Death, ghosts, and spiritual tourism: conceptualizing a dark spiritual experience spectrum for the paranormal market.

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Death, Ghosts, and Spiritual Tourism: Conceptualizing a *Dark Spiritual Experience Spectrum* for the Paranormal Market

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HIGHLIGHTS

Dark and paranormal tourism involves secular-looking, commercial activities with characteristics that can create intense spiritual experiences.

ABSTRACT

Paranormal tourism is a lucrative market offering visitors the opportunity to engage with enchanting experiences and stories in destinations around the world. Specifically, ghost tourism connects people to the dead (and death) through dark narratives, supernatural legends, and participatory experiences. Previous scholarship has suggested that ghost tourism exhibits characteristics of dark tourism (by visiting dark places) and spiritual tourism (by engaging in spiritual practices); however, this relationship has not been fully explored. The purpose of this conceptual paper is to consider where the experiential and motivational characteristics of dark, spiritual, and paranormal tourism converge, and to consider whether this convergence produces a dark spiritual experience for consumers. Three dimensions are identified as contributing towards the degree of dark experience offered by ghost tourism: place, promotion and production, and participation. To conclude, a *Dark Spiritual Experience Spectrum* is proposed, illustrating the characteristics of each dimension and their influence on the degree of dark spiritual experience offered to consumers. It is argued that these dimensions have the potential to impact the tourist experience, influence visitor motivations, and, consequently, drive an evolving paranormal market.

KEYWORDS

Paranormal tourism, spiritual tourism, dark tourism, ghost tourism, place, dark spirituality.

INTRODUCTION

Paranormal tourism has grown exponentially in recent years (Bader, Baker & Mencken, 2017; Obradović et al., 2021). Driven by a growing consumer market for the supernatural and otherworldly, a wide variety of tourism, events, and hospitality experiences have emerged, offering visitors the opportunity to engage in an evolving 'enchantment economy' (Houran et al., 2020, p. 18). The term *paranormal* alone is complex (Waskul & Eaton, 2018) and may encompass a wide variety of beliefs and experiences, including psi, after death communication, reincarnation, UFOs, and mythical creatures. In the context of tourism, it is considered a form of special interest or niche tourism in which people visit places "that embody belief systems beyond normal rational views" (Pharino, Pearce & Price, 2018, p. 21). Under the umbrella of paranormal tourism sits a range of potential travel experiences, which may in-

clude the search for UFOs, Bigfoot, mythical animals, and ghosts. For business and destinations, the supernatural offers a unique opportunity for branding and experiential diversification (Davies, 2007; Houran et al., 2020). For cities and towns, ghost tours provide an opportunity to present the history and culture of a location through a spectral lens. Roswell, Transylvania, and Salem all provide examples of places transformed by the commodification of supernatural legends (Candrea et al., 2016; Gencarella, 2007; Light, 2007; Meehan, 2008). Hotels may brand themselves based on their haunted status, and the events industry has capitalized on the desire for immersive experiences that cater to a supernatural theme. The paranormal industry is lucrative, offering the potential for significant revenue (Houran et al., 2020) and brand personality (Hill et al., 2018; 2019). As Hill et al. (2018) define, ghostly narratives have enduring qualities that are versatile, adaptable, participatory in nature, universal, and scalable (VAPUS), which make them particularly well-suited to the tourism market. Furthermore, the immersive and participatory nature of paranormal tourism aligns it with a growing consumer trend for experiential and transformative experiences (Houran et al., 2020; Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

Arguably, ghost tourism has received the greatest attention from academic scholarship and may be defined as "the desire to encounter ghosts, interest in the supernatural, and visitation of places associated with the spirit world such as cemeteries, haunted houses, castles, and historic towns" (Garcia, 2012, p. 14). The tourism, hospitality, and events industry have evolved to accommodate ghost tourism, offering "leisure, investigation, services, products, or conventions" (Haynes, 2016, p. 3) across a range of experiences and venues, including historic buildings, hotels, restaurants, museums, and tours (Ironside, 2018; Houran et al., 2020). Popular forms of ghost tourism include ghost tours/ walks, which guide visitors around cities or buildings relaying the supernatural legends, and ghost hunting (or paranormal investigations), which invite visitors to 'experience ghosts' through a combination of spiritual and pseudo-scientific practice (Ironside, 2016). While novelty and entertainment are considered factors for participation in ghost tourism (Garcia, 2012; Thompson, 2008), scholars have also observed more complex motivations that connect ghost tourism to aspects of dark and spiritual tourism. Education and learning about past events (Gentry, 2007; Holloway, 2010), confronting mortality and difficult heritage (Ironside, 2018), spiritual questing and the affirmation of belief and experience (Eaton, 2015; Ironside, 2018), and the search for emotional and cognitive experiences (Dancausa, Hernández & Pérezc, 2020) may all pull visitors towards ghost tourism. Additionally, a general interest in visiting dark places (Garcia, 2012; Thompson, 2010), the type of experience and guide hosting the event (Holloway, 2010; Krisjanous & Carruthers, 2018; Thompson, 2010), the popularity and propensity of the stories (Hill, 2011; Hill et al, 2019) and the attraction and organization of the experience (Dancausa et al., 2020), have also been considered pull-factors.

Pharino, Pearce, and Price (2018) framed paranormal tourism as a travel phenomenon overlapping aspects of dark and spiritual tourism. The historic routes of ghost tourism in the Spiritualist era (Holzhauser, 2015), its association with a rising spiritual quest culture, and ability to evoke meaningful spiritual encounters (Eaton, 2015), illustrate its connection to some of the characteristics of spiritual tourism. Likewise, the tendency for ghost tourism to be intertwined with dark narratives and human tragedy connect it with the wider dark tourism industry (Houran et al., 2020; Ironside, 2018; Garcia, 2012; Sharpley & Stone, 2009). However, while the relationship between paranormal, spiritual, and dark tourism has been implied, an examination of the points of convergence between these concepts has yet to be fully explored. This paper seeks to rectify this gap in the scholarship and to conceptualize where the (1) experiential and (2) motivational characteristics of dark tourism, spiritual tourism, and paranormal converge. In doing so, this paper considers whether this convergence produces a *dark spiritual experience* for consumers, which drives an evolving paranormal market. Due to the connection between ghost tourism, dark tourism, and spiritual practice, this study will focus on ghost tourism as a specific subset of paranormal tourism.

Death, Ghosts, and Dark Tourism

Haunted places are generally considered to have a dark, uncanny, or morbid connection. As Eaton (2019) considers, our understanding of haunted spaces emerges from pre-existing cultural representations in folklore and the media. Traditionally, these narratives affirm that hauntings occur in places of "war, slavery, untimely death, criminal activities, or burial" (p3) and may occur due to "improper burial, traumatic or sudden death, unfinished business, revenge, and attachment to material objects, among other causes" (p2). It is unsurprising, then, that dark tourism and paranormal tourism are interconnected.

Visiting sites associated with death have been referred to as "black spot tourism" (Rojek, 1993), "morbid tourism" (Blom, 2000), and "thanatourism" (Seaton, 1996). It has also been linked to an established body of literature concerning 'dissonant heritage' (Tunbridge &

Ashworth, 1996) and explored contextually in relation to specific subsets of heritage tourism, including battlefield tourism (Baldwin & Sharpley, 2009), Holocaust tourism (Beech, 2000), and prison tourism (Barton & Brown, 2015). In their seminal paper, Foley and Lennon (1996) introduced the term *dark tourism*, which they defined as "the presentation and consumption (by visitors of real and commodified) of death and disaster sites" (p.198). In the same special issue, Seaton (1996) introduced the term thanatourism as "travel to a location wholly, or partially, motivated by the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death, particularly, but not exclusively, violent death" (p.240). Thus, while the two terms share similarities, thanatourism has become more narrowly focused on sites specifically associated with death, whereas dark tourism encapsulates a wider array of places connected to death *and* suffering. Over the years, the suitability of the term dark tourism has been critiqued and debated (see Light, 2017), yet it has gained scholarly traction. Due to its ability to capture a wider breadth of death-related travel phenomenon, *dark tourism* will be used for the purposes of this study.

Lennon and Foley (2000) theorize that dark tourism is predominantly a postmodern phenomenon. They argue that visiting sites of death is a contemporary practice and links to events in living memory. However, as Light (2017) considers, this perspective has received criticism since its conceptualization. Travel to witness or contemplate death ("thantopsis") is considered to have a much longer history (Seaton, 1996; 2009; Bowman & Pezzullo, 2010). The gladiatorial games, pilgrimage, and public execution are often cited as examples of people traveling to bear witness to the death of others. However, despite arguments that thantopsis has influenced travel throughout history, it is also recognized that contemporary society has changed the nature of death-related travel consumption. Stone (2018) considered this to be a "spectacularisation" of death, "in which significant death of Others is commodified as a spectacle within visitor economies and, subsequently, consumed as tourist experiences" (p. 190). As a result, the dark tourism economy has evolved, offering a range of tourism experiences in different death-related sites from those with a more educational focus (such as visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau) to those with an entertainment lens (such as ghost tours or horror-themed events).

As a result, scholars have sought to unpack the complexities of contemporary dark tourism. Strange and Kempa (2003) proposed that there may be multiple shades of darkness across dark tourism sites, Miles (2002) also distinguished between 'dark', 'darker', and the 'darkest' sites dependent on the authenticity of a location. Places in which dark tourism emerges have formed a considerable focus of research as scholars seek to unpack nuances at the supply-end of dark tourism. Stone's (2006) typology is perhaps most notable in this regard, presenting a spectrum of dark tourism supply. He proposes that a continuum of dark tourism exists in which those sites *of* death and suffering are located at the darkest end compared to those *associated* with death and suffering at the lightest end. Along this spectrum, Stone identifies binaries related to authenticity, time from the event, education/ entertainment, and the level of power and ideological significance. Due to the commodification of ghostly narratives for entertainment purposes, paranormal tourism is often positioned towards the lighter end of Stone's dark tourism spectrum (Garcia, 2012; Wyatt, Leask & Barron, 2021).

Examination of dark tourism supply and an attempt to classify sites dominated early research. However, as Ashworth and Isaac (2015) note, distinguishing between different types of dark tourism through a supply-lens has been hindered by a lack of investigation into visitor experience and behaviour. As they state:

> The fatal flaw in these attempts to impose a system of classification upon tourism sites, first separating them into discrete dichotomy of dark from light and then sub-classifying in an increasingly complex hierarchical system, is that the same site evokes different experiences for different visitors – simply, what one visitor finds dark, another does not. (p318)

Others have also noted the lack of focus on the demand of dark tourism (Isaac & Çakmak, 2014; Lennon & Foley, 2000; Stone & Sharpley, 2008), leading to a growing body of research exploring tourist experience, behavior, and motivation.

In particular, the departure of dark tourism from the usual hedonistic motives associated with tourism has fascinated researchers (Biran & Buda, 2018). Naturally, dark tourism's association with death, suffering, and macabre subjects led to an assumption that a morbid curiosity or fascination with death would be needed to visit such places. Indeed, dark tourism has been considered by some to be a deviant behavior (Biran & Poria 2012; Stone & Sharpley 2013). However, while an interest in death has been noted as a potential motivating factor (Stone & Sharpley, 2009), it is by far the sole, or prominent motivation documented in contemporary studies. As Chanuanthong and Batra (2016) determine, a wide range of motivations may exist that 'push' and 'pull' visitors towards dark tourism attractions. Push factors may include education, historic awareness, fact-finding, commemo-

ration, and the search for national and cultural identity (Baidwann, 2022; Dunkley, Morgan, & Westwood, 2011; Farmaki, 2013; Hall, Basarin, & Lockstone-Binney, 2010). While pull factors may be influenced by the media, curiosity, patriotism, personal heritage, or family ties (Foley & Lennon, 1996; Hyde & Harman, 2011; Isaac & Çakmak, 2014; Kokkranikal et al., 2015). The popularisation of sites of dark tourism through film, TV, and social media channels also plays a considerable role in putting dark tourism 'on the map' as well as shedding light on the term dark tourism in popular discourse (Lewis, Schrier, & Xu, 2021). Furthermore, ghosts may act as a draw to places of dark tourism (Pharino, Pearce, & Price, 2018). Ghosts may form part of the wider "spectro-geography" of dark places, manifesting through the troubled memories, materials, and landscapes of a location (McCormack, 2010). Yet, dark places may also become haunted through their association with *literal ghosts* due to their dark heritage narratives and spiritual connection to the spaces of the deceased.

Spirituality, Spiritualism, and Tourism

Spirituality is closely associated with religiosity or religiousness (Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Both connect to ideas of the sacred and belief, and religion may also provide a framework through which spirituality emerges (Gall, Malette, & Guirguis-Younger, 2011). Spirituality has, however, come to be understood in its own terms, both conceptually and in general discourse. In Roof's (2001) study, he noted a growing subset of the population that recognized themselves as "spiritual but not religious." While both are associated with some form of personal belief, Zinnbauer et al. (1997) observed that religion was more highly associated with formal structure, including religious institutions, rituals, and practices. Spirituality, on the other hand, is often described in personal and experiential terms and may include characteristics such as: a belief system, the search for purpose, connection, self-transcendence and wholeness, existential reality or meaning and way of being in life, and the presence of a unifying force or energy (Chiu et al., 2004; Delgado, 2005). As Johnston and Mayers (2005, p. 386) put it:

> Spirituality can be defined as the search for meaning and purpose in life, which may or may not be related to a belief in God or some form of higher power. For those with no conception of supernatural belief, spirituality may relate to the notion of a motivating life force, which involves an integration of the dimensions of mind, body and spirit. This personal belief or faith also shapes an individual's perspective on the world and is expressed in the way that he or she lives life. Therefore, spirituality is experienced through connectedness to God/a higher being; and /or by one's relationships with self, others or nature.

As such, while spirituality may relate to aspects of religion, it may also sit outside of a religious framework. In its place, however, has emerged an evolving spiritual marketplace that caters towards a growing consumer sensibility to engage in practices and activities that provide spiritual exploration (Eaton, 2015; Roof, 2001).

Spiritual tourism is recognized as an important and growing sector within the wider travel industry. As Heelas and Woodhead (2005) acknowledged, travel has become an important practice in an emerging spiritual marketplace. Despite arguments that tourism is a relatively superficial and frivolous affair grounded in in-authentic experiences or 'pseudo-events' (Boorstin, 1964), it is argued that tourism may exhibit complex, spiritual motives (MacCannell, 1973; Cohen, 1979). Notably, MacCannell (1973) first recognized the ritual aspects of tourism, which he argues "absorbs some of the social functions of religion into the modern world" (p. 589). In their Special Issue, *The Search for spirituality in Tourism: Toward a Conceptual Framework for spiritual tourism,* Cheer, Belhassen, and Kujawa (2017) situate the growth in spiritual tourism within a wider cultural shift towards 'reflexive spirituality' (Roof, 2001) in which the boundaries and doctrines that have traditionally defined spiritual practice are reduced or removed. As they discuss, spiritual tourism is well-positioned to offer opportunities in which, "individuals can examine, consider and practice spirituality…in a way that is not always available in daily life" (Cheer, Belhassen, & Kujawa, 2017, p. 252). The growth and commodification of Yoga tourism (Bowers & Cheer, 2017), drug tourism (Prayag et al., 2016), and meditation retreats (Norman & Pokorny, 2017) offer clear examples. Spiritual tourism is, therefore, disentangled from religious tourism by multiple authors who recognize a distinction between religious and spiritual motives (Cheer et al., 2017; Kujawa, 2017; Wilson, McIntosh & Zahra, 2013). In their conceptual framework for spiritual tourism, Cheer, Belhassen, and Kujawa (2017), argue that spiritual drivers are grounded in secular motivations that focus on the self, including wellness, adventure, self-development, and recreation. In contrast, religious drivers are influenced by motivations of religious observance, cultural performance, reaffirmation of identity, and ritualized practice. Furthermore, spiritual drivers are highly commodified and packaged compared to religious drivers, which are highly institutionalized. Halim, Tatoglu, and Hanefar (2021) support

this, illustrating a 'Religious-Spiritual Tourism Continuum' in which religiosity is associated with visiting places of sacred significance and spirituality being more closely aligned with the search for personal meaning. On review of multiple studies, they propose a conceptual framework for spiritual tourism which recognizes seven key themes: meaning/ purpose in life, consciousness, transcendence, spiritual resources, self-determination, reflection – soul purification, and spiritual coping.

Place is a central component for spiritual tourists. As Cohen (1979) denotes, tourists seeking alternative spiritual experiences out with mainstream religious belief (i.e., "experimental tourists") do so by engaging with authentic spaces and the practices of "others." The character and authenticity of a place may also render it to have a distinctive "spiritual geography" (Henderson, 1993), "sacred" (Sharma, 2022), or "magical" (Singleton, 2017) qualities that evoke extraordinary and meaningful personal encounters. As multiple studies have shown, spiritual experiences may arise in a variety of places, including (although not exclusively) *routes of traditional pilgrimage* (Lopez, González & Fernández, 2017), *natural landscapes* (Bremer, 2021) and *heritage sites* (di Giovine, 2021). Spiritual experience may also be evoked in places associated with dark tourism by bringing visitors in close proximity to death to reflect, commemorate, and form connections with the dead (Hosseini, Cortes-Macías, & Almeida-García, 2022). It is in these dark places that ghost tourism has emerged, offering individuals the opportunity "to pursue spiritual meaning in their own ways" (Eaton, 2015, p. 409) by harnessing a multitude of discourses across science, New Age belief, and the decline of organized religion. In particular, the historic routes of ghost tourism in the Spiritualist movement of the nineteenth century continue to influence discourse and practices, including the use of mediumship, seances, and spiritual cleansing to invoke connections with the spirit world (Eaton, 2015). Like other spiritual spaces, dark places may become sacred spaces (Seaton, 1999; Sharma, 2020), which engender meaningful and transformative personal experiences (Dunkley, 2011). Indeed, Hanks (2015) recognizes ghost tourism, and especially the commercial ghost hunt, as a form of secular pilgrimage, providing the opportunity for individuals to visit places that may transform them from a non-believer into a believer in ghosts. As such, dark tourism and spiritual tourism may intersect in their experiential and place-bound offering to travelers.

Previous studies have generally focused on the connection between spirituality and tourism as being beneficial, particularly in relation to personal well-being and psychological development (Coghlan, 2015; Morgan, 2010). Others have recognized connectedness (Fisher, Francis, & Johnson, 2000; Jarrat & Sharpley, 2017; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006), spiritual growth (Heintzman, 2013; Robledo, 2015), self-awareness (Little & Schmidt, 2006) and altruism (Smith & Diekmann, 2017) as important outcomes. In these studies, the leisure activities that have led to these outcomes have been grounded in pleasant, wholesome, or awe-inspiring environments. Jarratt and Sharpley (2017), for instance, explore spiritual tourist experiences at the seaside, whereas Heintzman (2013) examined spiritual retreat centers. However, the dimensions of spiritual tourism, as recognized by Halim, Tatoglu, and Hanefar (2021), may also be found in environments that are considered uncomfortable, challenging, or 'darker' in nature. Examples of this may be found in forms of tourism that encompass physical and mental challenges. Kunchamboo and Little (2022) observe this amongst ecotourists who seek out risk and challenge within natural environments to strengthen a sense of self. Likewise, mountain-based adventure tourism has been linked to eudaimonic well-being development (Ritpanitchajchaval, Ashton, and Apollo, 2023). Yet while these experiences may be challenging, unlike ghost tourism, they do not (explicitly at least) illicit encounters with content or places which may be considered 'dark' in nature.

Dark Spiritual Places

Like all forms of tourism, ghost tourism involves travel from one place to another (Gilbert, 2004). The desirability of place, therefore, plays a significant role in the potential success of attractions and destinations. Place, however, is a complex, multifaceted concept (Creswell, 2015). While it may be determined geographically, different meanings and an alternative sense of place may emerge through our social interactions within it (Massey, 2005). Places are, therefore, not static concepts; they are constantly in movement (Hjorth & Pink, 2014). Paranormal places are, therefore, not intrinsically strange or otherworldly, but may become so through socially constructed practices. A process akin to the "sacralization" of sacred spaces recognized by Sharma (2022) – a "paranormalization". As Edwards (2019) observes, paranormal media plays a considerable role in transforming our understanding of ghosts and the places that they inhabit. Landscapes may be transmogrified by folklore narratives, visitor interaction, and contemporary media practices (Inglis & Holmes, 2003; Houran et al., 2020), which may lend credibility and authenticity to their haunted reputation (Eaton, 2019).

Paranormal places have a natural affinity with sites of dark tourism. This is to say, for places to be *authentically*

haunted and for the potential of paranormal experiences to be realized, they must also be places of "death, suffering and the seemingly macabre" (Stone, 2006, p. 146), at least in the case of ghost tourism. Due to this, popular ghost sites often arise around places of dark heritage, such as ancient cities, cemeteries, hospitals, prisons, and asylums (Garcia, 2012; Thompson, 2010). Sobaih and Naguib (2022) observe how places such as these possess distinguished characteristics that build a haunted environment for people. This "terroir" (Smith, 2015) may be constituted by the physical landscape but also the mood, feeling, history, and stories of a place (Houran et al., 2020; Ironside, 2018). The connection between death and the potential spiritual aspects of place may also denote these spaces as sacred or enchanted. As Drinkwater et al. (2022) considered:

> Sacred, enchanted, or haunted spaces can be understood as psychological constructions built from situational and sociocultural context, ambiguous stimuli (i.e., unexpected, unpredictable, or anomalous), and a supposition of supernatural or transcendent agency (p. 203).

In this way, haunted spaces share similarities with spiritual spaces. Drinkwater et al. (2022) draw on the concept of extraordinary architectural experiences (EAEs) in their study of paranormal tourism. These spaces, which may include cathedrals, chapels, temples, and retreats, can induce psychological shifts and facilitate transformational experiences (Bermudez, 2009). Similarly, scholars have observed that the characteristics of paranormal places can induce experiences of "situational-enchantment" (Drinkwater et al., 2022; Houran et al., 2022). They hypothesise situational-enchantment as a complex state of arousal in which competing themes of "Emotional, Sensorial, Timeless, Rational, and Transformative" arousal emerge. These states may trigger a mixture of both pleasant and unpleasant emotional states. This juxtaposition of emotions, triggered by the environment, creates a sudden, unexpected feeling of connection to a "transcendent agent or ultimate reality" (p216). A feeling that is evoked by the sensuous and affective components of haunted spaces (Holloway, 2006; Matless, 2008). The psychological impact of haunted places may also influence the detection and interpretation of subjective (e.g., feelings, sensations) and objective (e.g., objects moving, sounds) paranormal experiences (Houran et al., 2023).

However, while spiritual and haunted spaces may evoke similar feelings of transcendence and enchantment, arguably, places commercialized by the paranormal industry offer something different to tourists in comparison to the generally positive, psychological experiences offered by spiritual tourism (Coghlan, 2015; Morgan, 2010). As ghost experiences tend to be associated with places where the deceased, often tragically, died, there is a *darkness* constructed in paranormal places. This may be particularly true for ghost hunting investigations where visitors are motivated to interact with the dead in the locations associated with their deaths. In some cases, this may be very locale-specific such as a specific room, object, or piece of furniture linked to the death of the individual (Eaton, 2019). Death is, then, part of the terroir of ghost tourism, contributing to the sensuous and affective environment, as well as the perceived authenticity of ghostly narratives and experience.

The darkness of paranormal places is a motivational factor for tourists choosing to participate in ghost tourism (Garcia, 2012; Thompson, 2010). In addition to an association with tragic death, the darkness of paranormal places may also emerge from the folklore and legends attributed to place. As Ironside (2018) argues, paranormal tourism evokes forms of legend-tripping to dark places to experience and 'test' the legend. In some places, legends emerge from historically dark events such as murder and sacrifice, or supernatural associations to witchcraft and devil worship. For instance, The Ancient Ram Inn, UK, a renowned paranormal destination first popularised in the early-2000s, became a desirable paranormal location because of its association with pagan sacrifice and series of reputedly tragic deaths. Likewise, the Amityville House in Amityville, New York, remains a site of paranormal pilgrimage due to its associations with the reputed demonic and paranormal activity linked to the DeFeo murders in 1974. As Dancasua et al. (2020) observe, the *type* of paranormal attraction is a strong pull motivation for visitors, and those attractions that have gained notoriety through their appearance in the media become popular 'hotspots' for paranormal tourism (Hill, 2011; Hill et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2019; Holloway, 2010; Houran et al., 2020).

It may be hypothesized, therefore, that paranormal places exist along a continuum of darkness which is constructed from (1) the dark narratives associated with its legends and death history, (2) the historical authenticity of death in a location and its associated terroir, and (3) the sacredness of a space and its potential to evoke spiritual connections with the deceased.

Dark Spiritual Promotion and Production

Paranormal media plays an integral role in the promotion of haunted sites (Eaton, 2019; Hill, 2011). Reality television shows such as *Most Haunted* and *Ghost Adventures* perpetuate folkloric tropes and can transform

viewers' understanding of a place and its supernatural associations (Eaton, 2019; Edwards, 2019). These media representatives may become part of the "brand identity" (Davies, 2007, p. 64) of place compelling types of visitors and commercial activity. The dark history and narratives of place are regularly drawn upon to shape the uncanny potential of paranormal places represented in the media. Likewise, paranormal media draws upon visual and aural signifiers such as dark narratives, liminal spaces, and unsettling features to destabilize and frame places in uncanny ways (Smith & Ironside, 2022). This may influence how sites become seen, understood, and interpreted by visitors and may heighten their expectation of a paranormal experience and enhance their attractiveness for potential visitors (Houran et al., 2020). As such, while the 'promise' of experiencing a ghost can never truly be guaranteed, organizations draw on the possibility of extraordinary experiences with the dead in their marketing and experiential offering (Houran et al., 2020; Ironside, 2018). Some of the most popular paranormal attractions draw upon particularly dark narratives of human tragedy. The Lizzie Borden House, a B&B in Massachusetts (USA), is a well-known paranormal destination which promotes the gruesome double axe-murder that occurred onsite. The B&B hosts nightly ghost tours and hunts. Waverley Hills Sanatorium is reputed to be the site of over 163,000 deaths and hosts a haunted house alongside regular paranormal tours and events. Each location promotes its dark history alongside the propensity of spiritual experiences encountered in the venue. In doing so, human tragedy becomes a compelling promotional narrative for enhancing the reputation and spiritual potential of a location.

The mediatization and commodification of paranormal tourism, however, leaves it open to a mythologizing of the dead. As Hanks (2010) explores, ghost stories may become part of a site's 'mythico-history' (Malkki, 1995) in which the true history underpinning a ghost story and mythmaking converge. The commercial drive for entertainment in the paranormal industry contributes to the style and playfulness of how ghost tourism is produced and delivered (Thompson, 2010). Likewise, the sharing of ghostly experiences through online platforms provides the opportunity for engagement and (re)interpretation of paranormal experiences and haunted places by the people that visit (Hill, 2017; Hill et al., 2018; Hill et al, 2019; Lauro & Paul, 2013). As a result, ghosts and their stories can be transformed and re(presented) through tourism. They may even become darker through the production of new narratives and experiences. As Garcia (2012: 18) observed in her examination of ghost tours in Toledo and Edinburgh, tours may rely on the "trivialization of gore and human suffering" to capture the interest of audiences. Likewise, Miles (2015) considered how ghost tours appropriate and skew historic narratives in favor of sensational and macabre narratives for commercial gain. Dark tourism has faced similar criticism (Barton & Brown, 2015; Heuermann & Chhabra, 2014); however, arguably, the integration of dark histories and supernatural legend in paranormal places presents an increased opportunity for the playful interpretation, production and darkening of ghost stories to appeal to contemporary audiences.

As such, it is hypothesized that the darkness of paranormal tourism is also influenced by media representation and commercial production. Paranormal attractions may become seen and understood as darker through (1) the scope and propensity of dark histories and spiritual experience promoted by marketing and the media, and (2) the degree of (re)interpretation of dark narratives for experiential purposes.

Dark Spiritual Connection and Experience

Dark tourism encourages a connection with the dead. Tourists may be compelled to visit sites that connect them to the deceased and their own personal heritage (Dunkley, Morgan, & Westwood, 2011; Mowatt & Chancellor, 2011). They may also seek a wider connection to the dead through commemorative practices (Baldwin & Sharpley, 2009; Farmaki, 2013; Hyde & Harman, 2011; Kokkranikal et al., 2015; Dore, 2006; Hall, Basarin, & Lockstone-Binney, 2010). This connection to the dead (and death) is achieved through engagement with learning, knowledge, and the affective experience of place (Martini & Buda, 2020; Stone, 2012).

Like dark tourists, paranormal tourists are motivated to connect with the dead. As Thompson (2010) and Drinkwater et al. (2022) note, supernatural settings evoke extraordinary experiential possibilities and a sense of connectedness to the otherworldly. However, different forms of ghost tourism (e.g., ghost hunting, ghost tours) encourage different levels of connection which inform visitor motivations, expectation, and experience. The tendency to operate ghost tourism in authentic places of death or previous supernatural activity, evokes the possibility of seeing a ghost for visitors (Dancausa et al., 2011; Garcia, 2012). A motivation that Thompson (2010) notes as a key driver. Ghost tours often present this opportunity, while also enabling a connection to be made through the dead via the transmission of knowledge about past events and dark histories (Gentry, 2007; Holloway, 2010). In this sense, connecting to the dead during ghost tours is more akin to dark tourism, where representations of the dead are drawn upon to establish emotional engagement and empathy (Abraham, Pizam, & Medeiros, 2022; Hos-

seini, Cortes-Macías, & Almeida-García, 2022).

Ghost hunting (or paranormal investigation), however, engenders a direct form of spiritual connection with the dead. By drawing upon spiritual and pseudo-scientific practices, visitors participate in direct interactions with the dead (Eaton, 2015; Ironside, 2016). This may include participating in seances, Ouija Board sessions, and utilizing technology (e.g., digital cameras, EVP, EMF readers). Visitors play a direct role in constructing their own experiences during these encounters, which may help to shape a haunted place (Houran et al., 2020) but also inform the development of otherworldly narratives and how, and with whom, ghostly connections are made in the future. Forming these direct connections with the dead can offer profound spiritual, emotional, and transformative experiences (Ashworth & Isaac, 2015; Biran, Poria, & Oren, 2011). The combination of positive and negative emotions evoked by dark tourism sites (such as sorrow, shock, and depression) have the potential to foster spiritual meaning (Zheng et al., 2019). As Pharino, Pearce, and Price (2018) note, negative emotions play a significant role in constructing the experience for paranormal tourists. Fear and the opportunity to encounter scary experiences may also drive some tourists toward the paranormal market (Holloway, 2010) and form part of the experience (Pharino, Pearce & Price, 2018). As such, ghost tourism (like dark tourism) offers a unique experience to visitors in which there may be an expectation and intention, to experience uncomfortable psychological states.

Ghost tourism, therefore, offers different participatory opportunities to visitors dependent on the experiential offering. Using Pine and Gilmore's (1999) experiential realms, they may be positioned along a spectrum between passive or active participation, and absorptive or immersive engagement, dependent on the level of interaction with the dead. The co-productive and participatory nature of ghost hunting in dark places, however, has potential consequences. As discussed, popular sites for paranormal tourism often link to those places that harbor a dark or unsettling history. Paranormal tourism offers the opportunity to connect with dark histories, and the deceased people associated with them. As such, visitors may find themselves fully immersed and actively participating in activities that 'connect' them with victims or perpetrators of crimes (e.g., the victims of murder at the Lizzie Borden house) or interacting with supernatural forces of a demonic or unsettling nature (e.g. the incubus/succubus reported to haunt the Ancient Ram Inn). As such, while dark tourism offers an emotional connection to the victims of atrocities and tragedy through reflection and commemoration (Zheng et al., 2019), it does not put visitors in direct communication with them. Likewise, conventional spiritual tourism is generally associated with positive connections that promote personal well-being (Coghlan, 2015; Morgan, 2010), spiritual growth (Heintzman, 2013; Robledo, 2015), and self-awareness (Little & Schmidt, 2006). In contrast, ghost tourism evokes a form of *dark spiritual connection and experience* in which the dead and their dark histories are conjured through emotional engagement (Dancausa, Hernández, & Pérez, 2020), interaction (Ironside & Wooffitt, 2022), immersion (Pine & Gilmore, 1999) and enactive processes (Drinkwater et al., 2019; Eaton, 2019; Hill et al., 2018, 2019).

This paper, therefore, hypothesizes that ghost tourism evokes a form of *dark spiritual connection and experience* through *participatory practices*. The darkness of the paranormal attraction may be influenced by (1) the degree of active spiritual participation to connect with the dead, (2) the type of dead sought through this connection and (3) the level and degree of negative emotional experience.

Conceptualizing a Dark Spiritual Experience Spectrum

Ghost tourism offers individuals the opportunity to engage in experiences that confront and mediate the darker aspects of humanity (Ironside, 2018). While it is evident that ghost tourism can act as a form of entertainment and thrill (Garcia, 2012; Thompson, 2008), in this paper, I argue that it may also exhibit complex, darker, experiential, and motivational facets. Pharino, Pearce, and Price (2018) positioned dark, spiritual, and paranormal tourism as overlapping forms of niche tourism. By drawing upon this model, I argue that it is in the point of convergence between these aspects of tourism that darker forms of spiritual experience may emerge. Fig.1. conceptualizes three dimensions of paranormal tourism that influence the 'darkness' of the paranormal attraction and its experiential offering.

This model illustrates that: place, promotion and production, and participation influence the type of experience and potential motivations that may underpin paranormal tourism. *Dark spiritual places* emerge from *authentic* connections to the dead, in places where death and suffering have occurred. Like Stone's (2006) Dark Tourism Spectrum, those sites that demonstrate a higher degree of authenticity (those sites *of* death) present a darker experience to visitors. For paranormal tourists, authentic sites of death offer the greatest possibility of a ghostly experience, operating as dark, *sacred* spaces, where a spiritual connection may be sought with the deceased. The degree of connection between tourists and dark spiritual spaces will likely differ dependent on the

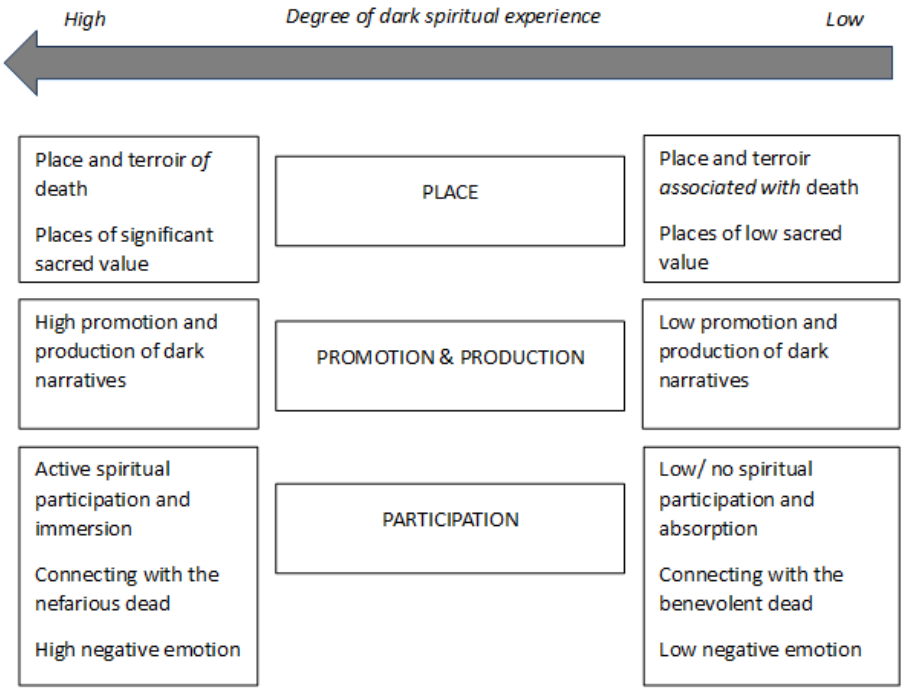

Figure 1. Dark Spiritual Experience Spectrum

experiential offering and visitor motivation. Ghost tours, for instance, offer a more transient experience where the possibility of a ghostly encounter is implied, and the focus is centered towards entertainment and education (Gentry, 2007; Holloway, 2010; Thompson, 2008). Alternatively, ghost hunting offers an immersive experience where the potential for a ghostly encounter is all but promised (Ironside, 2018).

Dark narratives and supernatural legends imbue places with ghostly potential but may also influence the type of experience and motivation to visit sites through *dark spiritual promotion and production*. Media narratives regularly draw upon horror and human tragedy, as well as visual signifiers of the uncanny, to frame paranormal places (Smith & Ironside, 2022). The co-productive nature of reality paranormal television shows invites viewers (and potential future tourists) to engage in forms of "belief in Spiritism, mediums and hauntings" (Hill 2011: 171). As such, places develop a brand personality (Houran et al., 2020) due to their potential to evoke spiritual experiences embedded in dark histories and folklore. Businesses may draw upon these darker aspects due to their popularity and market potential, inviting visitors to participate in contemporary forms of legend-tripping through tourism activities (Ironside, 2018). The experiential offering of places leans into dark narratives through the (re)interpretation of history in their tourism product and marketing activities (Garcia, 2012). Those attractions that invest the most in the promotion and production of dark narratives have the potential to offer a darker spiritual experience to visitors.

Finally, *dark spiritual connections and experience* also emerge through the participatory nature of ghost tourism. While, arguably, all forms of ghost tourism connect people to the dead, forms of ghost tourism that offer a greater degree of participation in spiritual practices in authentically dark places (such as ghost hunts) provide greater opportunities for dark spiritual connections to emerge. The promotion and production of dark narratives also establish *which dead* visitors may have the opportunity to connect with. In some locations, the dead are framed as either nefarious or benevolent, evil or good, and with whom and how connections are established has the potential to influence the degree of dark experience that emerges. These literal connections with the dead have the potential to evoke a breadth of psychological responses (Drinkwater et al., 2022), including both positive and negative emotions. As Dancausa, Hernández, and Pérezc (2020) observed, cognitive experience is a key motivator for paranormal tourists, however, negative emotion (such as sadness or fear) has the potential to impact how people draw meaning and understanding from their experience. A more frightening experience, for instance, has the potential to be perceived as darker in nature than those that evoke pleasant emotions.

Drawing on existing literature, the *Dark Spiritual Experience Spectrum* conceptualizes that ghost tourism offers experiences to visitors that vary in their perceived

degree of 'darkness'. The degree of darkness may also influence the motivations of visitors who may (or may not) seek out darker spiritual experiences. Influenced by Stone's (2006) Dark Tourism Spectrum, the model seeks to recognize that a continuum of dark spiritual experience exists across the ghost tourism industry. It purposefully does not position subsets of the industry along this spectrum (e.g., ghost hunting at the highest end and ghost tours at the lowest) to acknowledge the nuances that exist between different tourist offerings. For instance, it is quite possible that a ghost tour may visit dark spiritual places of death and draw upon a high degree of dark spiritual promotion and production, yet not encourage active participation from visitors. However, it does seek to illustrate how these dimensions (place, promotion and production, participation) influence the experiential and motivational facets of ghost tourism and may drive the production and consumption of experiences within the wider paranormal market.

DISCUSSION

By exploring existing scholarship, this paper aimed to consider where the experiential and motivational characteristics of dark, spiritual, and paranormal tourism converge, and to consider whether this convergence produces a dark spiritual experience for consumers. Due to the complexity of the paranormal tourism market, ghost tourism was selected as an appropriate focus for this study due to the extent of previous scholarship and its close association with dark tourism and spiritual practice. Three dimensions are identified as contributing towards the degree of darkness offered by ghost tourism: place, promotion and production, and participation. From this, a *Dark Spiritual Experience Spectrum* is conceptualized to illustrate the characteristics of these three dimensions and their influence on the degree of dark spiritual experience offered to consumers. It is argued that these dimensions have the potential to impact the tourist experience, influence visitor motivations, and drive the production and consumption of experiences in the wider paranormal market.

It is acknowledged that the *Dark Spiritual Experience Spectrum* is conceptual. Its purpose is partly to illustrate the nuances of ghost tourism, which, I argue, extend beyond its positioning at the lightest end of Stone's (2006) dark tourism spectrum (Garcia, 2012; Wyatt, Leask, & Barron, 2021). In addition, the model seeks to extend the work of Pharino, Pearce, and Price (2018) and others (Houran et al., 2020; Ironside, 2018; Garcia, 2012; Sharpley & Stone, 2009) who have acknowledged a relationship between dark, spiritual, and paranormal tourism, and to rectify a gap in scholarship by unpacking these connections further. There are limitations to this study. A North American and European perspective is adopted to explore ghost tourism, and it is acknowledged that the findings from this conceptual paper may be challenged by different cultural understandings of ghosts, hauntings, and place (see Kwon, 2008 and Rittichainuwat, 2011). Likewise, by exploring ghost tourism through the lens of dark tourism, certain parameters are imposed on the research. As others have observed, the wider heritage (Hanks, 2015), social (Ironside & Wooffitt, 2022), psychological (Houran et al., 2020), and environmental (Houran et al., 2022) context of ghost tourism has the potential to shape cultural behavior in different ways which are not fully explored in this study. To further investigate the conceptual argument presented in this paper, the Dark Spiritual Experience Spectrum model requires testing. Qualitative and quantitative data collection to determine the degree of impact that each dimension has on the experience will be important to establish their relevancy and effect. Furthermore, it would be interesting to establish whether 'darkness' is a conscious motivator for tourists and if cultural differences shape the degree of dark spiritual experience encountered. As such, this paper invites further investigation into the three dimensions identified (place, promotion and production, participation) and their interconnected relationships, to advance scholarship on the darker qualities and characteristics of ghost tourism, and to extend our understanding of its experiential and motivational facets. Furthermore, the focus on ghost tourism within this paper limits its application to wider forms of paranormal tourism which may not exhibit the same dimensions or 'degrees of dark experience'. An exploration of how this model extends to UFO tourism or vampire tourism, for instance, would be insightful.

Importantly, while this paper seeks to illustrate the darker qualities of ghost tourism, it does not attempt to imply that participation in, or production of, ghost tourism is in some way nefarious or deviant. Although it may be possible that some visitors seek out paranormal tourism for deviant means or indeed lead to nefarious outcomes [see, for instance Waskul & Waskul's (2016) discussion on the Witch Cemetery], the darkness explored in this study aligns with Stone's (2006) use and implies a continuum of experience based on death-related travel. Indeed, the suggestion that paranormal tourism represents a darker side to spiritual tourism may position it in an interesting crossroads to offer meaningful, and even transformative, experiences for tourists. In her discussion on the dark side of spirituality, de Souza (2012) recognizes that:

> What is needed to balance current studies is the

> recognition that *the positive must have a negative in order to be identified as positive*. Hence, there is always the *other side* to any single thing and this is a requirement if any single thing is to be seen as a whole. Logically, then, there must be both positive and negative aspects of spirituality (p. 294) [original emphasis]

Drawing on the work of Jung and the shadow self, de Souza (2012) considered the importance of identifying and understanding the darker sides of ourselves to achieve spiritual wholeness. As she stated, "the shadow complements the light in personality, and likewise, the dark is needed to balance the light side of spirituality" (p. 295). Collins (2007) also recognized the value of embracing the darker side of spirituality in his discussion on therapeutic practice, where he calls for therapists to embrace self-reflection to help identify their own 'shadows'. Scholars have recognized that dark tourism has the potential to evoke emotional and spiritual engagement with places to "develop self-identity processes" (Hosseini, Cortes-Macías, & Almeida-García, 2022, p. 11) and initiate existential and self-reflection (Stone & Sharpley, 2008). Like dark tourism, paranormal tourism offers the opportunity for individuals to engage in experiences that confront and mediate the darker aspects of humanity. Yet, the explicit intention for spiritual engagement in ghost tourism through connection and immersion in dark sites elicits the possibility for a darker spiritual experience to emerge. By providing the opportunity to engage spiritually with the historic shadows of our society, ghost tourism may, therefore, also encourage contemplation on the darker sides of ourselves.

IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS

This conceptual paper has endeavored to connect dark, spiritual, and paranormal tourism and to consider whether the convergence between these three areas produces a dark spiritual experience for tourists. In doing so, it contributes towards a growing body of scholarship on paranormal tourism (Houran et al., 2020; Ironside, 2018; Pharino et al., 2018) and challenges the perception of ghost tourism as a form of lighter dark tourism (Garcia, 2012; Wyatt, Leask, & Barron, 2021). Wyatt, Leask, and Barron (2021) acknowledge that lighter-dark tourism attractions have received significantly less scholarly attention due to the perception that they are less worthy of academic scrutiny than their 'darker' counterpart. This study helps to illustrate the experiential complexities and nuances of a dark tourism activity that has often been considered 'entertainment-focused', and therefore encourages further serious investigation into the full spectrum of dark tourist experiences. Perhaps the more stark and extreme immersive tourism experiences found with dark-paranormal tourism provide secular pathways to spiritual (transcendent) experiences -- somewhat similar to what people report who engage in extreme sports (Brymer & Schweitzer, 2017). Indeed, such athletes talk about how time slows down, and they seem to become one with their surroundings. This sounds much like enchantment reported during ghost hunts and paranormal tours (Houran et al., 2022). Thus, while amateur ghost-hunters use technical equipment and investigation protocols that arguably function as props in what are essentially spiritual rituals (Eaton, 2015), paranormal tourists might be more casual or unwitting secular spiritualists. More broadly, this study thus has implications for the study of spiritual experience. As de Souza (2012) recognized, dark spirituality is an under-researched concept. There is a very limited understanding of its form, importance, and resonance for people, how it manifests psychologically, or its applicability within our social and cultural world. This paper contributes to the discussion on the role of *both* positive and negative emotions in constructing meaningful, desirable, and enchanting experiences (Holloway, 2008; Houran et al., 2023; Pharino et al., 2018; Zheng et al., 2019). By proposing a model of dark spiritual experience within a tourism context, it also offers a conceptual framework for application and critique in wider leisure and cultural settings.

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