# MAPPING TWO DECADES OF RESEARCH ON DARK TOURISM AND THANATOURISM: A BIBLIOMETRIC PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract:** Dark tourism is an umbrella term for tourism related to death, suffering, cruelty, tragedy and/or crime. Thanatourism, on the other hand, refers to travel motivated by the specific desire to encounter death. However, these terms have become increasingly vague over time. This study uses VOSviewer to present a bibliometric analysis of dark tourism and thanatourism, aiming to clarify both terms and present the main lines of research. The main objective is to provide a qualitative and quantitative analysis of research published from 1996 to 2024. Data were collected from 548 documents in the period 1996-2024 (December) from the Web of Science database. Using the VOSviewer software, scientific maps were created showing the scientifical structure (co-citation analysis) and the current and future line of research (co-word analysis) in this scientific field. The scientifical structure shows the relevance of the two main approach: supply or demand approach, and integrated supply-demand approach. The main lines of research show the relevance of emotions in dark tourism experience, motivation for the death of dark tourists, authenticity in dark heritage, disaster tourism, and battlefield tourism. Furthermore, the final research line is related to emotions in dark tourism experience. The findings contribute to a broad and diverse understanding of the concepts of dark tourism and thanatourism, which can provide important insights for DMOs and policymakers in formulating management strategies in relation to collective memory and authenticity in dark touristic places. For example, it is is recommended that measures be implemented to enhance the authenticity of these tourist destinations, thereby increasing their educational value, fostering greater respect for history, and preserving the memory of the victims. Moreoover, these places play an important role in constructing a memory of national identification and fostering loyalty to the political entity of the state.

**Keywords:** dark tourism, thanatourism, heritage, bibliometric analysis, Web of Science, VOSviewer

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## INTRODUCTION

In the early 1990s, several academics began to examine the growing connection between tourism and sites associated with death or suffering (Dann, 1994). Thus, Foley & Lennon (1996) introduced the concept of dark tourism and Seaton (1996) introduced the concept of thanatourism. Initially, both terms were explored by a small number of scholars.

However, in recent years, the relationship between tourism and death has attached the attention of the media and it is now a mainstream research topic (Oren et al., 2021; Seaton & Lennon, 2004). Dark tourism is an umbrella term for tourism that is somehow related to death, suffering, cruelty, tragedy and/or crime, whereas thanatourism refers to travel motivated by a specific desire for an encounter death (Seaton, 1996). According to Hartmann (2014), the fundamental differences between dark tourism and thanatourism revolve around the dimensions of supply and demand. Foley & Lennon (1996) focused on the "supply" dimension, considering any place associated with death being inherently dark. In contrast, Seaton (1996) focused on the motivations of tourists to visit places associated with death. He therefore focused on the "demand" dimension and was less concerned with the ways in which such places are presented to their visitors.

In recent years, it has seen an increase in interest in this type of tourism due to the different possibilities it offers. Researchers have created different, more or less homogeneous categorisations with the aim of analysing the different places related to the "macabre" or the "dark". However, although their intention was to provide clarity, the central concept itself has become diluted. Dale & Robinson (2011) and Light (2017) argue that these typologies are ultimately subjective, as is the perception of the "dark." Therefore, this perception changes from one tourist to another. Furthermore, Ashworth & Isaac (2015, p.318) argue that the approach is endless, as "an almost infinite number of overlapping taxonomies can be conceived and imposed on the diverse realities of tourist sites". Therefore, bibliometric analysis will allow us to analyse the current state of the art with the aim of shedding light on the theories that have underpinned dark tourism and thanatourism.

This will allow to understand the motivations of tourists, clarifying the conceptualisation of both terms and defining proposals, both managerial and theoretical. Bibliometric analysis allows the analysis of a specific scientific field based on

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the analysis of its intellectual structure and the current state of research, as well as the prediction of future lines of research (Cobo et al., 2011; Zupic & Cater, 2015). Although several researchers have systematically reviewed the literature on dark tourism or thanatourism (Ogretmenoglu et al., 2022; Tarifa-Fernández et al., 2022; Tarifa-Fernández et al., 2024; Rasool et al., 2025), these studies have numerous gaps that our current research aims to fill. The current study correctly identifies search terms through the analysis of keywords such as "dark tourism" and "thanatourism," without falling into the ambiguity of other terms. Secondly, this research correctly identifies the scientific structure of this scientific field through the analysis of the three perspectives (*supply approach*, *demand approach*, and *integrated supply-demand approach*).

Finally, this research identifies five clusters not previously identified by these articles through co-citation analysis and co-word analysis. In the conclusion, the current article covers all of the mentioned gaps.

Based on articles published in Web of Science (WoS), this article provides a comprehensive analysis of the progression of dark tourism and thanatourism between 1996 and 2024. More specifically, the current research aims to achieve the following research objectives (O), which will be analysed throughout the research:

O1) To identify the co-authorship network on dark tourism and thanatourism.

O2) To examine the foundational themes on which the academic literature on dark tourism and thanatourism through co-occurrence analysis.

O3) To reveal existing or future relationships among topics related to dark tourism and thanatourism through co-word analysis.

In the following sections, a review of the relevant literature is first presented. Next, the methodology is described, including the bibliometric analysis and data sources. Subsequently, the main results are presented and discussed, and finally, the key conclusions of the study are drawn.

**Literature review: Dark Tourism and Thanatourism**

Dark tourism and thanatourism are concepts that have attracted particular attention from researchers due to the increase in popularity of places associated with death and their complex nature due to the different conceptualisations they raise. According to Light (2017) and Králová & Šperková (2024), the two concepts have different origins. Dann (1994) pointed out that in the future, interest in tourism will be related to nostalgia and fascination with tragic, macabre, or other equally unpleasant historical sites. Welz (1993) introduced the phenomenon of *slumming* or *negative tourism* using the example of tourism in Harlem (New York) to define tourism to poor neighbourhoods. Rojek (1993) introduced the term *black spots*, in which he pointed out the growing trend of consuming death and graves to postmodernity. The consequence is the commodification of spectacle, where even death becomes a spectacle to be seen and consumed. Tunbridge & Ashworth (1996) proposed the term *heritage of atrocity*, in which heritage does not represent everyone equally and creates conflicts between different groups with different perceptions. Finally, these same authors introduced the term *difficult heritage* (p.94), which refers to the dilemmas in managing sites that disrupt collective identities and highlight social differences.

The term dark tourism was initially introduced by Foley & Lennon (1996, p.196) to "describe the presentation and consumption of real and commodified death, disasters and depravity". On the other hand, the term thanatourism was introduced by Seaton (1996, p.240) and was defined as "the act of traveling to a place motivated by the desire to encounter death, in particular, but not exclusively, violent death, which can be assimilated to a greater or lesser extent depending on the specific characteristics of the people whose death is the centre of interest." Seaton (1996: 240–242) argues that thanatourism comprises five distinct travel activities: "[t]ravel to witness public enactments of death; travel to see the sites of mass or individual deaths, after they have occurred; travel to internment sites of, and memorials to, the dead; travel to view the material evidence, or symbolic representations of death, in locations unconnected with their occurrence; and travel for re-enactments or simulation of death." In academic literature, there is disparity when analysing both terms, which are sometimes ambiguous (Hartmann, 2014; Light, 2017; Králová & Šperková, 2024). Conceptually, it can be assumed that dark tourism focuses on the supply side, emphasising resources such as death, suffering, atrocities, tragedy, crime and the macabre for tourist consumption. In contrast, thanatourism relates to *demand*, referring to the visitor's motivation to experience an encounter, real or symbolic, with death.

Therefore, this term is less focused on how it is presented to the public, with the important thing being how people who visit it feel (Light, 2017). Ashworth (2015) claims that thanatourism is a type of dark tourism experience which comes closer to motivation rather than the tourist site only. According to Light (2017), dark tourism is an umbrella term for any kind of tourism related to death and tragedy. On the other hand, thanatourism relates to travel where the main motive is to have an experience related to death. However, these terms have become diluted over time and are now increasingly vague (Sharpley, 2009). For example, in Table 1 we have identified the different definitions of these terms in the scientific literature:

Table 1. Definitions of dark tourism and thanatourism (Source: Own elaboration)

| Focus | Definition | Author |
|---|---|---|
| Motivation | Dark tourism: "the visitation to any site associated with death, disaster and tragedy in the twentieth century for remembrance, education or entertainment." | Foley & Lennon (1997:155) |
| | Thanatourism: "the stimulus of war has been a principal energizer of thanatourism in history and in modern times." | Seaton (1999: 132) |
| | Thanatourism: "people who visit the sites of death are often motivated by curiosity over the death. There are however, cases where such curiosity is not about death; and those who seek the experience cannot be considered as thanatourists." | Slade (2003:779) |
| | Dark tourism: "the act of travel to sites associated with death, suffering and the seemingly macabre." | Stone (2006:146) |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | Dark tourism "involves visiting destinations at which violence is the main attraction." | Robb (2009:51) |
| | Thanatourism: "a form of travel where tourists encounter places associated with death, disaster and the macabre." | Johnston (2015:20) |
| | Dark tourism or thanatourism: "tourists were thought to have a two-fold motivation to select some places where tragic events had happened, i.e., 1) heritage, as the coalification of universal culture knowledge and 2) entertainment, as the visitors simulate to be witnesses of historical facts trough souvenirs and photographs." | Guerrero-Sierra et al. (2025:3) |
| | Dark tourism "the motive for visiting dark historical places is impacted by a complex interplay of personal, cultural, and psychological elements, which leads the visitor to a specific emotional experience." | Šuligoj & Jovanović, (2025:369-370) |
| Type of place | Dark tourism: "the presentation and consumption (by visitors) of real and commodified death and disaster sites." | Foley & Lennon (1996: 198) |
| | Thanatourism: "tourism to globally recognised places of commemoration." | Knudsen (2011: 57) |
| | Thanatourism: "engagement with a symbolic or real experience with death, where touristic monuments, sites and events take the form of graves, cemeteries, prisons and places of public executions." | Christou & Hadjielia Drotarova (2022:37) |
| | Dark tourism: "traumatic events in the social memory and the places associated with them are transformed into tourism items by being musealized over time to set an example for future generations and preserve the freshness of the events." | Kurnaz & Aniktar (2025:3) |
| Experience | Dark tourism: "where the tourist's experience is essentially composed of 'dark' emotions such as pain, death, horror or sadness." | Ashworth (2008:234) |
| | Dark tourism: "is concerned with encountering spaces of death or calamity that have political or historical significance, and that continue to impact upon the living" | Stone (2016:23) |
| | Dark tourism: "Dark tourism experiences often elicit intense negative emotions such as sadness, anger, and shock, responses that contrast with the positive responses typical in hedonic travel. Yet these negative emotions are not signs of dissatisfaction; rather, they are integral to the educational and commemorative purposes of dark sites." | Qin et al. (2026:1) |

The ambiguity in this context has transcended into numerous terms that, far from clarifying the concepts, create different categorisations that are more or less homogeneous. According to Light (2017), the terms "dark tourism" and "thanatourism" are generally inadequate for distinguishing between different types of sites and their visitors. Some authors differentiate based on the nature and context of the site being visited, such as 'paranormal tourism' (Pedreño-Peñalver et al., 2024), 'genocide tourism' (Beech, 2009), 'hardship tourism' (Beech, 2001), 'grief tourism' (Dunkley et al., 2007), 'horror tourism' (Strange & Kempa, 2003) or 'poverty and slum tourism' (Seaton, 2012). Other authors make distinctions based on motivation, referring for instance to "war or battlefield tourism." (Lloyd, 1998), 'disaster tourism' (Dunkley et al., 2007), 'suicide tourism' (Miller & Gonzalez, 2013), 'atomic tourism' (Freeman, 2014), 'prison tourism' (Ross, 2012), 'cemetery tourism' (Venbrux, 2010), 'ghost tourism' (Holmes & Inglis, 2004), or 'holocaust tourism' (Thurnell-Read, 2009). An initial conclusion from these different conceptualizations is that tourists are mainly motivated by encounters with death, the macabre, or disasters. However, based on the research of Kang et al. (2012) and Yoshida et al. (2016), the term 'dark tourism' and other related concepts are limited because they fail to analyse tourist motivations in depth. These studies merely focus on tourist attractions. Therefore, it is necessary to analyse the motivations of tourists who visit these places through three different approaches in the literature:

The first approach is the *supply approach* (Miles, 2002; Stone, 2006). Stone (2006) proposed the dark tourism spectrum, made up of seven stages, in which each one has a certain degree of intensity. On the one hand, the least dark stage is associated with places that recreate atrocities, in which the offer is focused on entertainment and has a greater amount of commercial and tourist infrastructure. On the other hand, the darkest stage is associated with places where atrocities have truly occurred, in which the offer is focused on conservation and remembrance. Therefore, the infrastructure is authentic and original, since it does not have a commercial purpose. However, Kang (2012) and Yoshida et al. (2016) criticize this theoretical framework, as it is not possible to associate each place with a specific type of motivation. The reason is because each place has a different relationship with each person or group of people, depending on different cultural or educational conceptions. McKercher & Du Cros (2003) recognized the diversity of the market, with a wide spectrum of visitors attracted to the same site with different goals met.

For example, Nawijn & Fricke (2015) analyse the emotional responses of Dutch visitors who visited concentration camps that commemorated the Nazi Holocaust in the Netherlands, which were built during the German occupation. The results show that the main feelings were intensity, repulsion, shock, compassion and sadness. However, those people closest to the Holocaust had more intense feelings of pride, love, joy, inspiration, emotion and affection.

Second, the *demand approach* argues that the presence of tourists in places associated with dark tourism always involves an interest in death (Slade, 2003). This approach is related with the perspective of postmodernism. The authors explain the role of the spectacle in contemporary society. This is in line with the motives of dark tourists, who are attracted to places associated with death, tragedy, and the macabre, thus challenging conventional norms and values (Lennon & Foley, 2000). However, most researchers have not adopted postmodernism as an explanatory framework (Bowman & Pezzullo, 2010). This is because tourists are motivated by a wide range of reasons, including those related to culture, education and entertainment, which are neither obscure nor morbid (Sharpley, 2009). Another theoretical framework related with this approach is the "mortality mediation thesis". This framework considers that death has become increasingly removed from the public sphere in the Western world due to an increasingly secular role and a greater taboo surrounding mortality (Aries, 1981; Giddens, 1991; Walter 2009). Stone & Sharpley (2008) transfers this theoretical framework to the field of tourism, explaining that in a Western context where death is socially silenced, these places provide a safe space in

which to establish a relationship with death. Secularization has therefore transformed the traditional religious structures that historically served as guides and controls in the face of death. In their place, contemporary mediating institutions of mortality have emerged that offer representations of tragedy and death. Dark tourism is one such institution, forming part of a broader set of expressions of popular culture that allow today's societies to confront and make sense of death. However, Light (2017) criticizes this theoretical framework because, like the framework of postmodernism, it has a narrow view of the modern Western world without taking into account the relationship that death has in other societies.

Third, Sharpley (2005), Bowman & Pezzullo (2010) and Biran et al. (2011) criticize the approach of the supply or demand perspectives and propose the *integrated supply-demand approach*. This perspective suggests that tourists visiting dark sites may engage in other non-dark experiences. Strange & Kempa (2003) previously introduced this perspective in their article entitled "Shades of Dark Tourism to Alcatraz and Robben Island". This was due to the authors' analysis of the multiple motivations and interpretations of tourists visiting Alcatraz prison in the United States and Robben Island in South Africa. Sharpley (2005) identified four types of dark tourism: *pale tourism* (people are not interested in death when visiting sites that are not intended to be dark tourist attractions), *grey tourism demand* (people are interested in death when visiting sites that are not intended to be dark tourist attractions), *grey tourism supply* (people are not interested in death when visiting sites that are intended to be dark tourist attractions), and *black tourism* ("true" dark tourism, in which people are interested in death when visiting sites that are intended to be dark tourist attractions). Sharpley's model (2005) is the most valid theoretical framework because it considers the multiple motivations of tourists who visit sites associated with death, such as education, entertainment, history, or heritage. In this regard, Table 2 analyses studies related to dark tourism and thanatourism and the different motivations of tourists.

Table 2. Motivation of tourists to visit "dark" places (Source: Own elaboration with Web of Science data (2025)

| Motive | Authors |
|---|---|
| Education: History or Culture | Strange & Kempa (2003) (12); Jamal & Lelo (2011) (13); Mansfeld & Korman (2015) (1); Casella & Fennelly (2016) (10); Thomas et al. (2016) (2); Kang et al. (2012) (14); Mileva (2018) (7); Hryhorczuk (2019) (8); Morton (2019) (7); Öztürk (2021) (9); Proos & Hattingh (2022) (1); Sobaih & Naguib, 2022 (10); Weston et al. (2022) (10); Widawski & Olesniewicz (2023) (2); Astudillo et al. (2024) (12). |
| Curiosity/ Morbidity | Gibson (2006) (6); Rittichainuwat (2008) (5); Heidelberg (2015) (10); Connell (2019) (4); Wang et al. (2024) (5) |
| Personal connection | Frew (2012) (6); González-Tennant (2013) (6); Kidron (2013) (2); Kang et al. (2018) (13); Applboim & Poria (2020) (2); Zhang (2021) (5); (12); Shang et al. (2022) (9); Kurnaz & Aniktar (2025). |
| Leisure motives/ Entertainment | Gibson (2006) (6); Freire-Mederios (2009) (9); Frisch (2016) (9); Dancausa-Millán et al. (2019) (10); Pereira et al. (2022) (11); Hammonds (2025) (10); Diana-Piscarac & Seung-Chul Yoo (2025) (4); Qian et al. (2025) (4). |
| Pilgrimage/Spirituality | Buda & Mcintosh (2013) (4); Thi (2021) (11); Pedreño-Peñalver et al. (2024) (10); Baraniecka-Olszewska (2025) (1); Seger-Guttmann et al. (2025) (2). |
| Remembrance | Bolin (2012) (3); Friedrich & Johnston (2013) (3); Buda (2015a, 2015b) (4); Nawijn et al. (2018) (2); Dancausa-Millán et al. (2019) (11); Seaton (2019) (1); Motena (2022) (12); Šuligoj & Kennell (2022) (1); Zhang (2022) (5); Li & Chan (2023) (13); Grek-Martin (2024) (14); Moravcíková et al. (2025) (8). |
| National Identity | Foley & Lennon (1996) (14); Jones (2011) (7); Frew (2012) (6); Yankholmes & McKercher (2015) (13); Mionel (2020) (11); Young (2022) (3); Asan & Daskin (2024) (12). |
| Death/Dark Events/Violence | Rofe (2013) (6); Dancausa-Millán et al. (2019) (11); Lewis et al. (2021) (10); Obradović et al. (2021) (10). |

Note: Sites associated with war/conflict (1); sites associated with the Holocaust (2); genocide sites (3); contemporary conflict zones/dangerous places (4); sites of natural disasters (5); sites of individual/mass murder (in a non-war context) (6); sites associated with communism in East-Central Europe and its legacy (7); Chernobyl (8); sites associated with poverty (9); ghost tours / walks/paranormal (10); cemeteries (11); prisons (12); sites associated with slavery (13); sites associated with tragedies (14)

Based on this theoretical foundation, dark tourism or thanatourism can be regarded as a form of cultural tourism in which visitors are primarily motivated by a desire for learning. Thus, some researchers use cultural tourism as a theoretical framework, as they believe there is insufficient theoretical justification for considering "dark tourism" or "thanatourism" as other types of tourism (Light, 2017; Widawski & Olesniewicz, 2023; Astudillo et al., 2024).

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), cultural tourism is "a form of tourism activity in which the visitor's most important motivation is to learn, discover, experience, and consume both tangible and intangible products and attractions in a tourism destination" (22nd meeting of the General Committee, Chengdu, China, September 2017). (UNWTO, 2017). Therefore, "true" dark tourism or thanatourism, in which people travel due to a specific interest in (or desire for an encounter with) death, may be quite rare and is confined to marginal activities (Seaton, 1996; Light, 2017). Podoshen et al. (2015) therefore prefer to call this type of tourism "dystopian dark tourism." For example, Tunbridge & Ashworth (1996) prefer the term "dissonant heritage" as an alternative to "dark tourism" or "thanatourism." They define as those tourism resources where a legacy of atrocities has occurred, leaving different impressions on different groups (Knox, 2024). Another significant term is "difficult heritage," which is a specific type of dissonant heritage and refers to a heritage that threatens to disrupt collective identities and open social differences due to its association with suffering, conflict, oppression and/or trauma (Giergiel & Taczynska, 2024).

Other alternative terms include "dark heritage" (Kurisoo et al., 2024), "heritage that hurts" (Drvenkar et al., 2015) and "sensitive heritage" (Chebaiki-Adli & Chabbi-Chemrouk, 2019). In conclusion, it can be assumed that the experiences tourists have at dark sites have the potential to be profound and highly meaningful, and that they may elicit a wide range of responses (Yankholmes & McKercher, 2015). Finally, it is necessary to note the debate about the ethical

dimensions of dark tourism and thanatourism (Potts, 2012) – and thus to consider the broader question of whether it is acceptable to profit from death or the macabre (Garcia, 2012). Firstly, this type of tourism has a negative impact on the management of the local community's historical memory (Moravcıkova et al., 2025). Therefore, it is necessary to respect the local memory of these places through a correct representation of the reality, avoid the excessive commodification, and the respectful of the victims or their descendants. For example, in places where collective catastrophes have occurred, such as Auschwitz-Birkenau (Abraham et al., 2022) or Holocaust museums (Dresler & Fuchs, 2021), dark tourism should include victims and/or their descendants in the design of the attraction.

Second, the management of visits to places where the current suffering of victims is commercialized, such as poverty tourism, has generated debate in academia today. There is criticism of whether it is ethical to turn other people's misery and adverse conditions into a commodity (Freire-Medeiros, 2009). Therefore, these types of practices must be addressed from a social justice perspective, so that tourism contributes to raising awareness of problems and promoting dignity and equality in local communities. Thirdly, there is a consensus on the need for sensitivity and respect in presenting these sites to visitors (Strange & Kempa, 2003). Therefore, tourism destination managers should avoid excessive commercialization of these sites and seek a balance between education, authenticity, and memory with the needs of visitors (Walby & Piche, 2015). Thus, the presentation of heritage should include the original historical elements.

For example, Grek-Martin (2024), in analysing the Titanic museum in Belfast, concludes that tourist visits should be framed within authenticity. However, this museum avoids delving into the more controversial aspects of the past, such as the exploitation of workers, the social inequality, or the failure of the ship. Therefore, they recommend that the management of this type of heritage be framed within a perspective of authenticity and aligned with it.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS
### 1. Bibliometric analysis
The objective of bibliometrics is to analyse bibliographic data from a scientific field and present the most important results in a systematic way. This quantitative approach is widely used in library and information science (Martínez-López et al., 2018). This analysis enabled us to present the current state of the intellectual structure, as well as the emerging trends and key topics within a specific scientific field (Orts-Cardador et al., 2024). In order to visualize the scientific structure of this scientific discipline, the Visualization of Similarities Viewer (VOSviewer) tool is used.

It is a software tool widely used by scientific literature (Liu et al., 2022) that is aimed at creating, visualizing and exploring maps of a specific topic (Eck & Waltman, 2022). It is useful because it facilitates pragmatic data analysis through its robust graphical interface. VOSviewer is a very popular software to provides an in-depth analysis of the literature in small and medium-sized networks (Waltman & Van Eck, 2013). Due to its advantages it is widely used for quantitative review studies in the field of tourism and hospitality (Agramunt et al., 2020). In our case, this tool allows to analyse the database related to thanatourism, dark tourism and heritage. Therefore, it will serve to fulfil the proposed objectives of the current study. We will use this software with the objective of carrying out a descriptive analysis, based on co-authorships, co-citations; and a content analysis, based on authors' keywords. These words more fully represent the content of an article than "keywords plus" in a co-word analysis (Zhang et al., 2016).

In the field of bibliometrics and literature reviews, databases (Google Scholar, Web of Science and Scopus) are the most widely used sources of information. The three databases provide sufficient literature coverage in the field of social sciences (Harzing & Alakangas, 2016). However, Google Scholar was not included in this study due to its lack of transparency, data quality limitations, and the difficulties associated with conducting large-scale analyses (Waltam & Noyons, 2018).

Moreover, WoS helps to minimize duplication by providing cleaner data than Scopus (Strozzi et al., 2017). It is worth noting that we compared the WoS and Scopus databases, ultimately deciding not to select Scopus because it contains only 178 articles, 160 of which are also indexed in WoS. Furthermore, using multiple databases complicates information integration due to differences in their structures (for example, each database classifies information differently) (Bartol et al., 2014).

### 2 Search string
In bibliometric analyses, there are generally two methods for obtaining keywords (Chen & Xiao, 2016).

On the one hand, there is the macro approach, in which all keywords related to the scientific field are used, and the micro approach, which uses the most representative words from a given scientific field.

In our research, we have used the second alternative, combining the terms ("dark touris*" OR thanatouris*"). The reason for choosing the second alternative is that these two terms are the cornerstones of literature related to this scientific field (Light, 2017). Otherwise, choosing other terms related to this discipline could dilute the central concept.

Secondly, only papers in English were included, excluding book chapters, books, conference proceedings, editorial material, review papers, books, etc., following the recommendations of Terán-Yépez et al. (2020) and Acuña-Muñoz et al. (2025). The search for the terms under study was applied to the topic (title, abstract, authors' keyword and keyword plus) of the documents. Thirdly, to eliminate bias, the documents were carefully screened, and those not related to this scientific field were eliminated. Additionally, duplicate records were removed from the Excel spreadsheet. Based on these premises, the exploration in WoS was carried out in the month of December 2024, with a total of 548 articles being obtained. The first two papers to introduce the terms "dark tourism" and "thanatourism" are Foley & Lennon (1996), who introduced the former in the context of sites associated with the life and death of former U.S. President John F. Kennedy (JFK), and Seaton (1996), who introduced the latter and analysed the historical development of thanatoptic elements in travel.
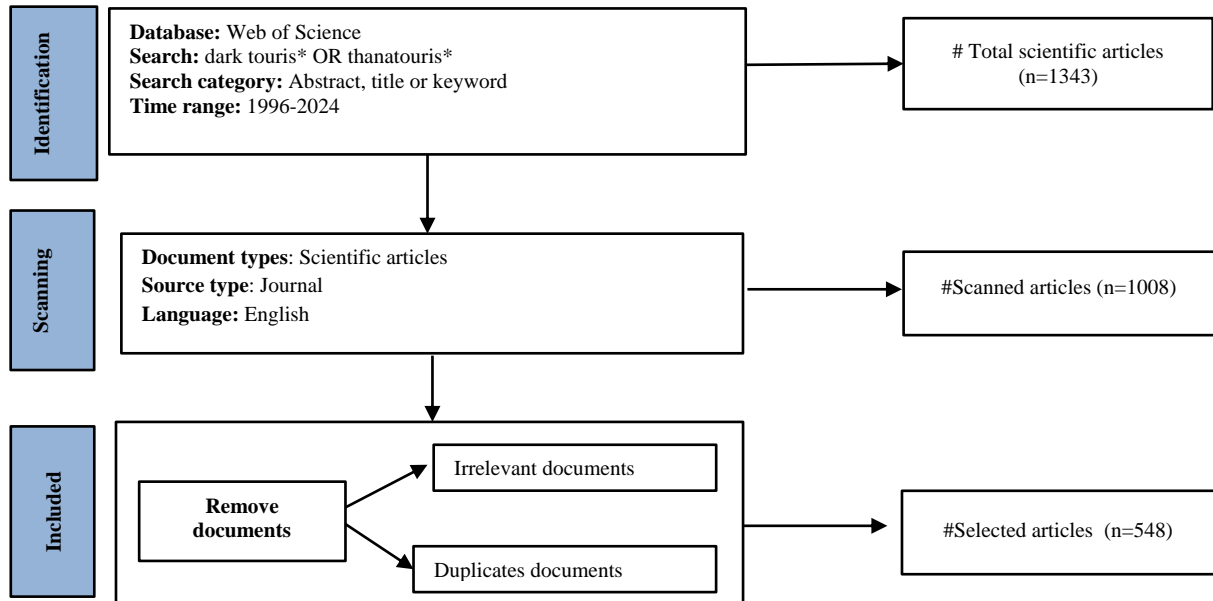
Figure 1. Review Protocol (Source: Own elaboration)

## RESULTS
### 1. Presentation of the Exploration

The sample of this study is made up of 548 articles, the result of the contribution of 987 authors affiliated to 562 academic institutions distributed among 78 countries (Table 3).

Table 3. Summary of Data (Source: Own elaboration with Web of Science data (2025)

| Data | |
|---|---|
| Number of articles | 548 |
| Number of citations | 16,809 |
| Number of journals | 78 |
| Number of authors | 987 |
| Number of institutions | 562 |
| Number of countries | 78 |
| Number of keywords | 1,798 |
| Study time | 1996- 2024 |

Figure 2 shows the temporal evolution of the characteristics of the database obtained. Recent interest in this scientific field stems from societal interest in learning (Yan et al., 2016) and enhanced curiosity and morbidity (Wang et al., 2024). Scholars, on the other hand, have increased their attention to this topic due to its complex nature and the ethical and moral questions it raises (Králová & Šperková, 2024).
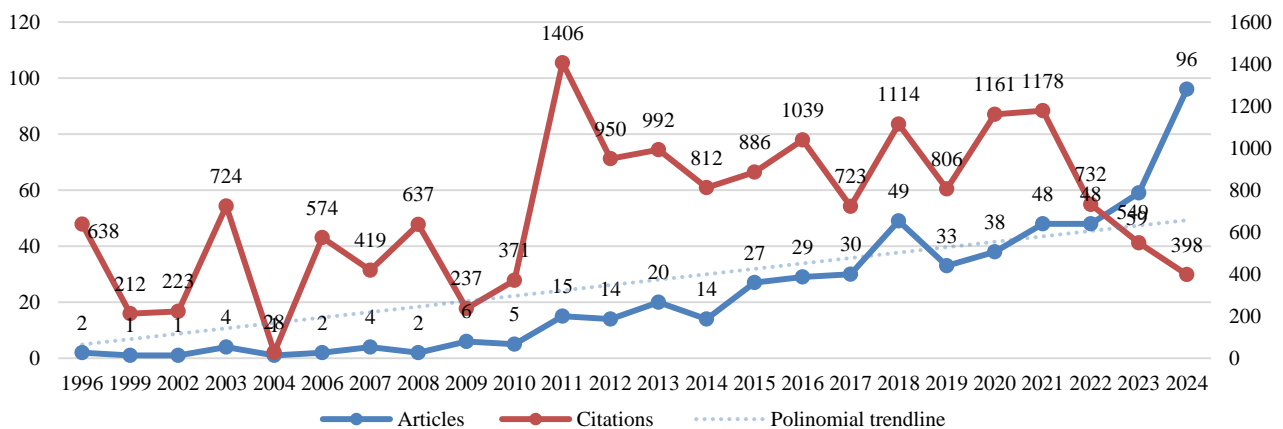


Figure 2. Temporal evolution of the scientific field (Source: Own elaboration with Web of Science data (2025)

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
### 1. Co-authorship Networks

The co-authorship analysis shows the collaboration networks between authors, organizations and countries that drive the development of knowledge in a given scientific field (Acedo et al., 2006; Cisneros et al., 2018). Following the

recommendations of Koseoglu (2016), the co-authorship of the authors has been used in the current analysis, since the authors remain stable over time, while their affiliations in the various countries or universities may change over time.

Table 4 shows the main characteristics of the ten most productive authors. Although all authors have a high number of citations, it should be noted that the number of citations alone is not a valid indicator for evaluating the solidity, originality or scientific value of the documents (Aksnes et al., 2019). For this reason, two indicators were employed: the h-index (Hirsch, 2005) and the number of citations per document (Costas & Bordons, 2007) based on the information provided by Web of Science. Based on the h-index, two authors have successful scientific careers (h-index >20). Based on the number of citations per document, all authors are highly cited researchers (C/A >14.42).

Table 4. Top Ten Most Productive Authors (Source: Own elaboration with Web of Science, 2025 processed with VOSviewer software)

| Author/s | A | C | 1st A | Last A | University | h-index (WoS) | C/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Lennon, John | 12 | 173 | 2007 | 2022 | Glasgow Caledonian University (United Kingdom) | 8 | 14.42 |
| Wang, Jinwey | 9 | 131 | 2018 | 2024 | Peking University (China) | 15 | 14.56 |
| Isaac, Rami Khalil | 8 | 393 | 2009 | 2019 | Breda University of Applied Sciences (Netherlands) | 17 | 49.13 |
| Stone, Philip | 7 | 917 | 2006 | 2022 | University of Lancashire (United Kingdom) | 12 | 131.00 |
| Zhang, Jie | 7 | 489 | 2016 | 2020 | Nanjing University (China) | 35 | 69.86 |
| Zheng, Chunchui | 7 | 349 | 2016 | 2023 | Guangzhou University (China) | 18 | 49.86 |
| Winter, Caroline | 7 | 267 | 2009 | 2015 | William Angliss Institute (Australia) | 11 | 38.14 |
| Qian, Lili | 7 | 172 | 2017 | 2024 | Hangzhou City University (China) | 40 | 24.57 |
| Korstanje, Maximiliano | 7 | 140 | 2011 | 2017 | Universidad de Palermo (Argentina) | 12 | 20.00 |
| Oren, Gila | 6 | 469 | 2011 | 2024 | College of Management Academic Studies (Israel) | 5 | 78.17 |

Note: A, total number of articles; C, number of article citations; 1st A, year of the first published article; Last A, year of the last published article. The h-index includes all the works of the authors.

The analysis of co-authorship networks for the entire period (1996–2024) reveals five scientific collaboration networks, four of which are national and intra-institutional in nature (Figure 3). Furthermore, it is noteworthy that all networks are currently active. Only authors who have published five or more papers and possess a link strength of ≥ 2 were included in the analysis. The first network (green) with a total of 699 citations emerged in 2009 and it is currently active. The researchers are Nawijn, Jeroen and Isaac, Rami Khalil from Breda University, both from Applied Sciences (Netherlands). The article with the highest number of citations is "Negative emotions in tourism: a meaningful analysis" (Nawijn & Biran, 2019). The authors analysed the effect of negative emotions on dark tourism, specifically in concentration camps. The results show that these negative emotions allow visitors to reflect on life and reconfigure memories and identities in order to reconcile themselves with past events. Among the practical implications, the authors recommend that, in educational visits in this type of tourism, negative emotions should predominate so that memory and remembrance prevail.

The second network (red) with a total of 641 citations emerged in 2016 and it is currently active. The researchers are Wang, Jinwei from Peking University (China), Qian, Lili from Hangzhou City University (China), Zheng, Chunhui from Guangzhou University (China), Zhang, Jie from Nanjing University (China) and Zhang, Honglei from Nanjing University (China). The article with the highest number of citations is "Investigating the motivation experience relationship in a dark tourism space: A case study of the Beichuan earthquake relics, China" (Yan et al., 2016). The authors analyse the effect of motivations (educational, leisure and curiosity) and emotional reactions on the experience of the place (moral, personal, knowledge and educational) of visitors to the memorial space of the Beichuan earthquake ruins (China). The results show that curiosity has a positive effect on all types of experiences, while leisure has a negative effect on the moral experience and education has a positive effect on it. On the other hand, emotional reaction has a positive effect on personal and moral experience. This implies that tourists with leisure-related motivations have lower levels of empathy than those with educational and curiosity motivations. Among the practical implications, the authors recommend that governments and destination marketing managers strike a balance between education and entertainment. In this way, an appropriate experience is provided for visitors who come with different needs and expectations. Furthermore, the authors endorse dark tourism as a form of local economic recovery after a disaster.

The third network (blue) with 473 citations emerged in 2011 and is currently active. The researchers are Oren, Gila from the College of Management Academic Studies (Israel) and Poria, Yaniv from Ben Gurion University (Israel). The article with the highest number of citations is the one titled "Sought experiences at (dark) heritage sites" (Biran et al., 2011). This article analysed dark tourism at Auschwitz II Birkenau, concentration camp, which was declared a WHS by UNESCO in 1979 and is known as "the pinnacle of European dark tourism" (Tarlow, 2005, p. 58). The results indicate, first, that tourists are primarily motivated by the desire for educational or emotional experiences rather than by "dark" motives, that is, an interest in death or tragedy. Second, perceptions differ between two groups: those who perceive the site as part of their heritage and those who do not. Among the practical recommendations, the authors suggest tailoring the offerings to tourists' perceptions of the site. For instance, for visitors who do not perceive Auschwitz as part of their personal heritage, the interpretation should facilitate emotional engagement while emphasizing the educational experience. For those who attribute personal significance to the site, interpretation should both enrich their knowledge and reflect their special connection to the place, allowing for an intense emotional experience.

The fourth network (yellow) with 172 citations emerged in 2018 and is currently active. The researchers are Sun, Jiaojiao from Suzhou University of Science and Technology (China) and Lv, Xingyang from Southwestern University Finance and Economics (China). The article with the highest number of citations is the "Feeling dark, seeing dark: Mind-

body in dark tourism" (Sun & Lv, 2021). The authors introduced the concept of embodiment in the context of Chernobyl dark tourism, according to which the human mind and experience are linked to the body (Thrift, 1997). To this end, they analysed the mind-body relationship through sensory experience using four types of studies. In the first, they analysed online reviews by tourists on their perception of photos of the plant; in the second, university students were asked to paint their perception of Chernobyl; in the third, the perception of university students about the accident was analysed qualitatively, and they were asked to evaluate two types of drawings (one lighter and one darker); and finally, participants were asked to read information about the Chernobyl accident and their perception of dark vs. light photos. The results show that individuals with negative feelings (mind) about the accident have greater darkness in their visual expressions (body) and, consequently, in their feelings. Among the practical implications, the authors recommend that destinations design dark tourism experiences for tourists by controlling the brightness to manipulate the pace of the experience, such as creating an appropriate amount of dark experiences in different places.

Finally, the fifth network (purple) with 113 citations emerged in 2017 and finally in 2023. The researchers are Xu, Honggang from Sun Yat Sen University (China) and Chen, Shengrong from Sichuan Normal University (China). The article with the highest number of citations is the "Resident attitudes towards dark tourism, a perspective of place-based identity motives" (Wang et al., 2019). The authors analysed the relationships between identity motives and the attitudes of local residents towards supporting the development of dark tourism, based on their location. To achieve this, they examined the perceptions of local residents who had experienced the Great Wenchuan Earthquake in China, drawing on theories of identity and social exchange (Andereck et al., 2005; Hagger et al., 2007). The results showed that tourists with a proactive attitude towards tourism and a stronger sense of place identity were more supportive of the development of dark tourism. The authors recommend that tourism destination managers eliminate the negative externalities of tourism to increase local residents' support for tourism and create sustainable employment.



Figure 3. Co-authorship Networks 1996–2024 (Source: Own elaboration with Web of Science data, 2025 processed with VOSviewer software)

## 2. Co-citation Analysis

Co-citation analysis is a scientific mapping technique that shows those publications, authors or journals that have been jointly cited by the publications in the database sample (Hjørland, 2013). The main objective is to reveal the scientific origin of a field of study (Rossetto et al., 2018), changes in the literature over time (Pelit & Katircioglu, 2022) and underlying themes (Liu et al., 2015). In our analysis, those documents have been considered as they had been cited jointly in at least 70 papers (Figure 4).

-Green cluster: *integrated supply-demand approach*. This cluster identifies those articles that analyse the multiple motivations of tourists who engage in dark tourism or thanatourism. Therefore, it is consistent with the integrated supply-demand perspective proposed by Sharpley (2005), Bowman & Pezzullo (2010), and Biran et al. (2011), which considers the multiple motivations of tourists who visit sites associated with death, such as education, entertainment, history, or heritage. One of the articles with the greatest academic relevance is "Sought experiences at (dark) heritage sites" by Biran et al. (2011). Based on a factorial analysis, the authors analyse the motivations of tourists who visit the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp. The proposed model is based on the "mortality mediation" model by Stone & Sharpley (2008); the four "shades" of dark tourism (pale tourism, grey tourism demand, grey tourism supply, and black tourism) by Sharpley (2005); and the analysis of the motivations of tourists who visit dark places (emotional, learning, and social relationships) based on Austin (2002).

A second article of academic relevance is "Progress in dark tourism and thanatourism research: An uneasy relationship with heritage tourism" by Light (2017). The author conceptually analyse research related to dark tourism and thanatourism, as well as the political and ideological dimensions. He based on Stone's (2006) supply perspective; Sharpley's (2005) four "shades" of dark tourism; postmodernism based on the postulates of Lennon & Foley (2000); and Stone & Sharpley's (2008) "mortality mediation" model. The author criticizes these postulates for not considering the complexity of the motivations of tourists who engage in dark tourism or thanatourism. Finally, the author concluded that each visitor will experience a site in different ways, so "dark" places will have a multitude of different meanings for different visitors.

A final paper of relevance in this cluster is "Benefits of visiting a 'dark tourism' site: The case of the Jeju April 3rd Peace Park, Korea" by Kang et al. (2012). Using a Pearson correlation table, the authors examined the perceptions of

tourists visiting the April 3$^{rd}$ Peace Park on Jeju Island, South Korea, a site that commemorates and recalls one of the most destructive episodes in modern Korean history. The authors draw on the benefit-based approach used by Driver et al. (1987) and Manning (1999), and the integrated supply and demand perspective of Strange & Kempa (2003).

-Red cluster: *supply or demand perspective*. This cluster identifies articles that analyse dark tourism or thanatourism, considering at all times that tourists who visit these places always have a motivation related to death and darkness (demand perspective) or those that relate each type of tourist infrastructure to a specific motivation (supply perspective). One of the articles with the greatest academic relevance is Stone & Sharpley (2008), which introduces the concept of the "mortality mediation model." The authors relate dark tourism to Rojek's (1993) perspective of postmodernity and Seaton's (1996) critique of this perspective, arguing that dark tourism is not contemporary but has its origins in the Middle Ages. According to Seaton (1996), it is a long-standing cultural tradition that exists in all societies and that was particularly foregrounded in Christian culture within Western Europe. It is a discursive field known as "thanatopsis," which includes all the signifying forms of representation, symbolization, and material evidence through which ideas of death are communicated to an individual in time and space within a given society. Finally, Stone & Sharpley (2008) based his postulates on Miles' (2002) spectrum of dark tourism supply and Sharpley's (2005) four 'shades' of dark tourism.

A second article of academic relevance is "A dark tourism spectrum: towards a typology of death and macabre related tourist sites, attractions, and exhibitions" by Stone (2006). The authors introduced the spectrum of dark tourism, consisting of seven stages, each with a certain degree of intensity. They base this on the integrated supply and demand perspective of Strange & Kempa (2003) and Sharpley (2005), the supply approach of Miles (2002), and the findings of Seaton (1999), according to which dark tourism is not static but evolves as changes occur in the overall political and cultural climate.

A final paper of relevance in this cluster is "War and thanatourism: Waterloo 1815–1914" by Seaton (1999). The author examines the historical evolution of Waterloo as a major tourist attraction. The author based their work on the concept of "thanatourism" proposed by Seaton (1996) and he accepted that thanatourism has its origins in the Middle Ages. Furthermore, based on Smith (1998), he pointed out how war has served to promote tourism in the affected region. He concluded with Gramsci's theory of ideology (1971), in which hegemonic states and religious organizations export symbolism and practices that penetrate deep into the popular consciousness. In this way, thanatourism and war tourism are icons of the hegemonic practice of triumphant national identity.
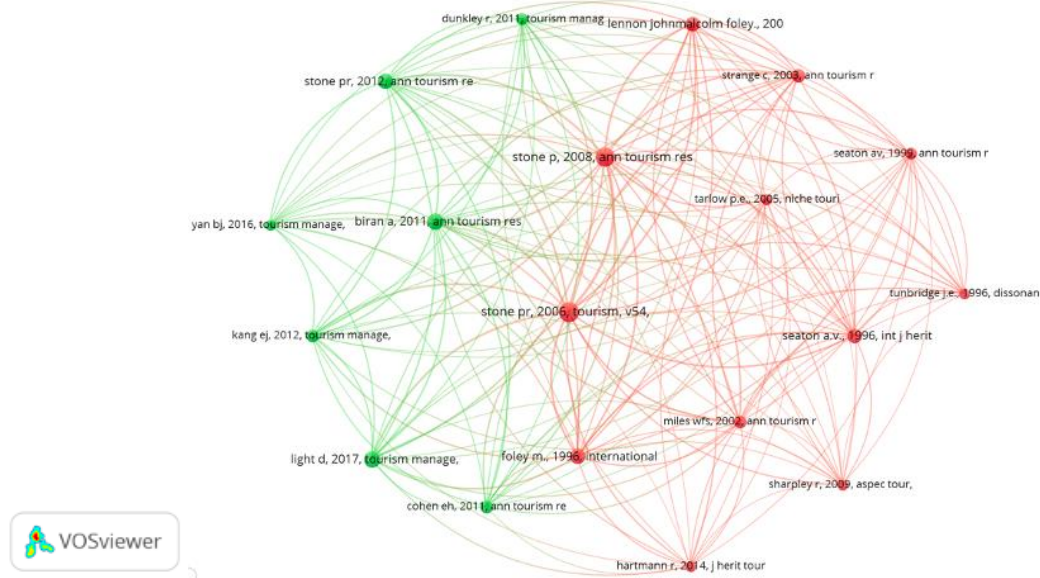


Figure 4. Co-citation References Analysis (Source: Own elaboration with Web of Science (2025) processed with VOSviewer software)

### 3. Co-word Analysis

Co-word analysis shows the interaction of keywords in the papers of the scientific field to be explored (de la Hoz-Correa et al., 2018). The main objective is to suggest the most prominent influential topics and evaluate future research trends (Su & Lee, 2010; Leung et al., 2017). Web of Science provides two types of keywords.

Firstly, "author keywords," which are the keywords provided by the authors. Secondly, "keywords plus," which are the keywords produced automatically by Web of Science from the titles of cited references in analysed documents (Zhang et al., 2016). Following the recommendations of Zhang et al. (2016), only "author keywords" were used in our analysis, as "Keywords Plus" are less comprehensive in representing an article's content. Keywords with a minimum occurrence of ten were considered, resulting in 19 keywords organized into four distinct clusters (Figure 5).

### 3.1. Keywords Co-occurrence Analysis

The analysis by keyword groups allows us to identify five relevant clusters of heterogeneous keywords (Figure 5 and Table 5), with the key concepts of "dark tourism", "tourism" and "experience" having greater relevance. Firstly, the green cluster has "dark tourism" as its most representative node, linking more closely to the nodes "emotion," and "experience" (link

strength ≥ 55). Secondly, the blue cluster has "thanatourism" as its most representative node, linking more closely to the nodes "tourism," "death" and "culture" (link strength ≥ 12). Thirdly, the red cluster has "heritage" as its most representative node, linking more closely to the nodes "memory," "museums," "holocaust" and "authenticity" (link strength ≥ 11).
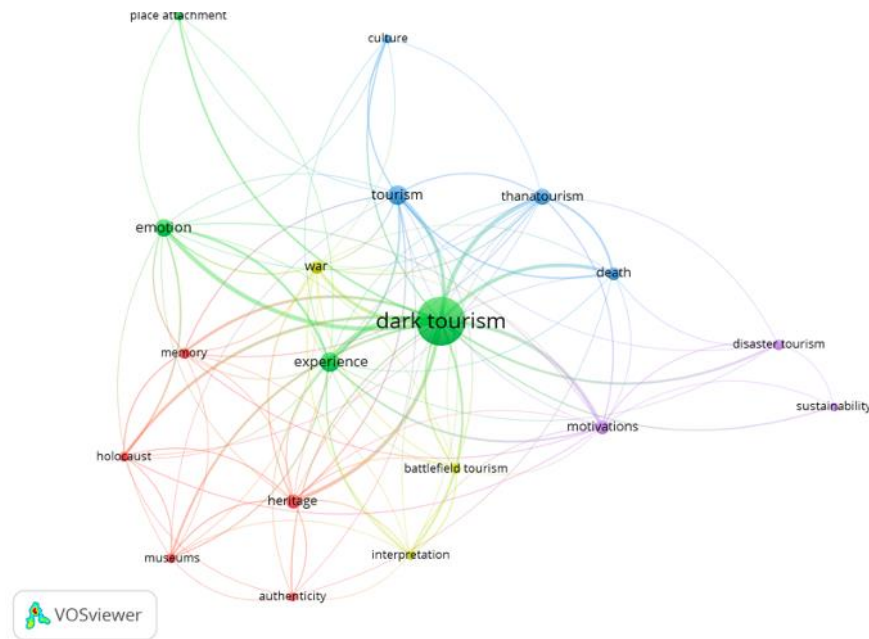


Figure 5. Co-occurrence Analysis (author keywords) (Source: Own elaboration with Web of Science, 2024 processed with VOSviewer software)

Fourthly, the purple cluster has "motivations" as its most representative node, linking more closely to the nodes "disaster tourism" and "sustainability" (link strength ≥ 5). Finally, the yellow cluster has "war" as its most representative node, linking more closely to the nodes "battlefield tourism" and "interpretation" (link strength ≥ 25).

Table 5. Top 20 Keywords from Co-word Analysis
(Source: Own elaboration with Web of Science (2024) processed with VOSviewer software)

| Rank | Keywords | 1996–2014 | | 2015–2024 | | 1996–2024 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | C | TLS | C | TLS | C | TLS |
| 1 | Dark Tourism | 47 | 234 | 256 | 1145 | 303 | 1379 |
| 2 | Tourism | 14 | 90 | 36 | 167 | 50 | 257 |
| 3 | Experience | 5 | 26 | 44 | 208 | 49 | 234 |
| 4 | Emotion | 5 | 24 | 36 | 170 | 41 | 194 |
| 5 | Thanatourism | 18 | 82 | 17 | 72 | 35 | 154 |
| 6 | Heritage | 7 | 43 | 20 | 86 | 27 | 129 |
| 7 | Motivations | 5 | 23 | 21 | 100 | 26 | 123 |
| 8 | Death | 11 | 62 | 11 | 50 | 22 | 112 |
| 9 | War | 8 | 49 | 13 | 63 | 21 | 112 |
| 10 | Memory | 3 | 13 | 14 | 64 | 17 | 77 |
| 11 | Disaster Tourism | 1 | 4 | 14 | 68 | 15 | 72 |
| 12 | Holocaust | 5 | 15 | 9 | 43 | 14 | 58 |
| 13 | Battlefield Tourism | 5 | 29 | 8 | 36 | 13 | 65 |
| 14 | Museums | 2 | 12 | 10 | 45 | 12 | 57 |
| 15 | Interpretation | 4 | 21 | 7 | 41 | 11 | 62 |
| 16 | Culture | 3 | 15 | 8 | 35 | 11 | 50 |
| 17 | Sustainability | -- | -- | 10 | 54 | 10 | 54 |
| 18 | Place Attachment | -- | -- | 10 | 49 | 10 | 49 |
| 19 | Authenticity | 2 | 8 | 8 | 40 | 10 | 48 |
| 20 | Identity | 2 | 10 | 7 | 43 | 9 | 53 |
| | **Total Keywords** | 204 | | 1513 | | 1717 | |

Note: C, occurrences; TLS: Total Link Strength

Figure 6 presents the overlay map, highlighting recurring and emerging themes. In this context, the green node represents the most recent themes, with the terms "experience," "emotion," and "place attachment" emerging since 2020. On the one hand, this is because recent studies have observed how places associated with death and tragedy have the power to produce deep emotional experiences in visitors (Ashraf et al., 2024; Cornelis & Strijbosch, 2024; Talebzadeh et al., 2024). Although all tourist experiences involve some type of emotion, the emotions that drive them are different from those

of other types of tourism, such as grief, disgust, fear, anger, anxiety, humiliation, or disapproval (Králová & Šperková, 2024). On the other hand, these emotions are not static but have different meanings depending on the relationship and attachment to the place of different groups of tourists (Aggarwal et al., 2024; Cifci et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024).
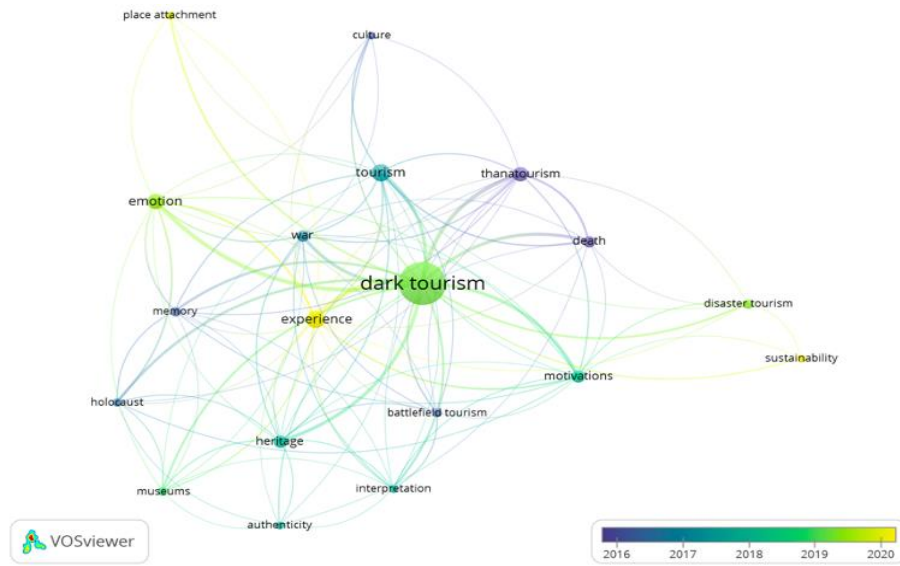


Figure 6. Temporal evolution of co-occurrence Analysis (author keywords)
(Source: Own elaboration with Web of Science (2024) processed with VOSviewer software)

Place attachment is a two-dimensional concept, made up of place identity and place dependence (Prayag et al., 2018). While place identity refers to identification with a place, place dependence refers to the relationship that is formed with the place due to its unique characteristics (Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Ramkissoon et al., 2015). Finally, Table 6 summarizes the main contributions of each thematic group, as well as the publications of greatest academic significance.

Table 6. Main contributions of each cluster
(Source: Own elaboration with Web of Science (2024) processed with VOSviewer software)

| Cluster | Main Contributions | Main Publications |
|---|---|---|
| Green: emotions in dark tourism experience | -The emotions formed vary among different groups of tourists.<br>-Attachment to the place allows for the creation of different emotions.<br>-The emotions aroused by this type of tourism are unique compared to other tourist experiences. | Yuksel & Yuksel (2007); Kidron (2013); Nawijin et al. (2015) Prayag et al. (2018); Martini & Buda (2020); Patterson et al. (2024). |
| Blue: motivation for the death of dark tourists | -The encounter with death as a tourist motivation in the context of dark tourism is marginal.<br>-Tourists' motivations should be analysed to establish differentiated offers for each tourist segment.<br>- The secularisation of society has forced the relationship with death out of the public sphere. | Stone (2006); Stone & Sharpley (2008); Stone (2012); Podoshen (2013); Yan et al. (2016); Stone & Grebenar (2022); Yousaf & Kim (2023). |
| Red: authenticity in dark heritage | -The excessive commercialization of dark tourism has negative consequences for the authenticity of the tourist experience.<br>-Dark tourism allows for the representation of a specific tourist destination's historical and cultural heritage.<br>-The managers of these tourist destinations must prioritize authentic and historical representation over entertainment. | Strange & Kempa (2003); Biran et al. (2011); Cohen (2011); Kang et al. (2012); Hartmann (2014); Gardiner et al. (2022). |
| Purple: disaster tourism | -Disaster tourism is a subtype of dark tourism where visitors interact with destinations affected by catastrophic events.<br>-Tourists' motives for visiting generally include curiosity, knowledge, commemoration of victims, and adventure.<br>-Site management should seek a balance between respect for victims and tourism promotion. | Biran et al. (2014); Ashworth & Isaac (2015); Isaac & Cakmak (2016); Reddy et al. (2020); Foroudi et al. (2021); Dresler (2024); Yan et al. (2024). |
| Yellow: battlefield tourism | -War tourism is a subtype of dark tourism where visitors visit war memorials, war museums, battle re-enactments, and battlefield tours.<br>-War tourism is used by some historic sites as a form of national pride.<br>-War tourism allows descendants to connect with their historical and family roots. | Seaton (1999); Winter (2009); Dunkley et al. (2011); Hyde & Hartman (2011); Iliev (2021); Quang et al. (2024). |

### 3.2. Keywords Cluster Analysis

Green cluster *emotions in dark tourism experience*: This group of articles analyses the emotions aroused by places related to death and darkness. Furthermore, the role of place attachment is highlighted as a key factor in explaining the variation in emotional responses among different visitor groups (Prayag et al., 2018). One of the most academically

relevant articles is that of Kidron (2013), who analysed the motivations and experiences of Israeli descendants of Holocaust survivors who take family trips to heritage and atrocity sites with their surviving parents. To achieve this objective, the authors interviewed these survivors and their relatives, who travelled to the heritage sites where the events had occurred (for example, concentration camps). The results show that while the interviewed groups shared an interest in historical and cultural heritage, the place allowed them to connect with the descendants in a deeply emotional way. Thus, the authors recommend to the managers of these destinations that these places should preserve the heritage legacy through the transmission of history and culture to future generations with the aim of reconnecting individuals with the past.

A second important research is provided by Nawijn & Fricke (2015), who analyse the emotional responses of Dutch visitors who visited concentration camps that commemorated the Nazi Holocaust in the Netherlands –specifically those located in Vught, Westerbork and Amersfoort, which were built during the German occupation. The authors observed that there were differences between those tourists who had a greater attachment to the place. The results show that the main feelings were intensity, repulsion, shock, compassion and sadness. However, those people closest to the Holocaust had more intense feelings of pride, love, joy, inspiration, emotion and affection. Furthermore, negative emotions (especially sadness and shock) were stronger predictors of return intentions and positive word-of-mouth than positive emotions. Among the practical implications, sites associated with death should focus not on negative emotional responses, but rather on the history of the site and its significance and place in society. The last research to be highlighted in the cluster is the recent article by Patterson et al. (2024). The authors compared domestic and international tourists visiting the Gur-e-Amir Mausoleum in the Central Asian city of Samarkand, Uzbekistan, a dark tourism destination.

The results revealed a range of emotions during the visit, with the majority of visitors expressing positive emotions on a scale from good to excellent, including feelings of satisfaction, awe, excitement, and admiration at the end of the visit. However, for local tourists, the visit was religiously related, including prayer and meditation.

-Blue cluster: *Motivation for the death of Dark Tourists.* The specific journey undertaken with the aim of experiencing a close encounter with death in places associated with thanatourism, or dark tourism, is marginal and is usually undertaken for other reasons, such as education or history. In this sense, this group of articles focuses on analysing tourists' dark motivations (Podoshen et al., 2015). One of the most academically relevant articles is that of Stone (2006). The authors analysed dark tourism from a supply point of view with the aim of advising companies how to explore tourist demand and their motivations. For this objective, the authors propose the dark tourism spectrum, made up of seven stages, in which each one has a certain degree of intensity. For example, the least dark stage is associated with places that recreate atrocities, in which the offer is focused on entertainment and has a greater amount of commercial and tourist infrastructure. On the other hand, the darkest stage is associated with places where atrocities have truly occurred. In this stage, the offer is focused on conservation and remembrance and, consequently, the infrastructure is authentic and original, since it does not have a commercial purpose. However, this spectrum is not static. Depending on their cultural perceptions, visitors can be placed at different stages of the scale. The authors advise destination managers to preserve the originality of their offerings to provide an authentic representation of history.

Other research of academic relevance is that of Stone & Sharpley (2008). The authors propose a theoretical model to analyse the motivations of tourists who visit dark heritage sites that serves as a basis for deepening the empirical analysis of dark tourism. The objective of the model is to explore the relationship between sociocultural perspectives on mortality and the potential of dark tourism as a means of coping with death in modern societies. The authors conclude that, due to the secularization of society, aspects related to death have been relegated to the private sphere. Therefore, dark tourism allows death to return to the public sphere and discourse and allows for a social confrontation with death.

The last research to be highlighted in the cluster is the recent work by Yousaf & Kim (2024). The authors analyse the relationship between three dark personality traits (narcissism, machiavellianism, and psychopathy) and the consumption of online reviews on dark tourism sites. To do so, they analysed online reviews from 12 dark and 12 non-dark destinations. The results show that personality traits influence how relationships with dark places are established. The three personality types influenced both review generation and review consumption. Among the practical implications, the authors recommend that managers of dark destinations analyse the personality traits of potential tourists in order to establish differentiated offerings.

-Red cluster: *authenticity in dark heritage*. This cluster is focused on the analysis of authenticity in dark tourism in places with important historical and cultural heritage. Authenticity is conceptualized as originally being real (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006) and expressed in the perceived genuineness of the experience (Zhang et al., 2018). Therefore, authenticity is related to the tourist experience at heritage sites in the original historical setting or place, with the original objects (MacCannell, 1973). In this area, commodification in dark tourism and thanatourism becomes particularly relevant as debates are created around the ethical dimensions of profit making through the commercialization of dark places (Foley & Lennon, 1996; Biran et al., 2011). The problem stems from the fact that many heritage attractions present a stereotypical version of history that prioritizes entertainment over education and historical accuracy, so that the messages presented to visitors are selective or biased (Bowman & Pezzullo, 2010; Light, 2017). Therefore, commodification has negative implications for authenticity and/or historical accuracy (Bai & Chen, 2024; Heuermann & Chhabra, 2014).

One of the articles with the greatest academic relevance is that of Strange & Kempa's (2003) study, which focused on Robben Island prison in South Africa. This prison was used to imprison opponents of the apartheid regime, which brought negative political consequences, such as repression and racial injustice. The results show that this place, once converted into a historical museum, has played a crucial role in the narrative of national reconciliation of those who were oppressed. Thus, this museum plays an educational role in overcoming racial differences in South Africa and creating a nondivergent interpretation of history, which is part of a broader political effort to create a just multi-ethnic

future for South Africa. In conclusion, these places can help facilitate feelings of peace and reconciliation and achieve closure, which can be important when a tragic story has divided the society (Stone, 2006).

Other research of academic relevance is that of Cohen et al. (2011), who introduced the term *in populo* to describe those places that commemorate the victims of a tragedy far from where the events occurred. The context of the study was the memorial museum in Yad Vashem (Jerusalem), established in 1953 by the State of Israel, which is aimed at remembering the victims and being a source of culture and education. The objective was to analyse the perception of teachers interested in the Nazi Holocaust, with two main aspects: evaluative and sociological. The results show that teachers were highly satisfied with the experience because they perceived it as a legitimate and authentic place to learn about the Holocaust as it faithfully represented reality. Therefore, the authentic representation of dark heritage in this museum is an important motive for visiting it. Participants value on-site interpretation as a tool for enhancing their educational experience and knowledge, and as a source of emotional experience and connection to one's personal heritage (Biran et al., 2011).

The last research to be highlighted in the cluster is the recent research by Gardiner et al. (2022). Authors analyse the demand for a tourist attraction that recreates the history of the Middle Ages in Queensland (Australia). The objective was to investigate consumer opinions on the authenticity achieved in staging historical heritage tourism experiences. Thus, through structured interviews with tourists exploring this tourist attraction, researchers examine two fundamental aspects. First, they evaluate authenticity through the appropriate recreation of culture and history. Second, they explore the interest in dark tourism, analysing the reasons behind the visit, including dark aspects such as the atrocities of the time. The results show that these two aspects have a positive effect on the perceived value of the tourist experience. Among the practical implications, the authors demonstrate how the staging of historical experiences can be achieved without relying on authentic locations.

-Purple cluster: *disaster tourism*. This cluster focuses on the analysis of disaster tourism. This type of tourism is a subtype of dark tourism where visitors interact with destinations that have been affected by catastrophic events such as earthquakes, floods, volcanic eruptions, and hurricanes (Fountain & Cradock-Henry, 2020; Min et al., 2020). One of the most academically relevant articles is that of Biran et al. (2014), which analysed the motivations and intentions of potential tourists to visit Sichuan (China). This tourist destination is popular, apart from its historical and gastronomic legacy, for having suffered one of the most terrible earthquakes in history in 2008, housing remains related to this disaster such as Tangjiashan Lake. Tourists' motivations include safety, curiosity, commemoration of the victims, and accessibility (as pull factors) and fun, recreation, prestige, escape, and relaxation (as push factors). Among behavioural intentions, the authors identified three types of segments: leisure-oriented people, dark tourism-oriented people, and those seeking to combine dark disaster sites with a leisure itinerary. Among the practical implications, the authors recommend that promotional messages seek a balance between natural and historical sites. Moreover, they recommend the introduction of measures to support the local community.

Other research of academic relevance is that of Yankovska & Hannam (2014). The authors analyse the perceptions of tourists visiting the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone (Ukraine). This site has experienced exponential growth within the context of dark tourism since the mid-1990s, when radiation levels began to decline. The objective of the study is to investigate tourist experiences in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone from the perspective of tour guides and travel agents. The results show that two groups exist. On the one hand, those aged 18 to 28 were more focused on strong emotions such as adventure and fun, while those over 28 focused on commemorative and educational aspects. Among the practical implications, the authors highlight the tension between respectful remembrance and the commercial exploitation of the tragedy.

The latest research to be highlighted in the cluster is the recent research by Yan et al. (2024). The authors analysed the differences in tourist perception between tourists with dark and non-dark motivations (recreational or educational) visiting the site of the earthquake in Sichuan, China. Four dimensions related to tourists' emotional responses were identified: empathy with the victims, gratitude for not being involved, knowledge, and education. The results show that empathy is the predominant emotional experience, while education is the least important. On the other hand, dark tourists have a deeper emotional response, especially in empathy with the victims. Among the practical outcomes, the authors recommend improving educational interpretation at disaster sites to enrich the cognitive experience without undermining the emotional one.

-Yellow cluster: *battlefield tourism.* This cluster focuses on identifying articles related to battlefield tourism. This type of tourism is a subtype of dark tourism, where visitors visit war memorials, war museums, battle re-enactments, and battlefield tours (Seaton & Lennon, 2004). One of the most academically relevant articles is that of Seaton (1999). The authors analyse the evolution of Waterloo as a tourist attraction. The Battle of Waterloo was a battle that took place on June 18, 1815, near Waterloo, Belgium. This conflict pitted the French army, commanded by Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, against the British, Dutch, and German troops led by the Duke of Wellington. Using MacCannell's (1976) model, the paper analyses how a tourist site has become a destination of quasi-religious significance.

For example, building monuments, placing commemorative plaques, publicizing the battle site or representing cultural objects in everyday life far from their original locations. The authors conclude that tourism in this area has evolved from visitors with personal interests to becoming a place with emerging recreational tourism, with visits related to historical or educational reasons. Among the practical implications, the authors recommend that tourist destinations associated with battles follow this process of sacralization with the aim of increasing tourism in the area.

Another study of academic significance is that of Dunkley et al. (2011). The authors analyzed tourists' perceptions of visits to sites associated with the First World War, such as war cemeteries and trenches, in both Great Britain and Germany. The findings indicate that tourists with an emotional connection to the site undertook the tour in search of identity through family history. Other motivations were related to learning, social interaction, or the physical experience of the sites as a means to better understand the war. Among the practical implications, the authors emphasize the need to adapt tourist experiences to the motivations of different visitor groups and highlight the importance of providing an

authentic and respectful interpretation of historical events. The latest research to be highlighted in the cluster is the recent article by Quang et al. (2024). The authors analysed the tourist experience from online reviews on TripAdvisor about visitors to the Cu Chi Tunnels (Vietnam). These tunnels were used in the context of the First and Second Indochina Wars by the Viet Minh resistance. The results show both positive and negative feelings. Positive feelings include empathy for the war, satisfaction with the tour, the opportunity offered, the uniqueness of the site, and the qualifications of the tour guides. On the other hand, regarding the negative aspects, they highlight disrespectful behaviour, boredom, poor guide training, biased content, and a poor experience in the tunnels. Among the practical implications, the authors recommend improving the technical training of guides, as well as their empathy with visitors. Furthermore, biased content in the information provided should be avoided and diverse perspectives should be included.

## DISCUSSION

Several studies have identified a relationship between thanatourism and dark tourism through bibliometric analysis (Ogretmenoglu et al., 2022; Pandita et al., 2024; Tarifa-Fernández et al., 2022; Rasool et al., 2025). However, these studies present several gaps that the current research seeks to address. First, regarding the literature review, they do not identify the three main approaches used to analyze the motivations of tourists visiting such sites. In this respect, these works are limited to a descriptive analysis of previous publications in the field, without engaging with existing theoretical frameworks.

Three perspectives are identified in this study: the supply-side approach, represented by Stone's (2006) dark tourism spectrum; the demand-side approach, grounded in the postmodernist perspective of Lennon & Foley (2000) and in the mortality mediation thesis of Stone & Sharpley (2008); and the integrated supply–demand approach, based on Sharpley's (2005) four types of dark tourism: pale tourism, grey tourism demand, grey tourism supply, and black tourism.

Second, the search terms are ambiguous, identifying different types of terms related to dark tourism and thanatourism. This can dilute the central concept of the original terms and fail to correctly identify the different lines of research or the scientific structure of dark tourism and thanatourism. For example, Rasool et al. (2025) includes "ghost tourism," Tarifa-Fernández et al. (2022) includes "grief tourism," Ogretmenoglu et al. (2022) only includes "dark tourism" without including "thanatourism," and Pandita et al. (2024) includes "atrocity tourism," "morbid tourism," and "black spot tourism."

Third, with respect to the co-citation analysis, the results indicate that the scientific structure comprises two main lines of research: one related to the integrated supply–demand approach and the other focused on either the supply or demand perspective. Document co-citation analysis was conducted, as it is considered the most appropriate method for mapping the intellectual structure of a given field (Fauzi, 2023). However, only Ogretmenoglu et al. (2022) and Pandita et al. (2024) conducted author co-citation analyses without identifying the foundational or seminal works. Finally, in contrast to these previous studies, the present study more consistently identifies the most productive authors through co-authorship analysis, allowing for the observation of different collaboration networks among them.

## CONCLUSION
### Theoretical

This research aims to identify past research and future trends concerning dark tourism and thanatourism. The main objective is to identify the current state of research on this topic, the theoretical foundations and emerging themes. Dark tourism and thanatourism have attracted an increase in academic interest in recent years due to the importance tourists place on new tourist attractions associated with tragic events such as death, tragedy, atrocity, war and natural calamities (Lewis et al., 2021). Different investigations show different reasons for visiting destinations related to dark tourism and thanatourism. These reasons are curiosity (Biran et al., 2014), education and learning (Kamber et al., 2016), interest in history (Yankholmes & McKercher, 2015), heritage (Light, 2017) and specific dark motives (Stone, 2009).

In order to correctly understand the motivations of tourists who engage in this type of tourism, the literature has established three approaches: *supply approach, demand approach* and *integrated supply-demand approach*. The latter is the one that most deeply understands the different motivations of tourists.

In recent years, an increasing number of terms have been used to refer to visits to dark sites or places where disasters have occurred. These terms, however, have generated confusion and ambiguity. A bibliometric analysis is therefore required to clarify the terminology, tourist motivations, and supply-related aspects.

Accordingly, the main objective of this study is to visualize the intellectual structure and future research directions concerning the relationship between dark tourism, thanatourism, and heritage during the period 1996–2024. Using the VOSviewer software—which offers advantages over traditional analytical methods by enabling a visual exploration of bibliometric data—the analysis identifies co-authorship networks (O1), co-citation networks (O2), and co-word networks (O3). The resulting clusters and their interrelationships reveal the foundational themes of the academic literature and the principal research topics in the fields of dark tourism and thanatourism.

The findings of this research include the proliferation of thanatourism and dark tourism studies in the last decade, increasing scientific production up to 8 times in the period 2016-2024 (Figure 2). The reason is because an increasing number of tourists are visiting these sites not only for reasons relating to death or morbidity and also, for historical education, reflection on national identity, and appreciation of the cultural heritage that these sites represent.

The analysis reveals the United Kingdom and China to be the countries that contribute the most to the scientific literature (Table 4). Furthermore, the co-authorship networks reveal four distinct groups: two from China, one from the Netherlands and one from Israel. Three of these networks are currently active. Co-citation analysis allowed us to identify three different clusters or groups of documents (Figure 4) that support the theoretical foundations of the subject

under study (O2). The first cluster is identified with the theme *integrated supply-demand approach*, which groups together foundational articles on the third perspective analysed. Therefore, it analyses the multiple motivations of tourists who engage in dark tourism or thanatourism. We highlight the research by *Biran et al. (2011)* based on Austin (2002), Sharpley (2005) and Stone & Sharpley (2008); *Kang et al. (2012)* based on Driver et al. (1987), Manning (1999) and Strange & Kempa (2003); and *Light (2017)* based on Lennon & Foley (2000), Sharpley (2005), Stone (2006) and Stone & Sharpley (2008). The second cluster is identified with the theme *supply or demand perspective*. This cluster groups together foundational articles on the first and second perspectives analysed.

Therefore, they consider that tourists who visit these places always have a motivation related to death and darkness (demand perspective) or those that relate each type of tourist infrastructure to a specific motivation (supply perspective). We highlight the research by *Seaton (1999)* based on Smith (1998), Seaton (1996) and Gramsci's theory of ideology (1971); *Stone (2006)* based on Seaton (1999), Miles (2002), Strange & Kempa (2003) and Sharpley (2005); and *Stone & Sharpley (2008)* based on Rojek (1993), Seaton (1996), Miles (2002) and Sharpley (2005).

The identification of current lines and emerging research themes reveals that research on dark tourism and thanatourism is complex due to the different motivations of tourists and the multiple offerings related to this type of tourism (O3). The co-occurrence analysis shows the relevance of research related to the themes: *emotions in dark tourism experience*, *motivation for the death of dark tourists*, *authenticity in dark heritage*, *disaster tourism*, and *battlefield tourism* (Table 6 and Figure 5). Furthermore, the overlay map (Figure 6) shows that the emerging theme in this scientific field is related to emotions in dark tourism experience. This is because recent studies have observed how places associated with death and tragedy have the power to produce deep emotional experiences in visitors.

Therefore, destination managers are creating new offerings to improve the tourist experience and adapt to new consumer segments. The reason is because the emotions that drive the dark tourism and thanatourism are different from those of other types of tourism, such as grief, disgust, fear, anger, anxiety, humiliation, or disapproval.

**Practical**

This study has a number of management implications. Firstly, the results show that the increase in interest in heritage places related to dark tourism has caused an increase in the commodification of these areas. This can cause two problems. On the one hand, so-called "visitor anesthesia" (Ashworth, 2004), because increased exposure to an atrocious past can lead to a loss of human sensitivity and an acceptance of atrocity and suffering (Mionel, 2019).

On the other hand, a prioritization of entertainment and diversion at the expense of education and historical accuracy, which can lead to a partial view of history and a dehumanization of the victims (Light, 2017; Lischer, 2019). The literature considers that respect for, and sensitivity toward, the victims in dark tourism and thanatourism is a fundamental pillar (Ashworth, 1996; Beech, 2001; Seaton, 2001; Braithwaite & Leiper, 2010). Therefore, we recommend that tourism destination managers limit the negative impact of tourism on the historical environment through the promotion of educational value, authentic cultural experiences and respect for history and memory (Hryhorczuk, 2019).

Secondly, collective memory, according to Zhang et al. (2018), refers to an active past that constitutes and maintains national identities (Bell, 2003; Olick, 1999). Heritage tourism reinforces social cohesion as a means of representing collective memory with the aim of telling national stories (Dang, 2021; Frew & White, 2011). Specifically, it is an important issue that emerges in dark touristic and thanatouristic places because it legitimizes national memory through the exposure to cultural, educational and commemorative aspects of an atrocious past (Knox, 2006). Thus, it is necessary to balance two fundamental aspects: one concerning remembrance as a form of cohesion (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996) and the other involving the forgetting of a bad phase in the history of a people (Light, 2017).

According to Mionel (2019), it is necessary to forget the disturbing elements of the atrocious past of a dark place. Thus, they recommend to present a series of messages aimed at the construction and promotion of a shared memory. This help to foster national reconciliation and healing between social groups and, ultimately, not to repeat the mistakes of the past (Beech, 2009; Simic, 2009; Nagle, 2012). Therefore, places of death and suffering can also play an important role in constructing a memory of national identification and fostering loyalty to the political entity of the state (Lelo & Jamal, 2013; Simone-Charteris et al., 2013). Collective memory is therefore an emerging theme within tourism studies (Causevic & Lynch, 2011; Zhang et al., 2018), with dark tourism and thanatourism having an important policy function as including places of collective/national memory (Allar, 2013; Bird, 2013; Yankholmes & McKercher, 2015; Kennell et al., 2018). There are a number of examples in the literature that analyse historical heritage as a source of national reconciliation, such as the concentration camps in Nazi Germany (Loizeau & Leleu, 2019), genocide in Rwanda (Cook, 2006), Cambodia (Hughes, 2017), ex-Yugoslavia (Kennell et al., 2018), Korea (Vaddi, 2023), Colombia (Castro, 2023) and Ukraine (Leahy, 2024) and apartheid in South Africa (Anderson & Daya, 2022).

Finally, it is recommended that measures be implemented to enhance the authenticity of these tourist destinations, thereby increasing their educational value, fostering greater respect for history, and preserving the memory of the victims. The main issue arises from the tendency of many heritage attractions to present a stereotyped version of history that prioritizes entertainment over education and historical accuracy. The narratives conveyed to visitors are often selective or biased (Bowman & Pezzullo, 2010; Light, 2017). Accordingly, numerous scholars argue that commodification has negative implications for both authenticity and historical accuracy (Bai & Chen, 2024; Heuermann & Chhabra, 2014; Wang et al., 2023). To strengthen the authentic representation of such sites, a balance must be maintained between entertainment and historical fidelity. One possible strategy involves employing specialized tour guides capable of presenting the site's history as objectively as possible. Furthermore, technological tools should be used

to support historical representation rather than to create spectacles that trivialize the past. Additional measures should also be introduced to prevent the biased portrayal of history, particularly in destinations that serve as symbols of national pride, where certain narratives or actors may be neglected. To address this, multiple perspectives could be incorporated, including those of the vanquished and the testimonies of victims or their descendants.

Historical contextualization could likewise be improved through collaboration with academics and historians. Finally, respect for the local community remains essential. For instance, priority should be given to supporting the local economy, establishing capacity limits, and introducing local tourist taxes to ensure that tourism benefits the resident population.

**Limitations and Future Research**

The current research has some limitations. Firstly, bibliometric studies suffer from the "Matthew effect in science," which indicates that more recent academic publications have a lower number of citations, leading to their underrepresentation (Lehmann & Stockinger, 2019). Therefore, these studies assume that the greater the number of citations that authors, journals and institutions receive, the greater their interest. However, there is not always an exact correspondence between the number of citations and the quality of a publication (Aksnes et al., 2019).

Secondly, our research focuses exclusively on analysing articles published in WoS because this database includes more prestigious journals and publishers. However, other databases such as Google Scholar, Scielo and Scopus are not biased towards English literature (Agramunt et al., 2020). Therefore, future studies could analyse this topic based on other databases (Orts-Cardador et al., 2023).

Finally, this analysis is focused on scientific articles, without considering other types of scientific publications such as conference proceedings, books, book chapters or doctoral theses. Therefore, these types of publications can be considered for analysis in future bibliometric articles. However, these types of publications suffer from a number of problems, since they are not always subject to the double-blind review system, or they can be published later in the form of academic articles, which increases the possibility of repetition (Rojas-Lamorena et al., 2022).

As for future research, firstly, we have noted the importance of heritage preservation in dark tourist places – for example, in Auschwitz (Biran et al., 2011) and in Chernobyl (Hryhorczuk, 2019). Future research should analyze which places deserve to be recognized with the label "Outstanding Universal Value" due to their heritage, historical or cultural value in order to achieve greater preservation and recognition by the population. Secondly, commodification and inauthenticity have been two fundamental issues in the debate about the construction of dark tourism (Šuligoj, 2016).

This is especially relevant in those places where dark tourism can cause wounds, suffering and divisions in the local population or visitors, as we have observed in the case of difficult or dissonant heritage. Future research should investigate the most appropriate way to present these locations with the goal of minimizing damage.

Furthermore, a correct representation of dark tourism can help national reconciliation, as in the case of Ghana (Yankholmes & McKercher, 2015). Thirdly, there is a broad range of motivations among tourists when visiting dark tourist places. In fact, we have observed that the main motivations go beyond dark motives, with educational or cultural reasons being of great importance, especially in places of high heritage value (Drobňák et al., 2022; Kidron, 2013). Future studies should analyse the motivations of tourists related to dark tourist places, especially those that are at the "lighter" end of Stone's (2016) dark tourism spectrum, where the motives can be very different (Light, 2017). Finally, we have observed that heritage tourism in dark places is a good way to integrate collective memory. Future studies should analyse collective memory in dark places beyond the field of tourism – for example, in the field of history, linguistics or sociology.

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