AN EXPLORATORY CONTENT ANALYSIS OF DARK TOURISM WEBSITES

Introduction

Dark Tourism is by no means a new phenomenon. For centuries the idea has been a definitive reason for travel and practiced by different cultures. Today dark tourism sites (henceforth ‘sites’) are a feature in almost all countries, with few countries exempt from human tragedy over time. In recent years the popularity of dark tourism has significantly increased (Logan & Reeves, 2008; Stone & Sharpley, 2008). There are numerous reasons that this increase can be attributed to: the rise in numbers and mobility of travellers world-wide (Gretzel & Jamal, 2009), interest in special interest tourism (Dunkley, Morgan & Westwood, 2011), an increase in voyeuristic activities (Lisle, 2004), a desire to remember (Carr, 2010), recognition of the need to preserve and restore important sites and structures (Sharpley & Stone, 2008), increased interest in genealogy and one’s own heritage (McCain & Ray, 2003), and an increasing desire for less prescribed travel packages in favor of individually-sought experiences (Tung & Ritchie, 2011) - and so on.

The term dark tourism is given essentially to any travel to a site where mass loss, death or atrocity has taken place (Stone & Sharpley, 2008). However, despite it being a common term used by tourism practitioners and academics alike, the phenomenon of dark tourism is extremely broad and diverse in its application. Some authors suggest there is no definitive explanation of what it really means (Biran, Poria & Oren, 2010; Stone & Sharpley, 2008) and the area is at best, ‘theoretically fragile’ (Stone & Sharpley, 2008, p. 575). Dark tourism also differs largely from other areas of tourism, where the picturesque and pleasant is observed, and rather turns its gaze on events and locations that are known for their history of ‘dark’ events; those considered macabre, and brought about by forces of destruction and malevolent human actions.

Furthermore, it is still arguable as to how a tourism site can be deemed ‘dark’ comparative to another. Stone (2006) has attempted to conceptualize this by providing a framework of criteria that encompasses what can be considered light-dark to darkest-dark, along a spectrum. Stone’s (2006) spectrum provides a useful tool for ascribing what attributes a dark tourism site has and where it would rest on the continuum between the lightest and darkest pole. ‘Light’ attractions, such as haunted houses and ghost tours (Raine, 2013) frequently maintain an entertainment focus, whilst the ‘darker’ attractions such as Chernobyl (Yankovska and Hannam, 2014), Auschwitz-Birkenau (Auschwitz) and the United States 9/11 Memorial have a deep rooted socio-historical context (Stone, 2006). This spectrum has led other academics to investigate ways of providing the dark tourist customer with a spectrum of their own (Raine, 2013), suggesting that visitors have different motivations that correspond with the location’s place on the scale. At present much extant literature focuses on the display of sites (Stone & Sharpley, 2008; Wight, 2006), and the presentation of the history and at times, what is chosen to be presented and what is obliterated from account around the site. More recent literature is emerging that focuses on the emotional experience: motivations and benefits had and reasons behind consumers visiting dark tourism sites (Walter, 2009, Kidron, 2013). Biran, Poria, and Oren (2011) discuss how some may interpret a site as personal heritage with deep meaning and lessons for all humanity, whereas others may feel ambivalent or seek a purely educational experience. Those sites where a tragic event has occurred within living memory may also be visited by those with direct personal experience to the event, such as inmates of concentration camps returning to the site of their own
or close relative’s incarceration, motivated by a need for closure or giving reverence. For others, a site may be considered a rite of passage where a personal homage is paid to the bravery or patriotism of forbears (such as the Gallipoli site for Australians and New Zealanders, where several thousand ANZAC soldiers were killed in the early days of WWI). Conversely, for some who are ambivalent about the site prior to travel, the actual experience felt on-site may leave them profoundly affected; where the atmosphere or narrative of human tragedy leaves them with unanticipated negative emotions.

As a tourism business dark tourism ventures need to operate within a commercial framework; one that provides a tourism experience that meets customer expectations, ensures profitability or at least sustainability, and also maintains the ethical integrity of the site. In order to do this effective communication to target markets before, during and after a visit is very desirable. One way a venture may do this, and to complement more traditional tools such as brochures or use of an intermediary service, is through a website. Indeed, in tourism, online customer search and purchase of travel is becoming increasingly universal (Sigala, 2005). How and what is offered to customers can impact on the customer decision-making process and their expectations around the tourism experience. Because of this, it is important to understand how these websites are structured, the way in which functionalities are incorporated, how marketers attempt to connect with audiences and how the intended user experience is created. Website communication is a vital part of meaning-making, creating expectation and ‘selling’ the visit. Bingley, Burgess, and Sellito (2010) also suggest that websites offering a larger interactive experience using Web 2.0 applications enrich the experience for the customer as there is an element of increased involvement, and use of referent learning from other customers on the site. Therefore, the distinct benefits accrued to dark tourism ventures having a a website to attract customers, communicate the offering, facilitate pre-purchase of tickets and other benefits, and provide a social media forum for user generated content (UGC) are compelling. A website can also be used as a means to guide customer behavior and communicate factors that are important for prospective tourists to plan for. As it is not unusual for a dark tourism site to be in a difficult terrain or isolated location, advice on how to get to the site and access are useful. Incorporating factors such as health and safety- how the experience will be affected by weather or clothing to wear that is essential for safety purposes- can also reduce risk to the operator. Likewise, setting the ground rules for ambulant tours (such as walking ghost tours) on drunkenness or over-excitable groups (such as ‘Hens’ parties) can make the tour more satisfying for all concerned. Opportunity also exists to shape the expectations of the customer as to what an authentic experience means, as many of the sites, particularly those that are ‘darkest’ are without overlaid ornamentation and facilities one would normally expect at a tourism destination oft-frequented: cafes, gift shops etc. Increasingly, there has been attention on tourists at dark tourism sites whose observed behaviors, regarded as acceptable by some, are found to be highly offensive or unsettling to others. Such an example is the ‘selfie phenomenon’, where the sight of a smiling ‘selfie’ in a dark tourism site such as Auschwitz (Booth, 2014), is deemed by others as highly offensive and transgressing usual norms of behavior at ‘sacred’ sites.

Whilst there have been several studies on the use of Web 2.0 in tourism (see Ip, Law & Lee, 2011), there is a paucity of research on the nature of websites in dark tourism. Therefore, the main objective of this study is to analyze dark tourism websites so that more may be known of how dark tourism operators attempt to communicate with their various audiences, convey their offering, facilitate customer search, and expedite visit purchase through the use of a website.
This paper discusses early stages of an exploratory qualitative content analysis of such websites from several countries and ranging from the darker offerings such as holocaust museums and battlefields, to lighter options such as ghost tours or curated museums of the macabre. This paper reports findings of the analysis in terms of functionality, transactional capabilities, use of authenticity versus creativity (and what is involved in that) and more importantly, how websites reflect the nature of the anticipated experience and set to establish pre-visit an informed, well-prepared customer with an understanding of the customer experience that tourists should expect to encounter. We now discuss the method used, findings, along with discussion, and conclude with recommendations, limitations and future research suggestions.

Method

The use of qualitative content analysis of tourism websites is valid (Aaberge, Grotte, Haugen, Skogseid & Ølnes, 2004; Law, Qi & Buhalis, 2010). The methodology used for the analysis is informed by the approach used by Choi, Lehto, & Morrison (2007) in their study of Macau travel tourism sites and also that of Bingley, Burgess and Sellito’s (2010) Web 2.0 classifications study in regard to the value measured by web interactivity and the vehicles that provide these means. The websites were examined for written content; (historical description of event, narrative and story-telling), pre-planning for trip information, images, links to other resources, functional elements such as navigation, transaction and purchase capability (online shop, tickets), tone, creativity and customer review abilities (Baloglu, Yakup & Pekcan, 2006), along with the use of UGC (Bingley, Burgess & Sellito, 2010). The websites were chosen from a broad range of countries (therefore histories, culture and value systems) and ranging along the dark tourism spectrum proposed by Stone (2006). A mix of well-known dark tourism sites and some less well-known (albeit within a Western perspective) were chosen. Websites selected for analysis met the following criteria: website content in English language or if not, an option for English translation was possible, the website was the main, exclusive offering or provider of the dark tourism site and not a parent site of several offerings and finally, the website existed for the sole purpose of the site and not as a product offer ‘bundle’. Initial coding was undertaken by a single coder. To ensure maximum trustworthiness of findings, all coding entries were scrutinized by a second researcher within the project and any conflicts around selection of, or judgments behind entries were discussed and resolved. Interpretation of the findings used a process of interrogating each cell of the data collection spreadsheet for its meaning and then using expert judgment (Choi, Lehto & Morrison, 2007) to determine final interpretation. Again, this process was performed by two researchers independently of each other, who then came together for discussion and final resolution of meanings. Table 1 shows the count of websites by country and placement of the site along Stone’s (2006) light to dark spectrum. Broad categories are given to each dark tourism venture examined, however due to the need for brevity, the rationale for ascribing the spectrum level given for each site cannot be discussed here.

Table 1: Source of websites examined

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of Attractions</th>
<th>Broad Category</th>
<th>Place on Dark Tourism Spectrum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Haunted house/Quarantine station/Historic jail</td>
<td>Light/Grey (mixture)/Dark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Type Description</td>
<td>Tone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Occupation museum</td>
<td>Dark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Genocide memorial</td>
<td>Dark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Cemetery/ Walking tour - historic murder locations</td>
<td>Grey/Light</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Holocaust site</td>
<td>Dark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Nuclear commemoration</td>
<td>Dark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Occupation museum</td>
<td>Dark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Walking ghost tour/Historic prison</td>
<td>Light/Dark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rwanda</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Genocide memorial</td>
<td>Dark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Walking ghost tour/ Dark location- city underground</td>
<td>Light/Grey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Apartheid museum/ Site of Imprisonment</td>
<td>Dark/Dark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Battleground</td>
<td>Dark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Nuclear disaster</td>
<td>Dark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States of America</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Witch Museum/ Haunted ship/ Battleground/ Terrorism Memorial/ Historic prison/</td>
<td>Light/Light/Dark/Dark/Dark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>War museum</td>
<td>Dark</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Findings and Discussion**

The findings reveal a wide variability in websites over several dimensions including general marketing 'sophistication', functionality, historical account, links to additional educational resources, tone, creativity, and value-added offerings. Although this would seem to be expected, the substantial variation in ‘like’ categories was curious. For example, there was a wide range of approaches taken in walking ghost tours. Whilst some appeared serious in tone and manner, emphasising the historical value and credentials of the tour guide as a historical expert, others were light-hearted promising customers the ‘spook’ or fright they were seeking, not only from the ghosts on route, but perhaps also from the tour guide! As the offering became lighter, so too in general did the gimmicks; audible ghostly noises, considerable red splattering on dark backgrounds (representing blood) and images of cartoon ghosts appearing and disappearing from the pages.

Overall, the dark tourism websites that was ‘light’ in nature were generally more commercial and for profit than many, if not most of the ‘dark’ offerings. Further, the categories ‘education’ and ‘gimmick’ seemed to be mutually exclusive. Dark tourism websites such as Auschwitz had no gimmick elements and had a vast array of educational and historical information available. Comparatively, the lighter offerings were more entertainment based, had more ‘gimmick’ features and less, if any educational information, available for customers.

Many websites use a mix of Web 2.0 applications such as blogs, video, and social media integration, whilst some lacked some or any of the applications. Some websites lack commerciality and existed through donation or charity. Communicative methods such as images,
language choice and tone, and varying levels of educational information and as mentioned, gimmick, were found. Some sites had extensive links to other websites—such as sources of relevant or further explanatory historical data. These links were interpreted as being appropriate in most cases as it served the educationally-oriented customer well without overburdening the site with too much information, that a less involved prospective customer could find cumbersome. A great deal of the sites facilitated pre-purchase of tickets and offered various promotions and group discounts. Again online store facilities were often present. A common product on offer for online purchase was printed material, both for light and darkest locations: souvenir booklets about the site and visit itself and then additional works on the event or site history by other authors. Again the lighter the site, the greater the level of merchandise and memorabilia on sale. Additionally the greater the level of service or human interaction over concrete elements (i.e. ‘bricks and mortar) in the visit, the greater the emphasis placed on the credibility of the site’s guides and employees.

In regard to structural elements, it was found that the navigation ability of the site and level of interactivity built into the experience works further to communicate aspects of the tourism experience, and also impacts on the tourist’s expectations of the real venture. Many of the websites did not have UGC applications, giving the website in many cases an austere and untrustworthy feel. UGC and promotion when used well, established credibility and engaged the viewer. The more customer reviews and interactivity available on the site and outside user applications, the more time was spent on the site, thus creating a more trustworthy feel. There was a clear trend pointing toward more recently occurring dark tourism sites having larger amounts of UGC content, and the website having a larger interactive structure. Many of the websites documented tragedies that happened many decades ago such as WWII, whilst more recent tragedies such as 9/11 in America had infinitely larger interactive abilities and UGC posted.

**Conclusions, Managerial Recommendations and Future Research**

Websites are now an integral part of most dark tourism ventures, used to promote an offering and convert leads into sales, and as well ‘tell the story’ prior to the tourist visit. This exploratory study has explored how these websites are constructed to offer an attractive and worthwhile tourist experience in a highly competitive tourism market. Primarily this is obtained through conveyance of editorial and visual content about the actual offering (including information specific to the differing market segments and motivations), providing transaction capability (purchase and travel commitment through ticket sales) and promoting early engagement through interest and involvement in the site. As well, the website works to shape the experience so that real time on-site consumption is met with realistic expectations according to motivations and benefits and the visit is perceived as value and forms a positive memory. A well-constructed website via its delivery can assist to justify ticket price and contribute to the sustainability of dark tourism sites through building understanding of the importance of preservation and the need to observe some limits to visitor access because of a site’s fragility.

In regard to recommendations, the tourism industry as a whole must work hard to sell an experience that cannot be immediately consumed after a purchase decision and transaction have been made. Therefore, the means and methods with which the venture communicates value to the customer are immensely important. Biran, Poria, and Oren (2011) suggest that in order for a dark
tourism venture to be made attractive to diverse audiences the interpretation should be customized in accordance with tourists’ perception of the site and that the heterogeneous nature of tourists’ motives; such as differentiating between goals of pure knowledge enrichment and those of gaining a deeper understanding of humanity or self through emotional connection. We believe this also aptly applies to the venture’s website. Furthermore, findings indicate that offerings differ in the methods employed to communicate to their audience. The tone, imagery, look and feel of a website that results in a particular atmosphere and experience conveyed must be appropriate for that type and shade of dark tourism. Website and tourism managers are right in trying to manage the experience that prospective customers have on once on site via their website. Pre-informing the customer can provide an effective means of shaping expectation and sensitizing the traveller to the nature of the site. Even if behavioral expectations are not made explicit, cues and signals within the written content and imagery can be useful as a way of communicating desirable visitor etiquette. This applies not only to the darker more ‘sacred’ sites, where tourists feel more connected in time or memory to the sufferers involved who provide the key threads of a dark tapestry, but to lighter sites where the enjoyment or safety of self and others could be marginalized. Finally, a website can also be useful to customers during and post visitation. An active and well-maintained website will encourage a customer to oft return to the website as a means of memory activation, gaining further knowledge or leaving positive user content.

Some limitations are acknowledged. To date only a small number of sites have been evaluated and therefore generalization of findings cannot be claimed. Additionally, many dark tourism customers present at a site without having referred to the website prior, or as a result of an unplanned or even impulse decision to visit. Future research could be considered by category; looking specifically at museums, battlefields or memorials for example. Analysis of specific countries or regions may be of research value to determine if national culture or other factors such as political influences affect the nature of dark tourism websites. Customer impressions and reaction to the content presented on the website would add qualitative value to this area of research. A division between commercial and non-commercial dark tourism websites is also be suggested, as this analysis would reveal the mutually exclusive nature of some of the categories and the corresponding offerings.

References


