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Exploring the Concept of Dark Tourism in Hungary: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The research explores the perception and potential of dark tourism in Hungary through a qualitative study. The interviews were conducted with Hungarian tourism academics and professionals to examine how they interpret the concept of dark tourism in the Hungarian context; the findings indicate that dark tourism is an ambiguous field in Hungary that evokes different attitudes from tourism professionals: some find it the worst tourism type, others think it is relevant and necessary. It also makes it clear that there is no clear consensus among experts regarding the definition of dark tourism, the classification of dark tourism attractions, or the appropriate ways to communicate and market such sites, even amongst a limited number of interviewees. While the term itself remains contested—an appropriate reflection of the gravity of these sites versus the evocations of other kinds of associations with the word "dark"—it is concluded that the term is applicable, even in Hungary. Despite the limitations of a relatively small qualitative sample and the resulting constraints on generalizability, the study provides valuable insights into current perceptions of dark tourism amongst tourism professionals. Additionally, it is proposed to further spread awareness of the possible positive sides of dark tourism outside of the sphere of academic dark tourism researchers.

Keywords: dark tourism; cultural tourism; tourism marketing; Hungary

1. Introduction

Dark tourism has become an increasingly prominent subject within tourism research all over the world over the past three decades (Ashworth & Isaac, 2015; Light, 2017; Mora Forero et al., 2023), and Hungary is not exempt from this. The concept commonly refers to travel associated with sites of death, tragedy, suffering, disaster or the "seemingly macabre" (P. R. Stone, 2006), and it has evolved into a multidisciplinary research field beyond tourism studies and heritage management, encompassing sociology (P. Stone & Sharpley, 2008), psychology (Iliev, 2020), politics (Dale & Robinson, 2011) and other related fields (Saha & Husain, 2025). However, it has been the focus of several academic debates on both the conceptual boundaries and the appropriateness of the term itself (Light, 2017). Questions related to historical memory, commodification, ethics, authenticity, commercialization and sustainability on the supply side (Virgili et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2021), and visitor motivation, emotions and controversies on the demand side (Lewis et al., 2022) have been examined throughout the decades.

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Although the phenomenon has been examined extensively in Western Europe (mainly the United Kingdom), the United States, Australia and China (Shekhar & Valeri, 2022) comparatively less attention has been paid to the ways in which the concept is interpreted and applied in Central and Eastern European countries. Thus, less awareness has been raised of how it has evolved in post-soviet societies, where the political transitions (Akaliyski & Tormos, 2025) and historical remembrance differ from those of their Western counterparts (Light, 2000; McKenzie, 2013; Kleitsch & Bader-Jurj, 2026). This study argues that internationally established tourism concepts are not universally understood categories; however, their admission and acceptance can be shaped through the consideration of the local situation. The examination of Hungary in a dark tourism context is important to broaden the academic discussion about the cultural recognition and transferability of tourism concepts. What happens when a tourism concept enters a national context in which the terminology itself carries unintended meanings? There is a conversation about tourism terminologies that can cause misunderstandings and confusion since words themselves possess semantic, emotional, and political dimensions that influence how tourism professionals interpret, communicate, and ultimately legitimize these concepts (Bausch et al., 2022; Bausch et al., 2024; Szőke, 2024), and Hungary provides an example to examine these processes in a dark tourism context. After all, tourism classifications are not only important for academic analyses, but function as a framework through which destinations and tourism professionals construct meaning, communicate value, develop marketing strategies, and shape public understanding (Larrosa Rocamora et al., 2023).

Academic discourses around dark tourism in Hungary are still at their early stages, even though dark heritage sites are important in the country's tourism sector. The country's history has been shaped by successive periods of war, occupation, political repression, revolution, migration, and regime changes. Sites associated with the Ottoman occupation, the 1848–1849 War of Independence, the First and Second World Wars, the Holocaust, the communist dictatorship, forced labor camps, and the 1956 Hungarian Revolution occupy a central position within Hungarian collective memory and heritage interpretation (Gwinn et al., 1990). The remembrance of these historical events and their usage in tourism are closely intertwined with contemporary politics and national identity (Horváth, 2015). This is why despite the growing academic interest in dark tourism globally, there is a limited understanding of whether the label "dark tourism" is appropriate or desirable in the Hungarian context. There are concerns that the term itself carries negative, misunderstandable, or commercially exploitative connotations. According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2026, "Dark"), "*dark*" means "*with little or no light*," "*sad and without hope*," "*evil or threatening*," or "*secret or hidden*." However, its mirror translation in Hungarian, "*sötét*," has one more additional meaning besides the previous ones: "*Bereft of the illumination of mind and intellect*" (Arcanum, 2026). This can lead to the unfortunate situation of calling a dark tourist "*sötét turista*" in Hungarian, effectively calling them a "*dumb tourist*."

This study explores the knowledge, concerns and vision of tourism professionals in Hungary regarding the concept of dark tourism. It examines the perceptions and attitudes of tourism experts regarding the term itself, what they think "dark tourism" means, when they consider the term appropriate to use, and when they believe it becomes problematic, investigating the legitimacy of this tourism terminology in a politically conservative and linguistically distinct society. The research adopts a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews with professionals working in Hungarian tourism and heritage institutions, together with tourism academics from several Hungarian universities. The analysis seeks to identify the themes through which professionals examine dark tourism as an academic concept and as a tourism management and marketing tool. In particular, the study addresses two research questions:

1. How do Hungarian tourism professionals theorize the meaning of dark tourism?
2. How do tourism professionals see the legitimacy of the concept of dark tourism within the Hungarian touristic and linguistic context?

By answering these questions, the paper contributes to international debates by demonstrating that the acceptance of dark tourism is influenced by personal worldviews and emotional sensitivity, as well as the ability to change preconceived opinions after gaining a deeper understanding of the topic. The findings contribute to broader debates concerning the contested nature of dark tourism, and its acceptance within the tourism sector of a society where its presence is still emerging. The study ultimately argues that the use of "*sötét turizmus*" ("dark tourism" in Hungarian) is acceptable and an important means of distinction within tourism; however, it is important to raise awareness and educate its participants on the topic.

2. Theoretical Background

The conceptualization of dark tourism emerged in the 1990s, referring to the travel to places associated with death, disaster, and trauma, to contemplate human mortality, to learn from the tragic past, and to engage with tragedy (Foley & Lennon, 1996; J. J. Lennon & Foley, 2000; P. R. Stone, 2006; Light, 2017). Although some date the phenomenon back centuries (Verma & Jain, 2013), J. J. Lennon and Foley (2000) characterized it as a post-modern phenomenon, where the catastrophes and dark themes are commodified for the tourists' consumption (Korstanje, 2020), and it was further questioned due to the lack of historical evidence (Korstanje, 2016). Dark tourism encompasses various definitions, categories, motivations and themes (Light, 2017), and the broad meaning of this phenomenon means that various sites can be included in it. These sites offer a wide range of experiences, attractions, and destinations, including everything from genocide memorials, through museums of war and oppression, to entertainment-oriented thematic parks (P. R. Stone, 2006). P. R. Stone (2006) developed the dark tourism spectrum, distinguishing "dark fun factories" with a "lighter" dark theme (e.g., Dracula tourism) from "dark camps of genocides", where tourists participate in the "darkest" form of dark tourism, arguing that these attractions differ considerably in terms of authenticity, educational purpose, political significance, and commercial orientation. Later studies refined and applied this spectrum in different spheres of dark tourism research, such as in the investigation of tourist motivation (Raine, 2013), the authenticity of dark tourism suppliers (Heuermann & Chhabra, 2014), the subjectivity of tourist experiences (Lacanienta et al., 2020), and the ethicality of dark tourism (Czermak & Vogler, 2025). McDaniel (2025) also showcased that P. R. Stone's (2006) spectrum is applicable to virtual dark tourism as some of these experiences can be "darker" than others. The continuing development of dark tourism classifications is also reflected in recent review research. Assylkhanova et al. (2024) emphasize the need to reconsider existing categorizations of dark tourism and identify remaining research gaps. Researchers have argued that dark tourism cannot be understood as a single homogeneous phenomenon because motivations, experiences, and interpretations vary considerably among attractions, visitors, and cultures (Biran et al., 2011; Biran & Hyde, 2013; Roberts & Stone, 2014; Light, 2017). Some tourists seek historical education, to understand the political background of certain events, or to learn more about (human) nature, while others may be motivated by curiosity, empathy, or entertainment, among others (Light, 2017). The interpretative process is particularly important as visitors must actively decode the symbolic representations, drawing upon their prior knowledge and cultural understanding, enabling them to interpret the significance of places while reinforcing the identity and meaning attached to them (Dimache & Qiu, 2024). Additionally, Wang et al. (2021) demonstrate that the quality of interpretation significantly influences the visitors' perceived benefits

and overall satisfaction with their experience. High-quality interpretation, supported by innovative digital tools, can enhance reflection and increase visitor engagement while preserving these difficult heritage sites, which in some cases, are not just part of keeping memories alive but also help sustainable tourism development through sustainable reuse (Sobaih & Naguib, 2022; Tevely, 2023).

In contemporary discussions of dark tourism, beyond interpretation tools, digital technologies are also being recognized as elements that shape visitor experience, helping visitors to critically engage with dark sites (Ward & Hill, 2020) and fostering understanding and ethical compassion (Fisher & Schoemann, 2018). In the systematic review by Magano et al. (2023), digital technologies are shown to offer new opportunities for dark tourism management that can transform the way difficult heritage sites are experienced. Virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), interactive exhibitions, digital storytelling, and multimedia applications have expanded opportunities for engaging with dark tourism sites beyond physical visitation, complementing existing dark tourism interpretation, providing more historical context, reconstructing lost environments, and presenting multiple perspectives that may otherwise remain inaccessible (McDaniel, 2025).

A central dimension of dark tourism is its relationship to collective memory and cultural identity (Volcic et al., 2014; Lischer, 2019; Kesumadewi et al., 2024). Sites associated with traumatic history often function as spaces of remembrance, mourning, and education. Through museums, memorials, guided tours, exhibitions, and commemorative practices, societies attempt to preserve and communicate difficult aspects of the past, yet the interpretation of these sites is rarely neutral. Political ideologies, social values, and cultural sensitivities strongly influence how tragedy is represented (Dale & Robinson, 2011; Sather-Wagstaff, 2011; J. Lennon, 2017). As Korstanje (2026) explains, dark tourism serves an educational and commemorative purpose by preserving difficult heritage, explaining the causes of past tragedies, and helping prevent similar events in the future; however, dark tourism sites are also socially constructed and contested spaces that can hide the real history, and be used as a commoditized spectacle. It can be seen as an opportunistic capitalist trap as well (Korstanje, 2016; Sather-Wagstaff, 2011), and as dark tourism is a broad category, it has too many sides to be described just one way or another. As James et al. (2024) argued, this phenomenon is based on contradictions; it remarkets the past to legitimize the present, often depoliticizing or even romanticizing certain events. It offers challenges for heritage site managers and stakeholders alike, to balance economic growth with ethical preservation. Education is considered the most important aspect of ethical dark tourism, to foster respect and empathy (Nag & Mishra, 2023).

Beyond questions of conceptual scope, the terminology itself has become a subject of scholarly debate, questioning what makes something "dark" (P. Seaton, 2019). Although "dark tourism" has achieved widespread acceptance within academic literature, it is questioned whether the label appropriately represents the sites connected to it (Sharpley & Stone, 2009; A. V. Seaton, 2012). Beyond academic discourse, many practitioners reject using this label, viewing it as problematic and misaligned with the aims of the sites (Wight et al., 2025). The adjective "dark" inevitably carries moral and emotional connotations that extend beyond its analytical function, potentially encouraging sensationalist interpretations of the places that the term intended to commemorate (Kleitsch & Bader-Jurj, 2026). Sharpley and Stone (2009) observes that the terminology may inadvertently reinforce assumptions that visitors are primarily motivated by morbid curiosity, despite evidence that a wide range of interests and emotions are behind these travels (Martini & Buda, 2020). On the other hand, it does commercialize sites of terror and involves the exploitations of "Others," while their consumption involves "depressing, defamiliarizing and unsettling experiences" (Cronin & James, 2025, p. 485). These conceptual and terminological debates become

even more complex when dark tourism is examined across different cultural and linguistic contexts. As tourism concepts circulate internationally, they are interpreted through locally embedded systems of language and historical experience rather than adopted as neutral analytical categories.

The growing internationalization of tourism research has resulted in the widespread circulation of concepts that are frequently assumed to possess universal meanings. However, these terminologies are neither neutral nor stable. As new concepts emerge, they are continuously negotiated, often acquiring different meanings depending on the cultural context in which they are used. Bausch et al. (2024) argue that tourism research increasingly relies on neologisms whose semantic boundaries remain fluid, potentially creating conceptual ambiguity and limiting effective communication among scholars and practitioners. Even one of tourism's most established concepts (sustainable tourism) is interpreted differently across languages and cultures (Bausch et al., 2022). The meanings of these apparently equivalent terminologies reflect that translation involves much more than identifying lexical equivalents. It is similar in the case of dark tourism, which makes it even more difficult to define and precisely conceptualize. For example, in the case of Japan, Japanese projects use "*dāku tsūrizumu*", since the country's words for "dark" and "tourism" would be a contradictory term, and in this way, it presents the phenomenon as an educational experience, where facing their history is beneficial (P. Seaton, 2019). It shows that neither the meanings attached to the expression dark tourism nor its interpretation by tourism professionals outside the predominantly Anglophone contexts can be assumed to be universally shared, nor can whether the terminology itself can adequately communicate the educational, commemorative purposes of sites associated with traumatic pasts be taken for granted. Understanding how tourism professionals accept, reinterpret, adapt, or reject internationally established terminology contributes to the discussion concerning the cultural transferability of tourism concepts. It is within this theoretical context that the Hungarian case becomes significant.

Although dark tourism has developed into a global field of research, its interpretation and application differ considerably across geographical, cultural, societal, and political contexts. Many of the studies originated in Western Europe—particularly the United Kingdom—and focused on sites associated with the Second World War and its difficult heritage, examining issues of authenticity, commodification, ethics, and visitor motivations (Light, 2017; Shekhar & Valeri, 2022). In the United States, research has frequently centered on distinct sites and the effect of media (Foley & Lennon, 1996), the issues around the commodification of slavery sites (Raymen, 2017), and their presence in the formation of American national identity (Clancy, 2024). South and East Asia-focused studies have introduced further perspectives by demonstrating that dark tourism is deeply embedded within local cultural values and experiences (P. Seaton, 2019; Batabyal et al., 2022). Research conducted in China, Japan, and Cambodia has emphasized remembrance, morality, transformative experience, and nation-building, particularly in relation to war memorials, sites of political violence, and natural disasters (Lin et al., 2024; Nakajima & Oguchi, 2025; Wild, 2022).

Within post-socialist societies, heritage is often associated with communist regimes, political repression, and contested national memories, which remain connected with ongoing political debates and interpretations of history (Assylkhanova et al., 2025; Kartashova, 2025). These sites often function as educational institutions, tourist attractions, and examples of how past and present politics shape the current narratives. Central and Eastern Europe have difficult history, and dark tourism sites beyond Chernobyl are often forgotten or deliberately ignored (Seccardini & Desmoulins, 2023). Dark sites associated with

war, dictatorship, genocide, revolution, and political oppression embody multiple—and sometimes conflicting—meanings for different social groups.

Hungarian dark tourism is even less represented within the global dark tourism studies, even though it was shaped by countless regime changes and conflicts, among which the most significant are the Ottoman occupation following the Battle of Mohács in 1526, the failed War of Independence of 1848–1849, the territorial losses imposed by the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, the Holocaust, the Second World War, the communist dictatorship, the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, and the subsequent decades of Soviet influence (Bak et al., 1991; Várdy & Várdy Huszár, 2007). These historical experiences remain subjects of political debate, making dark heritage interpretation difficult, even though Hungary possesses, as a consequence, a diverse range of sites that can be interpreted within the framework of dark tourism.

As Hungarian dark tourism sites mainly incorporate heritage sites, it is important to note the distinction between the two; while the objective of heritage sites is to promote the preservation and appreciation of heritage, and some are connected to traumatic heritage (e.g., the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Auschwitz Birkenau, German Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camp), difficult heritage goes beyond that. It focuses on a region's cultural, historical, and environmental heritage and engages with local traditions, to gain insights into the historical and contemporary aspects of a specific community (Jin et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2022). Difficult heritage (sometimes referred to as "contested", "dissonant", or "negative heritage" (Light, 2017)) refers to cultural heritage associated with traumatic, uncomfortable, politically sensitive, or contested pasts that challenge dominant narratives and raise questions regarding preservation, memory, and identity. Rather than focusing on the touristic attributes of a site, dark tourism focuses on how societies negotiate and communicate uncomfortable histories (Thomas, 2022; Xiao, 2025). What distinguishes heritage tourism from dark tourism is the transformation of difficult heritage into a tourism product. Scarlett et al. (2023) describe dark tourism as the process through which dark heritage spaces become places of visitation, interpretation, and, in many cases, commercialization. It has become an umbrella concept that encompasses a wide range of categories, such as thanatourism, which was coined by A. V. Seaton (1996), and places greater emphasis on travel motivated by an actual or symbolic encounter with death and mortality, rather than on human suffering, tragedy, and the macabre. As Mionel (2019) argues, thanatourism is a subset within the broader conceptual framework of dark tourism rather than an independent tourism category.

Prominent examples include the House of Terror Museum (a museum that exhibits the fascist and communist regimes in 20th century Hungary), the Holocaust Memorial Center (which accounts for the horrors of the Nazi and Hungarian Arrow Cross regimes), the Rock Hospital Atomic Bunker Museum (a former emergency hospital and atomic bunker that was built during the Second World War), the Fiumei Road Cemetery (the final resting place for Hungary's most notable figures), the Memento Park, the Recsk National Memorial Park (an open-air museum dedicated to monumental statues of the Communist period), the Mohács National Memorial Site (a memorial park and archeological excavation at the site of the Battle of Mohács), and memorials associated with the 1956 Revolution (Marton et al., 2020; Remenyik & Dávid, 2024). In addition to these nationally significant sites, Hungary's dark tourism offerings encompass war memorials, military cemeteries, Jewish cemeteries, former prisons, communist-era facilities, battlefields, memorial parks, medical museums, abandoned military installations, and guided tours focusing on crime, legends, and paranormal narratives. Many Hungarian heritage sites fulfill educational, commemorative, or memorial functions for student groups, rather than only being positioned as tourist attractions. The application of the term "dark tourism" in Hungary is contested, not only

because of the already existing negative associations with the depiction of crime, death and tragedies, but because of the previously discussed semantic associations ("*sötét*" = "*dumb*", "*stupid*") that differ from those attached to the English expression.

Although the concept is widely used in international academic literature, its reception within Hungarian tourism contexts is often ambivalent and under-represented. The term "dark tourism" evokes distinctly negative associations, and there is a practice of information avoidance by service providers, who "overlook" the dark history of certain sites, omitting or exaggerating certain details in order to avoid presenting the site authentically (Ágnes, 2023). Another issue is that very few Hungarians are aware of what dark tourism entails (Marton et al., 2020); consequently, little is known about the mechanisms through which people involved in tourism accept, reinterpret, or resist this concept. Although Hungary, as mentioned, has received relatively little attention in dark tourism research, the reason for this study extends beyond geographical representation. It provides an opportunity to examine how this concept may develop as both Hungarian tourism institutions and tourism studies rarely—if ever—adopt and address the term "dark tourism", despite managing numerous sites associated with traumatic history. This creates an opportunity to investigate the hesitance behind this conceptual acceptance, as well as its interpretation.

3. Methods

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative research design based on expert interviews to investigate how the concept of dark tourism is understood and interpreted within the Hungarian tourism sector. Given that the research focuses on the understanding of an internationally established tourism concept in the Hungarian context, rather than on measuring public attitudes, expert interviews were considered the most appropriate method, as they allow the researcher to explore the topic through the perspectives of individuals possessing specialized academic and professional knowledge. The goal of these interviews was to explore how dark tourism is generally interpreted, and what opportunities and risks the experts see in it, to understand how it is viewed compared to the global themes.

Purposive expert sampling was employed. The participants had expertise in tourism, marketing, heritage, and dark tourism (Table 1). The objective was to explore professional perspectives from individuals actively shaping tourism research, education, and practice in Hungary. Potential participants were identified through their academic publications, professional experience, institutional affiliations, previous collaborations, and recommendations from other experts. Eighteen experts were invited to participate in the study, of whom fifteen accepted the invitation and completed the interview. The final sample consisted of thirteen academics representing several Hungarian higher education institutions, including Budapest University of Economics and Business, Budapest Metropolitan University, the University of Sopron, the University of Pécs, Kodolányi János University, the University of Pannonia, Corvinus University of Budapest, and the Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences. These participants specialize in tourism marketing, cultural tourism, heritage tourism, war heritage tourism, dark tourism, and disaster tourism. Many of them also possess substantial practical experience in the tourism industry, having worked or continuing to work alongside their academic careers. One participant was the director of the National Heritage Institute (NÖRI), whose professional responsibilities include cemetery heritage and memorial tourism. Two participants were also members of a historical re-enactment association, providing practical expertise in war heritage interpretation and historical tourism. One of these two also teaches at the Budapest University of Economics and Business and is therefore included among the thirteen academics above; the other is her husband, with whom a joint interview was conducted. Taking this overlap into account, the final sample therefore comprised 15 individual participants. To preserve participant

anonymity, the interviewees are not identified by name in the manuscript; however, the complete list of interviewees, including their names, affiliations, and contact details, has been provided separately to the journal. All participants were selected based on their professional experience, academic contributions, and active involvement in tourism education, research, interpretation, or development.

Table 1. Interview participants. Source: Author's own interviews and table.

Tourism Field	Number of Participants
Connected to Dark Tourism	6
Cultural Tourism	3
Tourism Marketing and Management	6

The online and in-person interviews took place between October 2024 and November 2025. Semi-structured interviews were employed because they ensured that each participant reflected on the same core themes while allowing sufficient flexibility to explore individual experiences and unexpected issues that occurred during the conversations. A pilot interview guide was reviewed by a university professor specializing in qualitative research methodology prior to data collection, resulting in minor refinements to the guide. The interviews were designed for a larger research project where the overall situation of Hungarian dark tourism is being analyzed, so the guide consisted of five thematic sections covering: (1) the participant's professional background and relationship to tourism and dark tourism; (2) conceptual understandings and definitions of dark tourism; (3) ethical, social, psychological, and business aspects of the phenomenon; (4) perceptions of the differences between Hungarian and international dark tourism supply and demand; and (5) the present and future role of dark tourism within Hungary's tourism sector.

Each interview lasted approximately 60 min, although the duration varied according to the participant's willingness to elaborate on personal experiences. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission, transcripts were prepared, and notes were taken during each interview for additional contextual observations. Fourteen interviews were conducted in Hungarian, while one interview was conducted in English. The interviewees participated in the research voluntarily. Prior to each interview, participants received information about the objectives of the study and provided informed consent for participation and audio recording. They were informed that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw from the research at any stage without consequence. To ensure confidentiality, all interviewees are kept anonymous throughout the study. In cases where participants requested that specific comments remain off the record, these statements were excluded from the analysis and are not reported in the findings.

The interview transcripts were analyzed using NVivo 15 qualitative data analysis software. It helped with the transcription and the systematic organization of the data, and the coding and comparison of participant perspectives, to identify any recurring themes. During the first coding cycle, open coding was applied to identify meaningful units of information related to how experts conceptualized and contextualized dark tourism. At this stage, codes remained close to participants' own expressions and included concepts such as curiosity, emotional reactions, learning, remembrance, authenticity, psychological burden, concerns, terminology-related perceptions, and barriers to development. During the second coding cycle, related initial codes were compared and grouped into higher-level analytical categories. For example, codes referring to curiosity, emotional experiences, empathy, reflection, and transformation were integrated into a broader category concerning the experiential dimension of dark tourism. Similarly, codes related to education, historical understanding, remembrance, and collective memory were grouped under the interpretive

and heritage-related functions of dark tourism. Negative evaluations, including ethical ambiguity, commercialization risks, emotional burden, and concerns regarding inappropriate representation, were consolidated into a category addressing challenges and limitations associated with the phenomenon. The coding was conducted by the first author, while the higher-level analytical categories and final themes were reviewed and discussed by both authors to ensure consistency in the interpretation of the data. This process led to the final structure addressing the research questions: the construction of the meaning of dark tourism, and its legitimacy and future development. The final thematic mind map is presented in Figure 1. Quotations are used throughout the findings to illustrate both representative viewpoints and contrasting perceptions, reflecting the diversity of perspectives (Mitev, 2019).

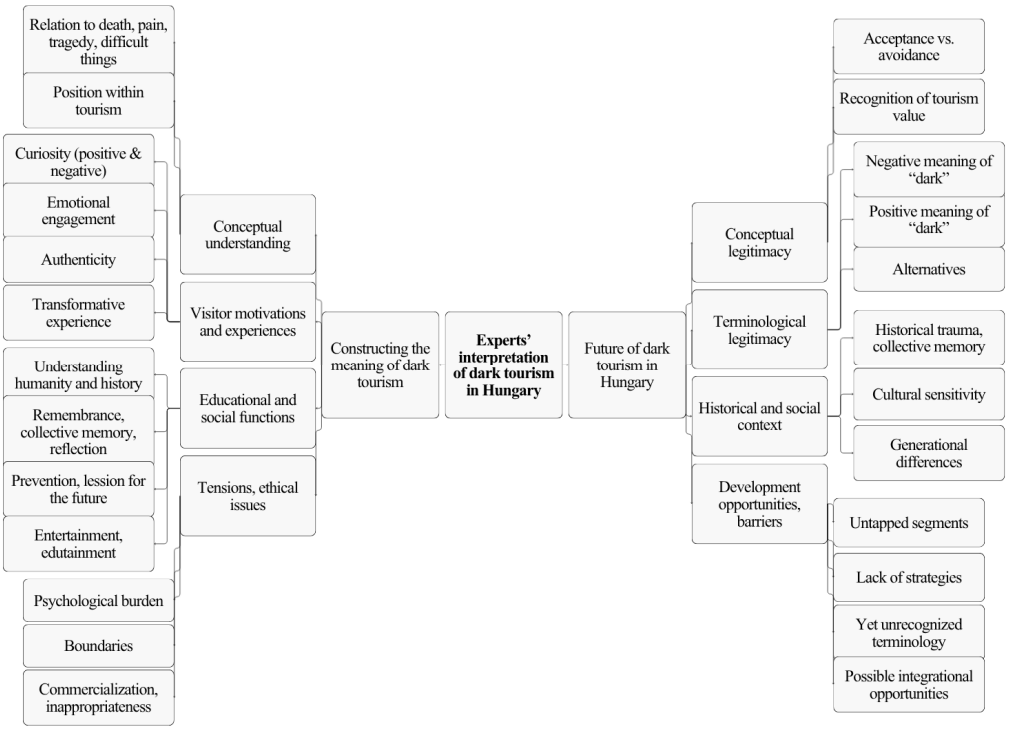


Figure 1. Mind Map of an expert's opinions. Source: Author's own interviews and formatting.

Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, as no substantially new themes emerged during the final interviews (Guest et al., 2006). Although other experts declined participation due to their lack of ability to contribute to the discussion, these interviews provided a sufficiently diverse range of viewpoints to address the research questions concerning the legitimacy and interpretation of dark tourism within the Hungarian context.

4. Results

4.1. Constructing the Meaning of Dark Tourism

All participants were familiar with the concept of dark tourism; however, their attitudes toward the phenomenon varied considerably. Responses ranged from complete rejection through neutral approach to positive support. Some interviewees described dark tourism as "*appalling*", or "*it is not something we talk about*", while others considered it an interesting and legitimate form of tourism connected to special, niche interests. Despite these differing emotional responses, none of the participants argued that this form of tourism has no legitimacy in tourism studies. On the contrary, all interviewees acknowledged its significance from both tourism and marketing perspectives, emphasizing its growing role in both the demand and supply sides of tourism.

The participants constructed the meaning of dark tourism that went beyond attractions associated with death or tragedy, describing it as something that evokes remembrance, some kind of positive or negative emotional experience and curiosity. One of the strongest themes that emerged from the interviews was the role of human curiosity in the formation of dark tourism. The tourism professionals repeatedly argued that people are naturally interested in tragedy, death, secrets, and the darker aspects of human life. This "morbid curiosity" was described as an inherent feature of human nature that motivates visitors to understand how people lived, suffered, fought, and died, to "relive" what it must have been like for people of the past. Importantly, respondents emphasized that this curiosity is experienced from a safe psychological, spatial and physical distance, allowing visitors to confront pain and death while maintaining a sense of security. Thus, dark tourists satisfy a desire to experience emotionally haunting and disturbing events without exposing themselves to actual danger.

> "*How people lived, where they lived, how they remember their loved ones, how they treat their dead.*" "*It's part of human nature: curiosity, a thrill, and a fascination with fear. It's no coincidence that reality shows are so popular: they let us peek into other people's lives, their secrets, and extraordinary situations. For some people, this is their strongest motivation: uncovering secrets and pushing boundaries.*"

> "*In the case of dark tourism, the experience is difficult to interpret on a purely personal level. These sites gain their true meaning within a social, historical, and moral context. Visitors not only gain information but are also compelled to think in broader terms and are forced to engage in deeper reflection. The experience is thus more complex and profound and can have a lasting impact on the visitor's way of thinking.*"

> "*It is linked to some kind of tragic, negative event. It could be an event that took place thousands of years ago, eighty years ago, or even three hundred years ago, but in any case, it's connected to something negative—a historical event, a natural disaster, an industrial accident, or a political and social turning point that later becomes a memorial or a place of pilgrimage.*"

Several interviewees positioned dark tourism as a branch of heritage tourism, arguing that it communicates the experiences of a particular historical period, albeit through a different interpretive lens than traditional heritage attractions, which corresponds with previous studies. The educative function also appears prominently throughout the interviews; it teaches visitors about the consequences of human decisions, prepares them for future crises, and encourages reflection on the darker aspects of human existence. Participants emphasized that such experiences could serve as warnings by demonstrating where hatred, war, racism, persecution, or poor decisions may ultimately lead.

> "*We could learn from dark tourism how such events occur, and what kind of horrors could happen if they did. Fortunately, so far there hasn't been a case where the entire world or all of humanity has been wiped out. But there have been incidents affecting certain communities and hundreds of thousands of people that could perhaps have been prevented or mitigated. While complete prevention isn't guaranteed, but mitigation is possible, if we learn from past events*."

It is not just about showing that wars are tragic and traumatic, but about showing where certain rhetorics may lead, or how to behave in dangerous situations. Closely related to this topic was their emphasis on remembrance, that dark tourism keeps memories alive by making these sites visible to modern audiences. According to one interviewee, time often obscures past suffering, creating the danger that societies may forget significant historical events of the past. Dark tourism was therefore interpreted as a means of bringing the past closer to the present, keeping the memories meaningful across generations; it

allows visitors to experience historical events emotionally rather than just learning about them in history classes, emphasizing the transformative potential of the visitor experience.

> *"Sometimes it's necessary to push people out of their comfort zones, because lessons learned through personal experience have a much deeper impact than any theoretical explanation."*

The interviewees associated the phenomenon with emotionally difficult aspects, negative experiences, or things that are difficult to process; "*if it is not emotionally draining, then something is missing from the interpretation.*" But despite its negative subject matter, it often generates positive emotional or intellectual outcomes for visitors, including empathy, reflection, emotional catharsis, moral awareness, or hope for a better future. Respondents acknowledged that visiting such sites can be psychologically demanding and that people are not always willing to engage with these emotions. Nevertheless, many believe that the emotional impact constitutes an essential part of the experience because it encourages deeper reflection. Ideally, visitors should leave these sites changed by the experience. Feelings such as sadness, shock, empathy, and emotional burden appeared repeatedly throughout the interviews.

> *"I can understand the tragedy [of the Holocaust] even without seeing it; it would upset me too much, and I don't need to see it in person. Regardless, I naturally find the whole situation appalling, but I don't need to experience it firsthand."*

One interviewee noted that ethical boundaries vary between individuals and generations, meaning that attractions acceptable to one visitor may be considered inappropriate by another. Another emphasized the importance of ensuring that representations of violence do not generate further violence or even desensitization to the topic of death. Additionally, there was a consensus that current tragedies should not become tourism products. It was notable that those who are not participating in dark tourism in their personal lives were harsher about the ethicality of the phenomenon, while those who have deeper knowledge were less concerned about issues of morality. Though, participants who were against the topic, spoke up the most about current societal issues, suggesting that these negative opinions are not necessarily against the visitation of these sites, but against the overall worldviews of modern society.

As dark tourism is an extremely broad and diverse field, it was argued that like cultural tourism, dark tourism encompasses numerous different types of attractions, experiences, and historical narratives. Some respondents characterized it as a specialized tourism product targeting niche interests rather than mass tourism. At the same time, however, they recognized that many iconic dark tourism sites have become fully integrated into mainstream tourism products, suggesting that dark tourism simultaneously operates as both a niche market and a normalized component of international tourism.

Overall, their contrasting opinions showed that the commercialization of dark tourism may increase public awareness of historical events, but they might also raise ethical concerns regarding its commodification. Although respondents acknowledged that this is a broad topic, their interpretations rarely extended to lighter forms of P. R. Stone's (2006) dark tourism spectrum. Instead, they largely focused on the medium and darker sides of the spectrum, primarily conceptualizing dark tourism through its more emotionally demanding historical focuses. For them, dark tourism seems to only focus on the past—without a specific time frame, as they mentioned examples both from the 20th century, and from the Middle Ages—and they largely do not consider the "lighter" dark, more entertainment-focused attractions among dark tourism sites. At the same time, participants were also quick to acknowledge the existence of torture chambers in various castles all around Hungary that function as macabre sites of entertainment.

4.2. The Legitimacy of Dark Tourism in Hungarian Context

The interviews demonstrate a broad consensus that dark tourism has a legitimate place within the Hungarian tourism sector. However, participants also emphasized that the current level of implementation remains limited, suggesting that the existence of potential does not automatically translate into successful tourism products if there is no strategy behind this development. The issue was that while most of the respondents agreed that it is a legitimate form of tourism, there was no unanimous agreement about the name. The interviews demonstrated differing perspectives regarding the word "dark" ("*sötét*") itself. Most participants regarded the term positively, arguing that it accurately communicates the atmosphere of the attraction and effectively distinguishes these sites from conventional tourism products. According to respondents, the label signals that visitors should expect drama rather than entertainment, while simultaneously functioning as an effective marketing concept because it highlights the unusual nature of the experience. Rather than perceiving the word "dark" as discouraging, interviewees generally believed it establishes appropriate visitor expectations and helps individuals decide whether such experiences match their personalities and interests. On the other hand, some argued that the word "dark" carries particularly negative associations in the Hungarian language, which strongly influences public attitudes toward the phenomenon. It leads to a preconceived judgment; thus, explicitly labeling a site as a dark tourism destination may discourage visitors who do not wish to encounter negatively charged themes during their leisure activities, even if they would be happily involved without the name.

> *"The fact that it's "dark" basically sums up its mood. From a marketing standpoint, it's not that bad—the term itself isn't off-putting—it just indicates that you need to be prepared for something negative. It's about human evil. It really does address that—whether it's war, racial issues, the persecution of Jews or Black people, slavery—those who don't consider others human are really dark-hearted people."*

"Some people find it repulsive, some are shocked by it, and some are simply curious about it. For many, it's a complete "blank spot": they don't know what dark tourism might be." It shows that individual feelings toward it depend largely on people's value systems, their sensitivity (both social and personal), and their life experiences. Many respondents admitted that their initial reaction was negative. The adjective "dark" was frequently associated with morbidity, perversity, tragedy, death, or even concepts such as the "dark web" or the "dark side," creating immediate negative connotations. Several participants noted that only after learning more about the concept did they recognize its educational depth and complexity. This finding indicates that the terminology itself may constitute a barrier to wider public acceptance.

> *"When we hear the term "dark tourism," the name itself sounds strange—and to many, even alarming. That's why I think it would be worth considering a different term. The goal would be to ensure that the term isn't misleading and doesn't scare people away from this field."*

> *"Instead of 'dark tourism', it could simply be called 'historical tourism'—but it's also true that not every part of history is dark."*

Despite these concerns, opinions differed regarding whether the name ("dark tourism," "sötét turizmus") should be changed. Some respondents suggested that alternative terminology or greater emphasis on specific subcategories might reduce public resistance and facilitate the integration of these attractions into Hungarian tourism strategies. One interviewee argued that the expression "memorial tourism" or "commemorative tourism" would be more socially acceptable because it lacks the negative emotional connotations associated with "dark tourism." Nevertheless, interviewees also noted that replacing the

term with a softer or more neutral expression might obscure its actual meaning, since the concept fundamentally refers to the negative aspects of human existence, with interviewees viewing the expression as informative rather than frightening. The adjective "dark" appropriately signals the emotional atmosphere of the experience and mentally prepares visitors for confronting tragic historical content. It can attract a growing segment of tourists seeking alternative, emotionally intense, or extraordinary experiences. According to these respondents, the concept of dark tourism communicates uniqueness and signaling that visitors can expect an unconventional and memorable experience and that it is not certain that visiting such a site will have a beneficial effect on everyone. After thinking about it, several interviewees concluded in the end that the concept itself does not require renaming; instead, greater public explanation and differentiation between various forms of dark tourism may be more beneficial.

> *"If we do not talk about certain events, we do not understand them, nor do we learn from them. In theory, we should also learn from the dark past in order to build a bright future."*

The interviews further highlight the historical context as an important factor influencing the future development of dark tourism. Two participants argued that Central and Eastern European societies differ fundamentally from Western European countries because historical traumas remain much closer to collective memory. Unlike many Western tourists, whose interest in dark tourism may partly reflect a search for novel or extraordinary experiences, Hungarians may possess personal connections to the depicted part of history, so domestic audiences may have less desire to revisit traumatic experiences for leisure purposes. This interpretation implies that historical proximity influences visitor motivation and may partly explain why dark tourism has developed more slowly within Hungary than in some Western destinations.

> *"After decades of socialism, our values and personalities have developed differently due to historical traumas and ongoing threats. In Western Europe, people are easily recognizable by the fact that they behave more freely and boldly when traveling, while we are more cautious because, throughout our history, every family has had to struggle to survive. We have no need to relive traumas "for entertainment," because life in Central Europe has been permeated by them from start to finish. For Western Europeans, however, this extreme curiosity is almost natural: they have lived in peace for generations, which is why they are drawn to more extreme experiences. Here, on the other hand, every generation has been driven by the need to survive, so we are more cautious and our values are different."*

Generational differences also emerged as a factor influencing the perceived legitimacy of dark tourism. According to several respondents, older generations often prefer to avoid discussing painful historical experiences, adopting an attitude that "it is better not to talk about such things." In contrast, other participants argued that it is precisely these difficult events that provide valuable learning opportunities and therefore should remain publicly accessible. These contrasting viewpoints may reflect differing relationships with collective memory. According to the participants, individuals with direct or inherited experience of historical trauma may seek greater emotional distance, whereas younger generations with less direct personal experience may approach these sites more from educational or historical perspectives. The interviews suggest that attitudes towards dark tourism may be influenced by lived experiences and generational trauma.

> *"What is still very close to home and painful for a member of Generation X is a much more distant experience for a member of Generation Z."*

One explanation offered by the interviewees concerns the relatively cautious attitude of tourism managers in Hungary. While several respondents acknowledged that dark

tourism represents a viable business opportunity, they also argued that destination managers and tourism organizations appear less willing to invest financial and human resources into its development than their counterparts elsewhere. However, several participants argued that dark tourism can successfully fit within the broader framework of Hungarian cultural tourism, provided that it presents multiple perspectives, including those of women, minorities, and other historically marginalized groups. Such an inclusive approach is viewed as essential for ensuring balanced and credible tourism interpretation. Future growth will likely depend on emphasizing specific values, such as authenticity, multiple perspectives, and remembrance. Greater public awareness of the concept, stronger integration into higher education, and more sophisticated destination management strategies may gradually increase both professional acceptance and visitor interest.

> *"Dark tourism is still a relatively unknown concept. We don't cover it in the required curriculum, and I think that's why few students take an interest in it. For those who aren't naturally interested in the topic, we don't delve into it any further."*

The interviews suggest that the linguistic legitimacy of the concept differs from its conceptual legitimacy. While respondents generally accepted the phenomenon itself, many believed that the adjective dark evokes negative associations that may hinder public acceptance before visitors understand the educational and commemorative aims of these attractions.

5. Discussion

This study explored the knowledge, acceptance, and definitions of tourism professionals regarding the field of dark tourism in Hungary. The research explored the perceptions and attitudes of interviewees regarding the term itself and its usage in future tourism development. The findings of this study demonstrate that dark tourism in Hungary is a still-evolving field within cultural and heritage tourism, with a potential that should be included in future strategies.

The interviews suggest that dark tourism is constructed as an experience driven by curiosity and morbidity, offering an authentic encounter with the difficult past. It is fundamentally centered on remembering, as it focuses on making the traces of the past visible in the present. Through this process, it places historical events into context, provides a meaningful experience, and often changes visitors by encouraging deeper reflection. At the same time, it is understood as an emotionally demanding and sad experience that confronts and shocks visitors with difficult realities. However, these emotional responses also contribute to its educational function: it is perceived as preparatory and deterrent, helping visitors understand the consequences of past events and human actions. The educational function emerged as one of the strongest arguments supporting the legitimacy of dark tourism in Hungary, demonstrating Nag and Mishra's (2023) solution for the ethical dilemmas of dark tourism. This finding is also consistent with Eck et al. (2026), who demonstrate that heritage interpretation can contribute to mindfulness, learning, and visitor satisfaction at dark tourism sites. Since the interviewees were predominantly academics, they naturally approached dark tourism from educational, commemorative, and interpretive perspectives rather than other viewpoints. Their professional responsibilities involve preserving and transferring knowledge, it explains these prominent themes. The prominence of education and remembrance also reflects the nature of Hungary's potential dark tourism resources. Many of the sites discussed by participants are associated with wars, political repression, and are national memorials. Such places are primarily understood as spaces of collective memory rather than leisure attractions, making this interpretation the most socially acceptable justification for their tourism use.

One of the most significant findings of this study is that the interviewees did not reject the phenomenon of dark tourism itself; rather, they established its legitimacy through the language used to describe it. This finding extends previous debates concerning the contested nature of dark tourism terminology (Light, 2017) by demonstrating that professional acceptance depends on both ethical concerns surrounding death and commodification and the perceived meanings of the terminology. Recent studies examining tourism terminology demonstrated that concepts are culturally negotiated rather than merely translated (Bausch et al., 2022; Bausch et al., 2024; Szőke, 2024). This case provides empirical support for this proposition. The interviews indicate that they generally consider dark tourism a legitimate tourism phenomenon because it contributes to education, remembrance, historical interpretation, and national identity, despite commercial and managerial challenges; this shows that the fundamental conceptual understanding of dark tourism is relatively stable across diverse cultural contexts. However, while the concept itself was widely accepted, its linguistic expression proved considerably more controversial because of the negative associations; some felt it creates prejudice before the concept is understood, whereas others believed that it accurately communicates the emotional nature of these experiences and prepares visitors for confronting tragic history. This case illustrates that linguistic meaning itself also affects the legitimization process in a country, as acceptance of an internationally established tourism concept cannot be understood independently from the cultural and semantic environment into which it is transferred. If one is not paying attention to the introduction, there might be issues around the resistance versus acceptance of the public before they understand the concept itself.

An equally important finding concerns the conceptual boundaries of dark tourism; most participants incorporated it into broader frameworks of heritage and cultural tourism. This supports the arguments advanced by Light (2017) and Hartmann (2014), who questioned the analytical separation between heritage tourism and dark tourism. However, the interviews suggest that while focusing on dark tourism as part of heritage tourism is correct, a distinction is necessary, as it allows potential participants to realize the emotional toll such a visitation might take on them.

Previous studies have demonstrated that interpretations of traumatic heritage are shaped by political ideologies and collective memory (Dale & Robinson, 2011; J. Lennon, 2017; Lischer, 2019). The present study not only supports these observations but further illustrates that these political processes influence not only heritage interpretation but also the acceptance of tourism terminology itself. Rather than completely accepting or rejecting the concept as a whole, the overall consensus was that there were morally legitimate and illegitimate forms of dark tourism, and that the ethically questionable parts should not be included in the tourism offering. Holocaust memorials, former prisons, cemeteries and sites of political repression were regarded as socially valuable because they promote remembrance and education. In contrast, disaster tourism, or any type of tourism involving ongoing suffering or recent catastrophes, was rejected. This demonstrates that professionals actively construct moral hierarchies within the phenomenon itself. The legitimacy of dark tourism therefore depends less on the presence of death than on the perceived purpose of visitation. The findings show the strongest correspondence with scholarship emphasizing the educational, commemorative, and heritage dimensions of dark tourism (P. Stone & Sharpley, 2008; Biran et al., 2011; Light, 2017). Like other existing models, academics also classified attractions according to their relationship with authenticity and their educative and commemorative value; however, it can be concluded that even they could not clearly define the boundaries of dark tourism.

6. Conclusions

The study explored the concept of dark tourism in the context of Hungary through expert interviews with academics and tourism professionals.

Overall, the findings suggest that the international concept of dark tourism cannot necessarily be transferred straightforwardly across cultural and linguistic contexts, as its interpretation may vary between destinations and individuals. The findings indicate an important distinction between conceptual and linguistic legitimacy: while participants generally accepted dark tourism as a tourism phenomenon, the Hungarian term "sötét turizmus" generated considerably more controversy because of its negative linguistic associations. The interviews nevertheless revealed differing views regarding the terminology: some participants considered the literal translation appropriate, while others believed that its negative associations could hinder acceptance of the concept. Moving beyond the Hungarian context, there is also a resistance to the application of the term on the international supply side, showing that the academic conceptualization does not necessarily reflect the reality (Wight et al., 2025). There is a need for education about dark tourism for both tourism professionals and tourists as well. There are universities where tourism students can learn about this topic, and there are ones where it is not included in the curriculum. The findings further suggest that increasing the visibility of dark tourism within higher education could contribute to improving public understanding of the concept. At present, knowledge of dark tourism appears to remain largely confined to academics and individuals already interested in the field. As a result, many people interpret the terms dark tourism or sötét turizmus through their everyday linguistic associations, linking them to criminality and other illicit activities. Integrating the concept more systematically into university tourism curricula and professional training could therefore help establish a more accurate understanding of its educational and commemorative dimensions. Over time, this knowledge may extend beyond academia as graduates enter the tourism industry, destination management organizations, museums, and heritage institutions, contributing to more informed public communication and reducing misunderstandings about the terminology.

Although the qualitative methodology applied enabled an in-depth exploration of perceptions related to dark tourism in Hungary, several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the findings are based on a relatively small qualitative sample of mainly university professors, which does not represent all tourism-teaching universities and other tourism professionals. Their perspectives may not fully represent the views of the wider population, including policymakers, site managers, and other stakeholders. Secondly, the qualitative nature of the research limits the generalizability of the findings, as the study reflects their interpretations of dark tourism and does not directly examine either tourism managers who manage dark tourism sites or visitor experiences or perceptions. Future research could therefore expand the analysis through investigations focusing on site manager attitudes, as well as visitor motivations and behavioral patterns at Hungarian dark tourism sites. An ethnographic examination of social media communication would also contribute to a deeper understanding of how dark tourism is seen among Hungarian citizens. In spite of these limitations, the study aims to express the need to have a broader conversation in Hungary about the usage of dark tourism in future tourism studies and developments.

Future research may further contribute to this field by examining visitors' experiences directly, comparing Hungarian dark tourism practices with those of other Central and Eastern European countries, and investigating the role of digital media and contemporary memory politics in shaping public engagement with difficult heritage. As the interviews indicate, dark tourism in Hungary possesses significant potential not only as a tourism product, but also as a means of encouraging a dialogue between different parties, that can help with the understanding of the past to lead to a better future.

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