explaining moral disengagement from a psychological perspective and with a few moral mechanisms having similarities with other concepts in social psychology. The study is not all-encompassing and does not consider genetic conditions, more specifically psychiatric disorders, that could play a role in antisocial, or transgressive behavior. It also does not examine the differences in behavior among tourist subgroups based on gender, age, cultural background, etc. Further, due to different dark tourism site characteristics (such as history of the site; intensity and representation of death; prohibitions on tourist behavior; monitoring, compensations and regulatory fines associated with transgressive behavior, etc.), the moral mechanisms cannot necessarily be generalized.

Conclusion

Drawing on a robust and replicable social-cognitive theory of moral thought and action (Bandura, 1991, 1999), it was found that transgressive behavior among tourists at dark tourism sites which are also emotionally sensitive in nature, is more likely if they disengage from processes related to moral conduct. Bandura's theory is applicable across multiple domains (e.g., the entertainment, food or tobacco industry, gun control and climate change), and is useful to understand human behavior without subjecting the participants in experiments to questionable behavior or morally distressing questions on the part of experimenters. Sternberg (2016) while reviewing the theory, writes that although earlier studies mention that even good people can face moral dilemmas and be placed in situations that lead them to act in an inappropriate manner but "what has been missing before is an explanation of the mental mechanisms that lead people to do these things" (p. 2). This is a relevant point to consider in the context of dark tourism. Several of the moral mechanisms used to justify transgressive behavior has been supported by observations and other psychological concepts such as deindividuation and moral exclusion.

Dark tourism offers a liminal time and space and locates the activity within constructivist realms of meaning and meaning making (Sharpley & Stone, 2009). It is also within this liminal space that moral transgressions and transformations occur. Tourists

morally justify their transgressive behavior at emotionally sensitive sites such as a cremation ground using various moral disengagement mechanisms. This behavior arises due to an obscuring and fragmentation of human agency during the moral disengagement process thereby making it possible for tourists to not take ownership of the consequences of their actions. The study also shows that the rhetoric of dark tourism sites, especially through euphemistic labelling, plays an important role in shaping tourist thought patterns which in turn, is likely to govern their actions and experiences.

While the study explains the various mechanisms of moral disengagement among tourists, it sets the stage for further psychological investigation to understand the underlying socio-cultural processes and factors at a dark tourism site that are likely to influence tourist behavior and moral perceptions. As Stone (2006) writes that not all dark tourism sites and its supplies have the same degree of darkness and ethics, it is clear that not all moral disengagement mechanisms will be operative at different dark tourism sites. Further, Johnson (2014) writes that while all people are susceptible to moral disengagement, some are more vulnerable than others due to such personal antecedents as lack of empathy, rigid and authoritarian beliefs, low self-esteem, and fear and anxiety. Hence, further studies can examine the interrelationships between socio-cultural factors influencing moral identity of tourists and personal factors such as fear of death and how this influence translates in cross-cultural encounters. It is possible that moral identities and the process of moral disengagement may operate differently when the tourists and the toured culture or object being represented at a dark tourism site, are culturally similar owing to a decreased possibility of “othering”, psychological distance and moral exclusion. A possible hypothesis for future research could be higher the psychological distance between two cultures, the higher is the possibility for transgressive behavior among tourists.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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