The power of storytelling in dark literary tourism: A mixed-methods study of visitor engagement and marketing strategies

A történetmesélés hatalma a sötét irodalmi turizmusban: A látogatói elkötelezettség és a marketingstratégiák vegyes módszertani vizsgálata

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This study examines the tourist motivations and marketing strategies of dark literary tourism based on five historical locations. Combining digital marketing analysis with qualitative interviews, the interest in these sites and the effectiveness of the used digital marketing strategies is examined. The findings reveal that personal narratives and storytelling often play an important role in tourist engagement, with visitors often driven by educational motivations, literary familiarity, and personal connections. Social media and digital marketing tools enhance site visibility and facilitate visitor interaction. This study highlights the importance of balancing historical authenticity with innovative engagement strategies to meet the expectations of tourists, offering insights into dark heritage tourism management.

A tanulmány a sötét irodalmi turizmus turisztikai motivációit és marketingstratégiáit vizsgálja öt történelmi helyszín alapján. A digitális marketingelemzés és a kvalitatív interjúk kombinálásával az e helyszínek iránti érdeklődést és az alkalmazott digitális marketingstratégiák hatékonyságát vizsgáltuk. Az eredmények azt mutatják, hogy a személyes elbeszélések és a storytelling (történetmesélés) gyakran fontos szerepet játszanak a turisták motivációjában, emellett a látogatókat a tanulási vágy, az irodalmi művek ismeretsége és a személyes kapcsolatok vezérlik. A közösségi média és a digitális marketingeszközök fokozzák a helyszínek láthatóságát és megkönnyítik a látogatók interakcióját. E tanulmány rávilágít a történelmi hitelesség és az innovatív figyelemfelkeltési stratégiák egyensúlyának fontosságára a turisták elvárásainak való megfelelés érdekében, emellett segítséget nyújt a sötét örökségturizmus menedzsmentjének.

1. Introduction

The main topic of this research is dark literary tourism, a unique category that connects both literary tourism and dark tourism. This tourism type has been becoming widely known worldwide, and even in Hungary, researchers are increasingly interested in examining this phenomenon (ASSYLKHANOVA 2022, ASSYLKHANOVA et al. 2024, MÉSZÁROS 2025, MÉSZÁROS et al. 2025). These sites have long been of interest to tourists who are interested in the combination of literary works, culture, and the darkest parts of history to learn and feel closer to historical moments and characters. The most well-known dark literary tourist attraction is the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, where visitors learn more about the little Jewish girl people all around the world read about in the *Diary of a Young Girl*. The paper aims to contribute to the analysis of this niche field, focusing on exploring what drives visitors to engage with dark literature tourist attractions. Additionally, it aims to explore

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the marketing communication strategies of five chosen attractions.

This study focuses on the First and Second World Wars, and the Cold War, through the literary works of Erich Maria Remarque: *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Anne Frank: *The Diary of a Young Girl*, Cornelius Ryan: *A Bridge Too Far*, Thomas Keneally: *Schindler's Ark* and Giles Whittell: *Bridge of Spies*. These works play an important role in preserving history and presenting an authentic image of the era, making them an effective tool for tourism marketing communication to promote the historical sites depicted in the novels. From contemporary literary works, people can learn, empathize more with the victims, and see the psychology and political motivations behind the atrocities. Tourist attractions, such as the Anne Frank House connect the literary works, the authors, and the modern tourists in a way that creates a thought-provoking experience for those who are open to it.

2. Literature Review

2.1. VISITOR MOTIVATION IN DARK LITERARY TOURISM

As defined by JÁSZBERÉNYI (2020), cultural tourism includes the appreciation of historic buildings and artistic works, alongside cultural values rooted in daily life and events that immerse visitors in local customs and traditions. Closely related is heritage tourism, which emphasizes preserving and sharing a community's history (YUXIN et al. 2024). Dark tourism, a connected category, focuses on destinations associated with death, suffering, and tragedy (FOLEY–LENNON 1996). Visitors of dark tourism sites are often motivated by educational factors but with an emphasis on engaging with difficult histories. Literary tourism, another branch of cultural tourism, focuses on places associated with literary figures, works, or settings, catering to individuals interested in literature (BUSBY–KLUG 2001, HOPPEN et al. 2014). This form of tourism has roots in the 18th century when travelers began visiting sites like the graves of poets Percy B. Shelley and William Shakespeare (IRIMIÁS 2017), which started the connection between dark tourism and literary tourism. The key motivations for literary tourism include admiration for authors, gaining literary and historical context, experiencing specific landscapes, social interaction, and inspiration from film adaptations (BALEIRO 2023a).

Dark literary tourism combines the commemoration and historical reflection associated with dark tourism with the literary focus of visiting sites tied to authors or themes of tragedy. This subgenre focuses on literary sites that are associated with suffering, death, or social injustice (BUSBY–DEVEREUX 2015). Tourists are motivated by a desire to pay tribute to the author's legacy, empathize with the hardships they endured, or reflect on the darker themes within their works (ÇEVIK 2023). It also includes visits connected to gothic, horror, and Holocaust literature (BALEIRO 2023b). The connection between literary tourism and film tourism is also notable, as some sites gain further prominence through film adaptations, as in the case of *Game of Thrones* or *Dracula*, where fans are drawn to both the novels and the cinematic portrayals of these narratives (BUSBY 2022).

The concept of *remembrance education* is often linked to dark tourism; dark literary tourism encourages visitors to reflect on historical tragedies and fosters empathy and a critical engagement with the past (BALEIRO 2023c). Emotional involvement is a significant component, as these sites often elicit reflections on human suffering, mortality, or social injustices presented in the works. Additionally, like literary tourism, admiration for an author or a desire to contextualize literary narratives in physical spaces, are equally relevant in dark literary tourism (BALEIRO 2023b). Motivation is based on engaging with fictional tragedies or real historical suffering. For example, visitors may feel compelled to visit Holocaust sites, such as Auschwitz-Birkenau, after reading related literature (ÇEVIK 2023). In other forms, such as *Dracula tourism*, visitors are drawn by a blend of imagination and historical ambiance (LIGHT 2017), that involves both rational and sensory modes. On the rational side, tourists validate the fictional elements through real-world locations. The sensory mode, however, emphasizes emotional immersion, where tourists do not care whether something is real or not (REIJNDERS 2011).

As with dark tourism, dark literary tourism often contains elements of political and ethical tension, particularly in cases where the subject matter reflects the sensitive parts of history. This form of tourism connects tourists to literary figures and narratives through a more somber lens, the engagement respects both historical memory and the darker side of human experience.

2.2. MARKETING COMMUNICATION OF DARK LITERARY SITES

Literary tourism attractions hold significant commercial value and are marketed based on the connections to the lives of authors, the settings of

novels, and the emotional ties they evoke. Beyond these literary connections, these sites often possess inherent qualities – such as scenic beauty, the presence of souvenir shops, or proximity to other popular attractions – that further enhance their appeal (HERBERT 2001). Collaborative marketing, such as creating thematic routes that link sites associated with specific authors (e.g. Jane Austen tours), further enhances their appeal by offering a structured yet diverse experience (HOPPEN et al. 2014). Marketing efforts in literary tourism also focus on offering visitors authentic experiences that match their interpretations of literary works, reinforcing both the emotional and intellectual connections between the sites and the literary content they represent (HERBERT 2001).

The marketing strategies for dark literary tourism are similar to the ones utilized in literary tourism but are tailored to the motivations of dark literary tourists. While general literary tourism may emphasize the celebratory or inspirational aspects of literature, dark literary tourism highlights the somber, reflective, or tragic elements within literary narratives and the lives of their creators (SAMA 2022). These tools include storytelling, technology-enhanced experiences, and creative re-imaginings of heritage tied to darker historical or fictional themes (MOSTAFA et al. 2021). For instance, dark literary sites often highlight the tragic aspects of authors' lives or the darker themes of their works (ÜNÜVAR et al. 2022). Additionally, digital innovations (e.g. augmented reality, interactive maps) allow for immersive storytelling that enhances visitors' understanding of the historical and cultural significance of these sites (SAMA 2022).

A partnership among stakeholders, such as cultural institutions, tourism boards, and local businesses, supports the creation of meaningful visitor experiences and ensures that the marketing of these sites aligns with the themes they represent (MOSTAFA et al. 2021). Emphasizing both the literary and historical value of the site, marketing efforts focus on connecting visitors to the emotional and intellectual dimensions. Cultural intermediaries, such as tour guides and storytellers, play a significant role by shaping visitor perceptions and experiences and bringing dark literary narratives to life in ways that foster empathy and reflection (McKENZIE 2022). Dark literary tourism focuses on ensuring accurate representations of the heavy themes of historical narratives. Destinations can struggle to attract visitors without authentic and emotionally resonant marketing approaches. User-generated content (UGC), such as visitor reviews and social

media posts, often conveys a more emotionally engaging narrative compared to traditional marketing from destination management organizations (DMOs), which can lack the depth and personal connection visitors seek (IRIMIÁS–VOLO 2018). By incorporating UGC into their strategies, dark literary tourism marketers can enhance the authenticity and emotional appeal of their communication.

3. Research methods

This study used a mixed-methods approach, combining digital analysis with qualitative interviews to investigate tourist motivations and the marketing strategies used by historical sites related to World War I, World War II, and the Cold War. The research specifically focuses on sites that also have connections to prominent 20th-century literary works, as well as their film adaptations.

The selection of sites was based on predefined criteria that ensure relevance to the research objectives. The criteria include:
- The site is located on the European continent.
- The site is associated with World War I, World War II, or the Cold War.
- The site has a connection to a famous literary work.
- The site offers organized activities specifically designed for tourists.
- The site maintains an existing website and has an active presence on social media platforms.

Using these criteria, five sites were selected for in-depth study: the Anne Frank House, Oskar Schindler's Factory, Leger Holidays' *All Quiet on the Western Front* tour, the Battlefields Explorer *A Bridge Too Far* tour, and the German Spy Museum. Each site reflects significant historical events from the 20th century through literature and film, offering insights into the complexities of war and its societal impacts.

The data collection involved two primary methods: digital analysis of the selected sites' online presence and semi-structured interviews with tourists. During the analysis of digital media, websites, social media platforms, and user-generated content related to the selected sites were examined. The analysis focused on the contents, engagements, such as likes, shares, and comments, and any news featured on the websites. This digital content provided a foundation for understanding how these sites market themselves.

The interviews allowed a more personal insight. A purposeful sampling method was used to select interview participants based on their

online interactions with the chosen sites. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 tourists who had visited one or more of the selected attractions. The interview guide included open-ended questions that explored the participants' emotions, motivations, historical knowledge, and overall impressions of the sites. The interviews were conducted both face-to-face and online, and participants were recruited through social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, where they publicly shared their experiences related to the sites. Interviews were conducted in both English and Hungarian.

The research focused on identifying key themes related to tourist engagement. By focusing on the intersection of literature, film, and historical tourism, the study contributes to the understanding of how these attractions serve as both educational and emotional touchpoints for visitors seeking to connect with 20th-century history.

4. Overview

4.1. THE VISITORS' MOTIVATION TO VISIT THESE SITES

The analysis of in-depth interviews highlights the role of storytelling in shaping visitors' motivations to explore historical sites associated with dark literary tourism. Beyond the general curiosity typical of heritage tourism or influence from recommendations on platforms like TripAdvisor, visitors expressed motivations that can be categorized into the following themes: emotional engagement through storytelling, educational impact, and personal connection.

4.1.1. Emotional engagement through storytelling

Visitors often described emotional connection as a primary motivation for visiting these sites. Literature, films, and other narratives allow historical figures like Anne Frank or Oskar Schindler to emerge as relatable individuals instead of just historical figures, drawing visitors into their life stories. This human connection evokes empathy, as participants connect with personal stories that bring historical events closer. For example, visitors to the Anne Frank House often experience her diary in a new light, with some sharing that the visit inspired them to read her story again. This emotional resonance created by storytelling invites visitors to immerse themselves in the real-life experiences of historical figures, offering a moving experience that inspires reflection on the impact of political and human conflict and loss.

Cinematic storytelling also shaped visitor motivations. Film portrayals of historical events make complex subjects more accessible for a wide range of movie-watchers, which could help the emotional experience extend beyond the screen. In the case of sites like Oskar Schindler's Factory, movies like Stephen Spielberg's Schindler's List can foster an empathetic connection, motivating visitors to explore the reality behind cinematic interpretations. By engaging in these narratives, visitors gain a nuanced view of the historical events, often feeling compelled to see how film and history align or diverge at the actual locations.

4.1.2. Education and personal relevance

Another significant theme is the desire to deepen their historical understanding. Many participants sought to expand their knowledge of World War I, World War II, and the Cold War, attracted by the prospect of immersive learning experiences offered at these sites. Sites like the Anne Frank House and the German Spy Museum extend beyond passive learning by incorporating multimedia exhibits, virtual reality, and interactive displays. These tools provide accessible educational experiences that engage diverse age groups, particularly younger audiences who are drawn to technological interactivity. By presenting history through an educational yet immersive narrative lens, these attractions contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the past, especially its personal and moral implications.

For some visitors, a personal or family connection to historical events also influenced their motivation. The sites serve not only as memorials but as places for personal reflection, where visitors can connect their own histories with the others who endured the trauma of war and persecution. In addition, some visitors were motivated by the opportunity to provide meaningful educational experiences for family members, particularly children. These visitors expressed a desire to introduce younger generations to historical events in ways that foster understanding and empathy.

Storytelling is important in dark literary tourism, transforming sites into spaces where history becomes personal, accessible, and memorable. It can help younger audiences to grasp complex historical narratives in a relatable, emotionally engaging manner. This narrative-driven approach not only motivates visits but also promotes an emotional and intellectual engagement that allows visitors to look beyond the learnt facts and think about the factors that led to these events.

4.2. MARKETING COMMUNICATION TOOLS OF THE SITES

Novels and films play a key role in bringing personal experiences of victims to the forefront, while also depicting the socio-political context of the time. What unites attractions like the Anne Frank House, Oskar Schindler's Enamel Factory, Leger Holidays' All Quiet on the Western Front tour, the Battlefield Explorer's A Bridge Too Far tour, and the German Spy Museum Berlin is their thematic emphasis on significant historical events from World War I, World War II, and the Cold War, framed through literary works. Each site contributes to a broader narrative that delves into different aspects of the 20th century, offering both educational and personal insights into the complexities of war and its lasting impact on individuals and society.

Table 1 provides an overview of the attractions including their historical significance, and a look into the online marketing communication tools they use to attract visitors.

The analysis of the selected sites reveals several key themes, including the use of technology and digital platforms, the importance of education and awareness, and the role of social media in modern tourism.

The sites and tours are dedicated to preserving the memory of individuals and events that shaped history. These sites serve as memorials, honoring the victims of war and genocide, while also educating visitors about the human experiences and sacrifices made during these turbulent periods. Incorporating technology and digital platforms shows that keeping up with technological advancements is crucial even for dark tourist attractions. Institutions like the Anne Frank House and the German Spy Museum Berlin have effectively used digital innovations to enhance visitor experiences through virtual reality tours, 3D models, multimedia exhibits, and interactive displays. This also benefits those who cannot physically visit. Moreover, the Spy Museum integrates interactive exhibits and games that allow visitors to engage with the content in an immersive manner. The integration of technology serves not

Table 1

Overview of the attractions

Name of the attraction	Anne Frank House	All Quiet on the Western Front Tour	A Bridge Too Far Tour	Oskar Schindler's Enamel Factory	German Spy Museum Berlin
War connection	World War II	World War I	World War II	World War II	World War II, Cold War
Historical importance	Memorial to Anne Frank and other victims of Holocaust	Showcases the realities of the Western Front	Commemorates Operation Market Garden	Highlights efforts to save Jewish workers during Holocaust	Explores espionage in the „City of Spies"
Social media platforms	Facebook, Instagram, X, YouTube	Facebook, Instagram, X, YouTube	Facebook, Instagram, X, YouTube	Facebook, Instagram, X, YouTube	Facebook, Instagram, X
Marketing communication tools	Website, SM, WOM, UGC, press coverage	Website, SM, SEO, brochures, travel blogs, email list	Website, SM, WOM, email list	Website, SM, temporary exhibitions	Website, SM, UGC, dynamic pricing, webshop
Visitor engagement methods	VR tours, 3D model, guided tours	Guided tours, additional services	Guided tours, additional services	Multimedia exhibits, guided tours	Interactive exhibits, games, guided tours
Target audiences	Students, international tourists	History enthusiasts, military fans	History enthusiasts, military fans	Students, international tourists	Families, espionage enthusiasts
Special programs	Remembrance events, educational workshops	Commemorative events	Anniversary events	Remembrance events, temporary exhibits	Lectures, book readings, movie premieres
Revenue channels	Tickets, donations	Tickets, private tours	Tickets, private tours	Tickets, donations	Tickets, merchandise

Sources: HARTMANN 2013, BUSBY–DEVEREUX 2015, ANNE FRANK HOUSE 2024, DEUTSCHES SPIONAGE MUSEUM 2024, LEGER HOLIDAYS 2024, MK 2024, THE BATTLEFIELD EXPLORER 2024

only to make history more accessible but also to appeal to a broader, often younger audience.

Education is a core function of these sites and tours, focusing on raising awareness of historical events, social justice issues, and broader societal themes such as tolerance and democracy. The educational programs are designed to teach visitors about the consequences of prejudice, antisemitism, and war. These programs extend beyond the physical location of the sites, offering online resources that facilitate global access to educational content. Additionally, tours like *All Quiet on the Western Front* provide participants historical context and insights into the realities of warfare, further contributing to the educational mission of these sites. They emphasize visitor engagement and the creation of a personal connection with the historical narratives presented at these sites. The use of personal stories, survivor testimonies, and immersive experiences helps visitors form an emotional connection with the past. For example, the Battlefield Explorer's *A Bridge Too Far* tour incorporates both personal and historical insights provided by a local guide, deepening visitors' understanding of the events surrounding Operation Market Garden.

vary. The Anne Frank House stands out for its large audience on Facebook, Instagram, X, and YouTube, posting diary quotes, historical facts, and visitor introductions every one to two days on Facebook and Instagram, while producing more documentary-style videos on YouTube (albeit less frequently). The other museums also focus heavily on historical facts, museum updates, and events, but they are less consistent. The tour operators, besides sharing historical information about world war sites and battlefields, heavily emphasize promotional deals or discount announcements *(Table 2)*.

All the attractions utilize social media to engage followers with a mixture of informative, promotional, and storytelling content, to attract new visitors, encourage repeat visits, and UGC. The German Spy Museum stands out for its high level of UGC due to its interactive exhibits, which encourage visitors to share their experiences online. Furthermore, positive reviews and recommendations on platforms like Tripadvisor and blogs help boost the visibility of these sites and tours, enhancing their reputation and appeal to potential visitors.

Table 2

Attractions' social media posting habits

	Facebook				Instagram			
	Followers	Frequency	Posts	Link	Followers	Frequency	Posts	Link
Anne Frank House	953.000	*Every 1-2 days*	*Diary quotes, old photos, additional facts, information about the museum*	https://www.facebook.com/annefrankhouse/	232.000	*Every 1-2 days*	*Informative videos on history, same posts as on Facebook, introducing visitors, "booktok" style posts*	https://www.instagram.com/annefrankhouse_official/
All Quiet on the Western Front Tour	12.000	*Weekly*	*Historical facts, information about the tours*	https://www.facebook.com/legerbattlefields	2839	*Every 2-3 days*	*Promotions, discounts*	https://www.instagram.com/legerholidays/
A Bridge Too Far Tour	17.000	*Every 1-2 days*	*Introduction of sites, videos, tour updates*	https://www.facebook.com/theBattlefieldexplorer/	1332	*Every 1-2 days*	*Same content as on Facebook*	https://www.instagram.com/thebattlefieldexplorer/
Oskar Schindler's Enamel Factory	13.000	*Every 1-2 days*	*Museum updates, event information, historical facts*	https://www.facebook.com/FabrykaSchindlera	8530	*Every 1-2 days*	*Information about Museum Krakowa's all branches and exhibitions*	https://www.instagram.com/muzeumkrakowa/
German Spy Museum Berlin	21.000	*Weekly*	*Museum updates, event invitations, information technology explanations, games*	https://www.facebook.com/spionagemuseum	3510	*Irregularly*	*Current politics, games, museum information, historical facts*	https://www.instagram.com/spionagemuseum

Source: own elaboration

The influence of social media and word-of-mouth promotion is a recurring theme across all analyzed sites. These attractions actively use social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, X, and YouTube to share educational and promotional content, though their follower counts, posting frequency, and types of posts

By commemorating historical events, utilizing technology, focusing on education, engaging visitors, leveraging social media, and implementing dynamic visitor strategies, these sites can preserve and promote history while also catering to the needs and expectations of contemporary tourists. These findings suggest that successful heritage

tourism requires a balance between historical preservation and innovative engagement methods that resonate with a global and diverse audience.

5. Conclusion

This research offers insight into dark literary tourism, emphasizing its role in connecting literature, history, and tourism. Many visitors are drawn to these sites by more than just a desire for historical knowledge – they are also motivated by an emotional connection to the stories and events that these locations represent, often originating from the related literary works. Storytelling not only informs visitors but enriches their engagement at dark literary tourism sites. Whether through novels, films, or interactive on-site experiences, storytelling enables visitors to view historical figures and events through a personal and relatable lens. For many, the immersive experience of reliving or learning about the stories behind these historical figures reinforces a sense of moral responsibility and global awareness.

The findings show the importance of effective marketing strategies, particularly those of storytelling and technological improvements. Digital tools like interactive websites, social media campaigns, and immersive virtual reality experiences are crucial in expanding the reach of these attractions. A strong online presence not only informs potential visitors but also enhances the overall visitor experience. Well-maintained, interactive attractions have proven to be more successful in attracting and retaining visitors, which in turn contributes to local economic growth and supports the preservation of cultural heritage.

Museums, tours, and attractions are important tools to connect tourists to history and to learn about the past through personal storytelling. By reinforcing this, dark literary tourism can be one of the tools that works well in building a country's image in countries with historical sites associated with famous literary works. With a concerted marketing strategy, they can attract international interest and tourists, and can quickly gain a reputation thanks to the internet, with appropriately respectful but attention-grabbing interpretation methods. This is also important for the countries to reinforce their national identity. For example, the World War memorials on the Western Front emphasize heroism and sacrifice, thus strengthening the national image.

The importance of this theme is heightened by the increased interest in World War II themes at anniversaries, especially major anniversaries. This in turn provides an opportunity to commemorate the victims and to raise awareness of the need to preserve historical memory. Such occasions, such as the programs in early June to mark the anniversary of the Normandy landings, are particularly attractive to those interested in the war. These events, exhibitions, and tours attract more tourists than usual to the area, helping to boost tourism. And cooperation between venues – and countries – would create opportunities to further boost dark literary tourism. A good example of this is Jaroslav Hašek's Švejk, the brave soldier. The sites featured in the book are tourist attractions that not only promote the cultural heritage of the Czech Republic but also connect it with other Central European countries. As a result of historical processes, many heritage sites do not stop at national borders, so it would be worthwhile for the countries concerned to work together to develop their economies through the joint preservation of their heritage.

The research also points to opportunities for collaboration across different forms of tourism, such as literary, heritage, and film tourism. For example, a site linked to a famous novel might also be a historic landmark or have been featured in a film, allowing it to attract visitors from multiple interests. These collaborations can increase the attractiveness of the site by offering a richer experience that combines literature, history, and film, appealing to a wider range of tourists with diverse interests in different aspects of history. This approach can transform historical sites into more versatile and engaging tourist destinations that offer more than just one type of attraction, ultimately drawing a larger and more varied audience.

Ultimately, this research broadens the understanding of dark tourism by examining the intersection of literature and history within tourism. The findings suggest that integrating literary themes into the promotion of dark tourism sites can enhance their appeal and effectiveness. As this niche continues to grow, it has the potential to make significant contributions to cultural education, heritage preservation, and economic development, enriching both the visitor experience and the broader societal understanding of history.

Acknowledgments

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