Regina Navickiene*, Ruta Meiste**, Egle Zaleckaite***

ASSESSMENT OF DARK TOURISM AWARENESS
IN *YOUTUBE* SOCIAL NETWORK

Abstract: This paper deals with dark tourism, as fast-developing phenomenon and a form of alternative tourism, which is defined as visiting real and artificial places of disaster, exile, poverty and death. Dark tourism does not come into existence without social media, which is commonly understood as a set of web applications that allow users to publish and share content online and is associated with international brands. One of the most popular social networks is YouTube, which captures millions of viewers. Therefore, the scientific problem arises that thanks to YouTube social media platform travellers can gather information and experience from others to widen their knowledge, but it's not clear how dark tourism is rated and assessed on YouTube.

The research aim is to assess dark tourism in the social media platform YouTube. The research object is dark tourism in the social media platform YouTube. An empirical study has shown that in order to attract more tourists to visit dark tourism sites through social networks, the technical elements of video production, their content and image quality have to be carefully considered as it is important for the viewers. Respondents were interested not only in the videos about dark tourism, but also in written or spoken information, with particular emphasis on completeness, not just the musical background. Good quality and informative footage on YouTube encourage more interest in the object being seen and lead to a desire to read comments and ratings from other active social network members. The YouTube network is well-suited to promoting a variety of tourist attractions, as it is easily accessible and at no cost. Some respondents emphasized and did not change their opinion even after the discussions that the term 'dark tourism' itself is macabre and unattractive and only referred to it as a new trendy word.

Keywords: dark tourism, tanaturism, *YouTube* social network, assessment, awareness.

Introduction

Relevance of the topic. Tourism has always been a fast-developed phenomenon, and its mass form has been the basis of it all, but as the tourist experience grows, new cultural values and technology evolve, the attitudes of travellers begin to differ. Although mass tourism has been recognized as a factor of great economic and social benefit, providing jobs and boosting GDP, the changing attitude of travellers has led to the emergence of alternative forms of tourism, which are described as a tool of diversifying tourism products.

One form of alternative tourism is dark tourism, which is defined as visiting real and artificial places of disaster, exile, poverty and death. Dark tourism does not come into existence without social media, which is commonly understood as a set of web applications that allow users to publish and share content online and is associated with international brands. One of the most popular social networks is YouTube, which captures millions of viewers. Therefore, *the scientific problem* arises that thanks to YouTube social media platform travellers can gather information and experience from others to widen their knowledge, but it's not clear how dark tourism is rated and assessed on YouTube.

Therefore *the research object* in this research is dark tourism in the social media platform *YouTube*. When this *research aims* to assess dark tourism in the social media platform *YouTube*.

* **Regina Navickiene** – Assoc. Prof., PhD at Kolping University of Applied Sciences, Lithuania, e-mail: regina@ turinfo.lt
** **Ruta Meiste** – Assoc. Prof., PhD at Kolping University of Applied Sciences, Lithuania, e-mail: rutameiste@ gmail.com
*** **Egle Zaleckaite** – a graduate of Kolping University of Applied Sciences, Lithuania, e-mail: eglezaleckaite@ gmail.com

The objectives are as follows:

1. to assess the concept of dark tourism as tanaturism theoretically;

2. to carry out the research on assessment of dark tourism awareness in *YouTube* social network.

The results of the empirical study show that in order to attract more tourists to visit dark tourism sites through social networks, the technical elements of video production, and their content and image quality have to be carefully considered as it is important for the viewers. Good quality and informative footage on *YouTube* encourage more interest in the object being seen and lead to a desire to read comments and ratings from other active social network members.

The *YouTube* network is well-suited to promoting a variety of tourist attractions, as it is easily accessible and at no cost. Some respondents emphasized and did not change their opinion even after the discussions that the term 'dark tourism' itself is macabre and unattractive and only referred to it as a new trendy word.

The Concept of Dark Tourism as Tanaturism: Theoretical Analysis

Tourism has changed dramatically to meet the diverse needs of travellers. The concept of relaxing leisure in an eye-catching environment is changing and expanding into a new market that is complex and even unusual. Dark tourism is also included in this market.

The term dark tourism, also known as *tanaturism*, was first used in an article by Foley and Lennon[1] on cultural and historical heritage, published in the International Journal of Science, stating that dark tourism is attendance of death places or places, related with great suffering. Stone and Sharpley[2] were the first to look at dark tourism through the prism of the tourism market, describing the term 'dark tourism product', which includes an assessment of the consumerism, supply and demand of dark tourism, i.e. this includes visits to places or exhibitions where the main theme is the depiction of real or artificial scenes of death, suffering and massacre.

According to Vainikka[3], millions of people travel thousands of kilometres every year to visit battlefields, cemeteries, monuments, and places where historically significant people, who continue to influence our lives, died or were killed. The topic of death, as a reason for choosing the direction of travel, has only recently been discussed, but in fact it is one of the oldest causes of travel. According to Fonseca, et al.[4], early examples of dark tourism include pilgrimage travels to holy sites, Roman gladiatorial battles, medieval events, Victorian excursions to the morgues, and the ancient city of Pompeii, one of the major tourist attractions of the Romantic period. Since the end of the 20th century, the demand and supply of this type of tourism has increased dramatically, with the media providing easy access to news, especially watching movies and photos of accidents and tragedies, allowing the global community to experience a distant event as if it happened right next door.

According to Allman[5], dark tourism can be described in one word – tanaturism, which is defined as a trip to places where the traveller's basic desire is motivated by the encounter of real or symbolic death, especially violent. Tanaturism focuses on the behaviour of tourists and their motives when visiting dark tourism destinations. Allman[6] distinguishes five main activities of tanaturism (see Fig. 1).

Focus on the topic of death is interpreted as the result of people's interest in dark tourism. When dark tourism was recognized as a topical phenomenon, some countries tried to integrate this form of tourism as a product into their tourism industry. Many places around the world have put in place structures to support this new offering, so dark tourism plays an important role in both the country's economy and its image.

Fonseca, Seabra, et al.[7] distinguished the types of dark tourism based on visitors' motives for visiting dark objects (see Fig. 2).

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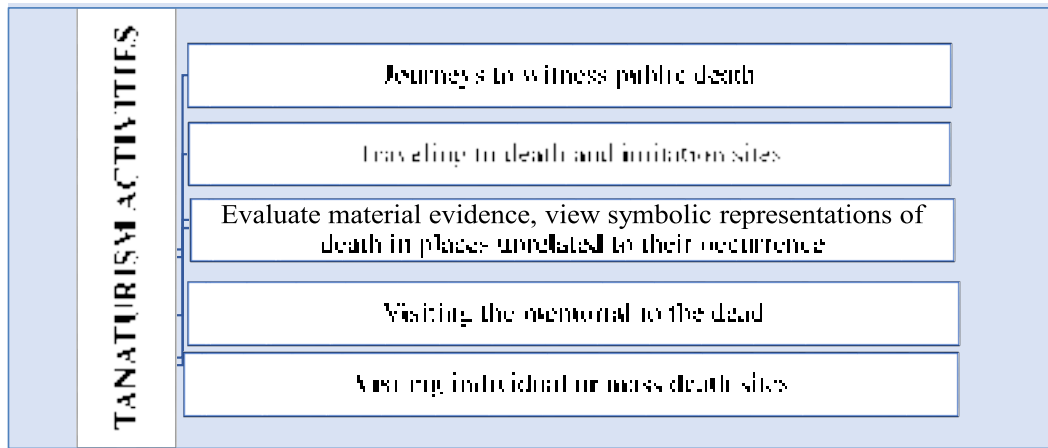
Source: Allman, 2017

Fig. 1. Types of Activities Specific to Tanaturism
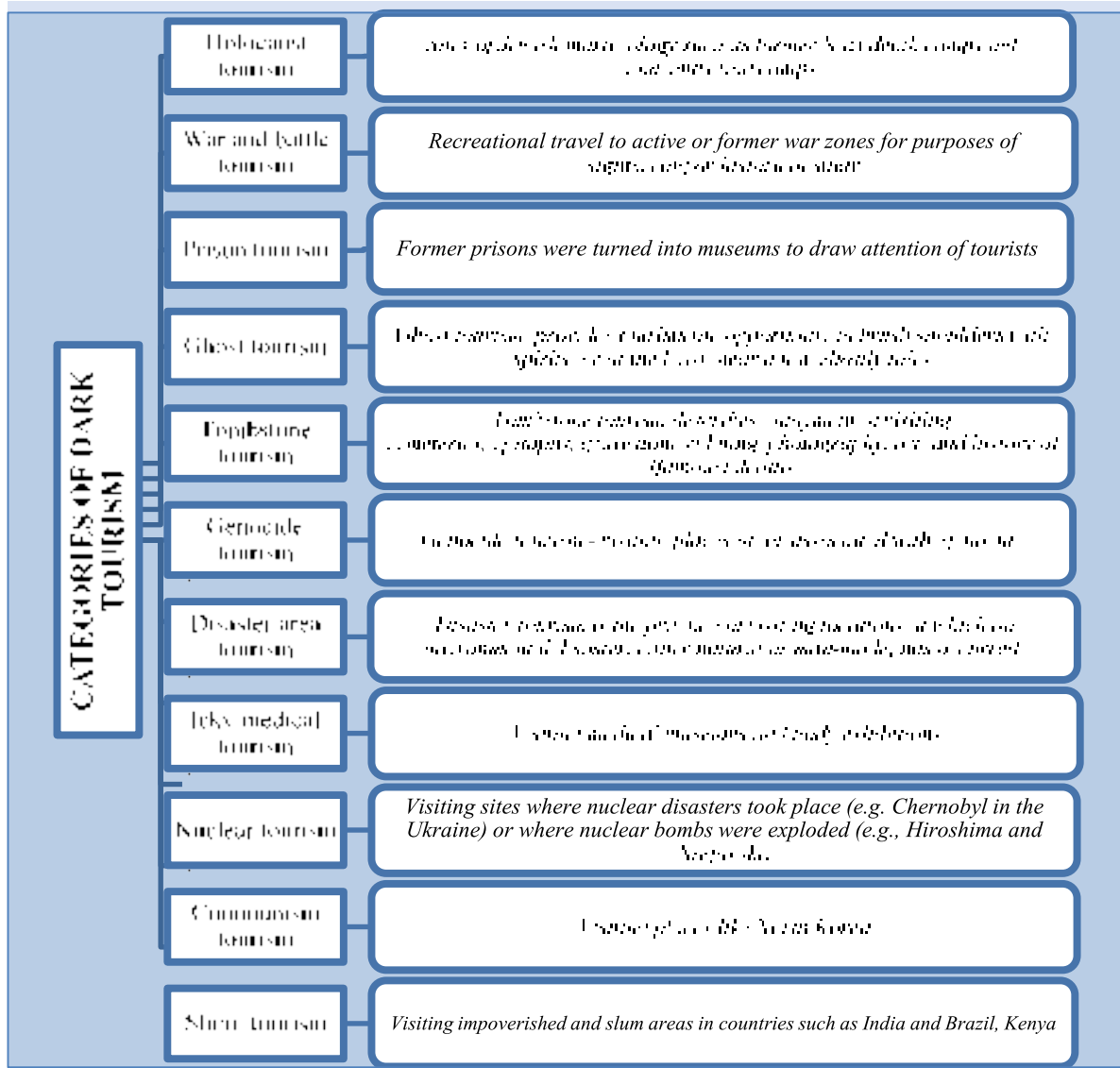
Source: Made by the authors according to Fonseca, Seabra, Silva, 2016

Fig. 2. Categories of Dark Tourism

Dark tourism has always been dependent on technology to attract the greatest amount of tourists to visit this form of tourism. Communication technology enabled people to hear and see the tragic events taking place in the world. Technology has made the public more aware of dark tourism destinations and, as a result, not only it encourages them to travel and satisfy their curiosity, but it also provides an opportunity to deepen their historical knowledge, as most of these places have a very strong historical basis[8].

In the 21st century, even 62 per cent Americans find out about the news via social media, and 18 per cent it does regularly[9]. Social media research has flourished over the last fifteen years as researchers are interested in exploring the positive and negative effects that social media can have on the daily lives of citizens and society as a whole. By connecting people around the world, social media provides an opportunity for the public to express themselves and openly share their ideas, opinions and views, regardless of social, cultural or geographical boundaries[10].

According to Wolf, et al.[11], social media can be defined as websites that allow creating profiles and monitoring communication between users; web applications that allow staying in touch and sharing information, creating groups, and chats. As an information system, social media is defined as a set of internet, communication and computer technologies, as well as a set of ideological beliefs that define how information should be created, accessed, and distributed.

According to Kane, et al.[12], the internet is now by far the most important and relevant source of tourist information. In turn, travel destinations are also directly involved in this IT process, as their competitiveness is directly related to their ability to meet both local stakeholders and the needs of tourists, and in particular the need of the technology use[13].

Today's travellers are eager to get all information about travels via social media platforms or search systems rather than traditional travel planning procedures, using the services of travel agencies[14]. As a result, social media platforms like *YouTube*, with a wealth of user-generated content, have become very popular among online traveller communities.

Methodology of the Research on Assessment of Dark Tourism Awareness in *YouTube* Social Network

Research and Data Analysis Method. A focus group research method was selected to reveal how dark tourism information is valued on *YouTube*. According to Caers and Feyter[15], this research method pays more attention to people's thoughts, emotions, and group discussion and non-verbal communication are one of the most useful parts of a focus group. This discussion between the members of the focus group can help to engage with the various topics covered, which is not usually the case with individual interviews. Zydziunaite and Sabaliauskas[16] emphasize that the group discussion method is a form of qualitative research for the collection of detailed descriptive data in small groups whose participants agree to focus on a topic of interest to all participants. This approach allowed for analysis of the interaction between the participants in the discussion group, which took place when considering the research questions, when the experiences, interests, attitudes, attitudes and opinions of the participants of the group emerged.

The obtained data were analysed using qualitative content analysis method, which helps to avoid superficiality and to look deeper into the phenomenon under investigation.

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Focus group members reviewed the video selected on the *YouTube* network during the discussion and then discussed the questions posed. In preparation for the focus group discussion, the 4 most relevant questions related to the research objective and work problem were formed:

1. "*What ideas do you have when hearing the term 'dark tourism'*?" (The aim is to find out if the respondents know what dark tourism is and what their thoughts are when they hear it. This question served as an introduction to the discussion and helped to understand participants' attitudes towards tourism).

2. "*What ideas do you have after having watched this movie*?" (Before each movie, its theme was introduced (ghost tourism, holocaust tourism, cemetery tourism, war/battle tourism, disaster tourism, or prison tourism). This question is asked to clarify respondents' views on the material they have seen.

3. "*Do you think these visuals encourage tourists to visit dark tourism sites? Why?*" (The aim is to find out the participants' reasoned opinion about visiting dark tourism objects).

4. "*How would you recommend promoting dark tourism sites?*" (The aim is to find out about the popularity of social networks and its place on *YouTube*).

During the study, participants were asked to express their thoughts, feelings and opinions about the images they had seen. After asking the key questions, the participants' responses provoked discussion and each question was discussed in detail, followed by conclusions, generalization and evaluation of the course of the discussion. The facilitator used the discussion guide[17] to ensure the fluency of the discussion so that respondents could freely express their thoughts (see Fig. 3).

1. • Define the aims and information need for the focus group
2. • Organise discussion topics into subtopics and paragraphs
3. • Form the research questions
4. • Review the guidelines and remove unnecessary questions

Fig. 3. Discussion Guidelines for the Focus Group

In order to avoid wasting respondents' time, 6 videos with about 3–4 minutes length (a maximum length of 7 minutes) were selected. Each video was selected according to the types of dark tourism mentioned above (see Figure 2), so each video corresponded to a different type of dark tourism.

Sample size and research time. For the study, a selection strategy of 2 criteria was selected: age and hobby. Two focus groups participated in the study: I – people aged 23–28 (7 people); II – people aged 45–50 (8 people). Totally 15 participants with travel experience both in Lithuania and abroad participated in the study.

Research period: 2019 March – May. Discussion time from 49 minutes to 1 hour and 18 minutes (video preview time is incalculable).

Research ethics. The research was guided by the ethical principles of scientific research: respect for individual privacy; confidentiality and anonymity; goodwill and a willingness not to harm the subject; and justice[18].

Results of the Research on Assessment of Dark Tourism in the Social Network *Youtube*

During the first and second focus group discussions, an introductory question was asked, "What ideas do you have when hearing the term 'dark tourism'?" in order to find out if the participants understand the main topic of the study. The answers of the first focus group can be divided into two groups: dark tourism is an activity that is organized illegally, in a dangerous environment for people, and it is traveling in the dark time of the day or places where they are pursuing. The second focus group associated dark tourism with 'something bad', 'failed', 'illegal travels' or 'travels related to disasters', leading to negative associations. Thus, the reporters of both groups had negative associations in their assessment of the concept of dark tourism and this term was heard for them for the first time.

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The study then introduced the true concept of dark tourism and described its types. The study participants then watched videos related to the various types of dark tourism. The subject of the first film was ghost tourism (movie duration: 1 minute and 7 seconds). After the preview, there was a discussion about "What thoughts and feelings do you get from watching this movie?".

Having analysed the answers of the participants of the first focus group, they can be divided into two groups: for one it is very interesting and engaging (e.g., „I wonder what will happen next"; „I would like to see a follow-up"); for others – not interesting, even caused some doubts (e.g., „I did not believe that real events were recorded, a real ghost"), or caused tension (e.g., „Curious, but also scary, uncomfortable", „It was very unpleasant to watch").

When discussing the results of the first and second focus group discussions to reveal how dark tourism information is rated on YouTube, it emerged from the reviewers' comments of 6 dark tourism related videos on YouTube that one footage appeared very interesting and definitely worth the attention of the viewers, but the others – not so engaging (too short, poor video or audio quality, dislike of the video content itself).

Respondents found the study useful because they were satisfied with the new experiences that would encourage them to share their theoretical knowledge, encouraged them to become dark tourism tourists and to visit a number of sites of this type. The second group was more emotional and emphasized the need for brighter colours and good emotions in tourism.

Conclusions

1. Dark tourism is most often described in literature as a visit to places of death or great distress, which is classified as an alternative to mass tourism.

2. Social media is becoming increasingly popular and is becoming an important tool for promoting dark tourism.

3. An empirical study has shown that in order to attract more tourists to visit dark tourism sites through social networks, the technical elements of video production, and their content and image quality have to be carefully considered as it is important for the viewers. Respondents were interested not only in the videos about dark tourism, but also in written or spoken information, with particular emphasis on completeness, not just the musical background. Good quality and informative footage on *YouTube* encourage more interest in the object being seen and lead to a desire to read comments and ratings from other active social network members. The *YouTube* network is well-suited to promoting a variety of tourist attractions, as it is easily accessible and at no cost. Some respondents emphasized and did not change their opinion even after the discussions that the term 'dark tourism' itself is macabre and unattractive and only referred to it as a new trendy word.

Recommendations

1. People who sign up for *Youtube* and post about dark tourism should pay more attention to the audio and video quality of their videos and their content.

2. Lithuanian tourism industry organizers of dark tourism activities should take advantage of the opportunity to place videos from excursions or other dark tourism related information on one of the most visited social networks in the world *Youtube*, as during the discussions it was noticed that there are almost no videos related to dark tourism in Lithuanian.

3. Organizations working on dark tourism should be aware that dark tourism objects do not always attract a lot of tourists because they are popularized with bullying techniques: photos, music, and silent breaks.

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