

# Tourists' Awareness and Perception on Dark Tourism in Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

Dark tourism offers unique, emotional and educational experiences of the places connected to death, tragedy, or suffering. Dark tourism represents a niche segment within the broader tourism industry that has been experiencing steady increment. However, research on dark tourism in Malaysia is still in its early stages. To date, no studies have specifically examined awareness and perception of dark tourism in this country. Thus, this study sought to explore the dimensions that shape tourists' perception towards dark tourism to provide a clearer perspective on the factors influencing their thoughts. Respondents were recruited at dark tourism sites in Melaka that includes Ghost Museum and Malaysia Prison Museum. A total of 216 samples were collected using survey questionnaires. The findings of the study reveal that tourists' perception on dark tourism is shaped by cultural beliefs and heritage sites. On the other hand, tourism opportunity does not have a strong influence on the perception of dark tourism. This study provides insightful information on how tourists view, interpret and respond to dark tourism sites and experiences. Such information ably helps destinations managers develop strategies to design immerse, respectful and educational experiences that meet tourists' expectations.

**Keywords:** Tourism experience, thanatourism, black spot tourism, morbid tourism, educational.

## INTRODUCTION

Dark tourism is defined as the act of tourists travelling to sites of death, tragedy, and suffering (Lennon, 1996 in Lewis et al., 2021). Scholars came up with new terms and labels to describe dark tourism, such as thanatourism, disaster tourism, black spot tourism, morbid tourism, and even phoenix tourism (Lewis et al., 2021). Over the past few years, dark tourism has gained more and more attention. Moreover, a growing percentage is setting its eyes on an emerging market to places of death, disaster, and atrocity (Martini et al., 2020).

Dark tourism is considered as popular among American travellers. Study shows that 82% of Americans have visited at least one dark tourism in their lifetime (Passport Photo Online, 2022). In Europe, dark tourism divided into two types that ranging from those at the brightest of the spectrum that include dark theme parks and those at the darkest side that include mass murder destinations (Juranović et al., 2021). The Europeans recognise and support dark tourism as an attraction and destination. Several popular dark tourism destinations available in Europe such as Corvin Castle in Romania, the Catacombs of Paris in France, Highgate Cemetery in London, and others.

Despite its growing popularity, dark tourism is still not widely recognized as a multifaceted phenomenon mentioned by Brian (Lewis et al., 2021). Dark tourism is viewed differently in different continents. Dark tourism has become more popular in Europe as a result of increased travel trends as well as modifications in tourist preferences and behaviour (Juranović et al., 2021). Dark locations are visited for a variety of reasons, while some are motivated by a fascination with death and seek enjoyment, others are attracted to the learning value of it. Although tourists demand for visiting dark tourism destinations is high in some countries of the world, however it is still uncommon for Malaysia to be known as one of dark tourism destinations. According

to Masanti (2016), Malaysia once suffered from Japanese colonisation during the Second World War, similar to other Southeast Asia (SEA) nations that have their own history of having suffered from conflict and war. These destinations, where wars, suffering, death, and tragedy had happened in the past, can be transformed into dark tourism offerings in Malaysia. In fact, Malaysia is even now offering a variety of attractions, including cemeteries, museums, and artefacts from previous wars (Jamin et al., 2020).

Other than that, three sites at Crocker Range Park (CRP) have been identified as potential destinations for tourists seeking something more off the beaten path, also known as dark tourism (Miwill, 2021). In addition, Masanti (2016) listed several possible spots to be dark tourism attractions in Malaysia such as The Penang War Museum, Jerejak Island, Labuan, Pulau Bidong, and others. This initiative can be considered as one of the attempts taken to promote and helps in the development of local tourism products and domestic tourism in Malaysia through dark tourism activities. Besides, as one of the niche markets in tourism, the growth of the dark tourism market in Malaysia helps in adding more value to other tourism products in a particular area.

In academic field, there has been an increase in interest and theoretical perspectives on dark tourism (Zahari et al., 2016). However, while existing research mainly undertaken in European countries, only a few studies report available in the Asian context (Sarkar et al., 2021). Therefore, to enrich the body of knowledge in the field of dark tourism especially in the context of Malaysia's tourism industry, this study aims to examine the factors that effects perceptions of dark tourism in Malaysia. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the academic discourse on dark tourism and provide valuable insight for tourism stakeholders in improving site management and tourists experience.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Dark Tourism as New Niche in Tourism

Visits to dark tourism sites is seen as emerging niche of tourism attractions as tourists begun interested in different dimension of touristic satisfaction and experience where disaster, mass death, and horrifying events happened in the past (Masanti, 2016). Dark tourism classifies as one of forte tourism in which popular among the youth tourists' market that can drive to a new direction of rebuilding tourism concept in Malaysia. While niche tourism commonly offers tourism excitement within smaller number of visitors in total, less damaging on the environment, and the tourists are more courteous and respectful, thus, the emergence of dark tourism is seen to benefit local tourism development while achieving national agenda (Ahmat et al., 2021).

### Perception of Dark Tourism

Perception is known as the ability to be aware of something that extracts understanding as a process of perceiving. It is also can be defined as the process by which sensations that is the immediate responses of one's sensory receptors (e.g., ears, eyes, mouth and nose) are selected, organized, and interpreted. Perception plays vital role in influencing travel decisions (Masanti, 2016). Perceptions on dark tourism commonly linked death and tourism, holding the concept of visiting the sites linked with dark tragedies such as death, disaster, and human suffering (Iliev, 2020). Dark tourism serves new experience for tourists who are looking for interesting and unusual adventure to fulfil their curiosity, and to some extent, to experience suffering of others (Jamin et al. 2020).

Although dark tourism product in Malaysia remains untapped, there are many 'dark' sites available in this country potentially to be promoted to carve the country as one of dark tourism destinations. Once, Malaysia was among other countries of Southeast Asia that suffered from occupation of Japanese army during World War II, left the involved sites where battles, suffering, and death occurred in the past to be dark to tourism products of the country (Masanti, 2016). Undeniably, the development and promotion of dark tourism contribute to positive impacts on the infrastructure of the place as well as economic development of the local communities there, although in terms of cultural perspective, it is unacceptable among locals. In addition, the development and promotional activities of dark tourism also could enhance the preservation of historical and cultural facts that serve as educational functions for both local communities and tourists (Aleshinlove et al., 2025).

## Awareness of Dark Tourism

### Tourism opportunities

Tourism is one of prominent economic contributor to the Malaysian economy. With the introduction of new tourism package that include dark tourism sites could boost the industry. Noticeably, the West, Europe, and Australia experiencing growth in dark tourism offerings. Looking at Malaysia, many destinations here are well known for dark tourism product. For instance, one of it that is the outstanding one is Mahsuri Tomb in Langkawi Island, Kedah (Ahmat et al., 2021), Pudu Prison in Kuala Lumpur, Penang war Museum and Jerejak Island in Penang, Pulau Bidong in Terengganu, Batu Lintang in Sarawak, Pulau Berhala and Mantanani Island in Sabah (Masanti, 2016). These sites offer dark tourism opportunity to the tourists.

The successful management and presentation of dark tourism sites are crucial for visitor satisfaction. Sharpley and Stone (2009) highlight the importance of balancing the preservation of a site's authenticity with the provision of modern visitor services to enhance overall experience. However, it is crucial to maintain their unique appeal without compromising heritage and historical integrity. Besides, affordability is significant factor in providing opportunity for dark tourism tourists to access the sites to explore the beyond the ordinary experience (e.g., relate to paranormal, death, tragedy, or macabre) experiences within reasonable cost.

### Cultural Beliefs

Dark tourism package can be classified as 'one size that fits all' since tourists visiting dark tourism sites could obtain all onsite values including education, culture, and adventure (Ahmat et al., 2021). Such sites also may serve ritualistic purposes, often aligning with cultural and religious traditions. As long as these practices do not against the local culture, dark tourism remains an acceptable form of cultural engagement (Stone, 2013). Meanwhile, the commercialization of dark tourism sites raises concerns about cultural authenticity. The transformation of solemn sites into entertainment venues can dilute their significance, leading to debates on whether commercial interests should take precedence over historical integrity (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996).

The connection between dark tourism and ritualistic practices has been widely discussed. Seaton (1996) introduced the concept of thanatourism, where visitors seek to understand or commemorate death-related events. Many cultures incorporate visits to dark tourism sites as part of ancestral worship, memorialization, or spiritual cleansing. However, in some societies, visiting places associated with death is strictly regulated due to beliefs in bad luck or spiritual contamination (Lennon & Foley, 2010). In addition, cultural beliefs and taboos significantly influence engagement with dark tourism. In many Asian societies, for example, visiting places linked to death, such as cemeteries or battlefields, is believed to bring misfortune (Teo & Yeoh, 1997). Individuals who do not believe in ghosts or superstitions may be more open to visiting such locations, whereas those with strong spiritual convictions may refrain from participation (Dann & Seaton, 2001).

### Heritage Sites

Heritage sites of dark tourism are locations linked to historical tragedies, war, and death (Stone, 2006). That is why the cultural representations of mortality such as death and dying are often bound up with heritage and tourism. In the present-day dark tourism can represent fundamental political oppositions of a 'heritage that hurts' (Roberts & Stone, 2014).

Furthermore, genocide sites that are significant dark tourism destinations such as in Cambodia and Rwanda's genocide memorials provide insight into mass atrocities (Farmaki, 2013). Nonetheless, dark tourism would function as educational resource for visitors to learn local culture and get insight into specific tragedy of the dark tourism site (Aleshinlove et al., 2025). Unlike ghost tours, dark tourism sites focus on historical education and commemoration rather than horror (Poria et al. 2003). It has been affirmed by Lennon and Foley (2000) that dark tourism sites serve as places of remembrance or glimpse of the past and education (Lennon & Foley, 2000).

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative research design to investigate the perceptions of tourists on dark tourism

attraction. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered at two prominent dark tourism attractions, that include Ghost Museum and Malaysia Prison Museum in Melaka, Malaysia. Tourists visiting the selected sites were approached and invited to participate in the survey.

A cross-sectional approach was adopted, capturing responses at one point in time. A total of 216 samples were gathered using a convenient sampling method. This sampling strategy allowed for the efficient collection of data from individuals who had direct experience with the attractions, thereby enhancing the relevance of the findings to dark tourism.

The survey instrument was structured into two sections. Section A consists of information on respondents' profiles, while Section B comprises information of the key variables under investigation. Five-point Likert-scale that ranges from 1 - Strongly disagree to 5 - Strongly agree was applied for variable measurement to ensure consistency and reliability in responses. The collected data were analysed using statistical techniques via SPSS software to assess the descriptive information and relationship between variables to derive meaningful insights into tourists' perceptions on dark tourism.

A pilot test has been conducted within the lecturers and students at a public university in Melaka as well as the employees at the two museums. 30 samples were collected for pilot test. The Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) score for 28 items of this study is at 0.810, suggesting good reliability of the instrument used in this study.

A reliability test was conducted to assess the internal consistency of the measurement scale. Cronbach's alpha is the most often used, and it is based on the average correlation of items within a test if the items are standardised. Cronbach's alpha values range from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating greater internal consistency among items in a scale or test. Table 4 indicates the result of reliability test of this study using Cronbach's alpha coefficient.

Table 4: Result of Cronbach's Alpha.

No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha based on Standardised Items
30	0.886	0.888
Variables	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Dark tourism perception	8	0.669
Tourism opportunity	7	0.941
Cultural belief	8	0.753
Heritage site	7	0.825

Table 4 indicates that the overall Cronbach's alpha for the 30-item scale of this study was 0.886, indicating a high level of internal consistency. When based on standardised items, the result slightly increased to 0.888, in which the result supporting the robustness of the scale. Further, the result of individual construct was examined. The results showed that the Cronbach's Alpha ranged between 0.669 to 0.941. Overall, the findings confirm that the measurement scale is reliable.

## FINDINGS

### Respondents Profiles

Table 2 summarises demographic profiles of the respondents of this study who are the ghost museums visitors. More than half of the respondents were female visitors (65.1%), while the remaining 26.2% of them were male visitors. Majority (44.1%) of the respondents were aged between 18 to 25 years old, followed by 24% of them between 26 to 33, and 19.2% between 34 to 41 years old. From the racial perspectives, almost all of the visitors were Malay (85.2%). Only minority of the visitors were Indians and Chinese with 3.9% and 3.1% each respectively. Meanwhile 2.2% of them were the other races.

Based on educational levels, ghost museum visitors are mostly holding a Bachelor's Degree (35.4%), followed

by Diploma (26.6%) and high school graduate (16.6%). Moreover, majority of the visitors were the students (31.9%), meanwhile 27.5% were employed in the private sector and 18.3% were the government servants.

Table 2: Respondents' Profiles

Information		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	67	29.3
	Female	149	65.1
Age	18-25	101	44.1
	26-33	55	24.0
	34-41	44	19.2
	42-49	9	3.9
	50 and above	7	3.1
Race	Malay	195	85.2
	Chinese	7	3.1
	Indian	9	3.9
	Other	5	2.2
Education Level	Primary school	2	0.9
	High school	38	16.6
	Certificate programme	12	5.2
	Diploma	61	26.6
	Bachelor's Degree	81	35.4
	Post-graduate	22	9.6
Employment	Government Servant	42	18.3
	Private Sector	63	27.5
	Self-employed	18	7.9
	Retired	1	0.4
	Student	73	31.9
	Unemployed	18	7.9
	Other	1	0.4

Note: n = 216.

## Descriptive Statistics

Table 3 presents the descriptives statistics of the variables used in this study. Perception of dark tourism is the dependent variable of the study while tourists' awareness is the dependent variable that represents by three dimensions of tourism opportunity, cultural belief, and heritage site. The mean scores and standard deviations values are measured to identify the respondents' input on the variables.

Perception of dark tourism consists of eight items. All items were received high mean scores that ranges from 2.89 to 3.93, wherein the top three with the highest mean scores are The history of dark tragedies at dark tourism sites is a sensitive issue (3.93), Visiting dark tourism sites is a fulfilling experience that satisfies my curiosity (3.92), and Malaysia has potential to be promoted as a popular dark tourism destination (3.69).

Next, for the tourists' awareness on dark tourism, the mean scores for tourism opportunity ranges from 2.62 to 3.21. Among the top-rated items are I aware that there are many dark tourism sites to be visited in Malaysia (3.21), The establishment of dark tourism in Malaysia is currently at a satisfactory level (3.19), and New tourism packages of dark tourism were commercialised in Malaysia (3.07). Item I am aware that I can travel to the dark tourism sites in Malaysia receives the least amount of mean score (2.62) among the dimension and among all variables of Tourists' Awareness.

Cultural belief consists of eight items with mean scores that range from 2.86 to 3.30. Item I aware that dark



tourism sites are locations that are often utilised for ritual purposes receives 3.30 mean score. Meanwhile, item Dark tourism is acceptable in my culture as long it does not go against their principles receives 3.14 mean score.

Lastly, Heritage site dimension is measured using seven items. The mean scores ranged from 3.28 to 3.88 with an average of 3.56, marks the highest average mean score among all variables. Item Visiting dark tourism sites allows me to catch a glimpse of what had happened in the past (e.g., during wartime that become country's history (3.88), and Malaysia has many war-related heritage sites that can be turned into dark tourism attractions (3.75).

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of mean scores and standard deviations.

Dimensions and Attributes	Mean	Std. Deviation
<b>Perception of dark tourism</b>		
The history of dark tragedies at dark tourism sites is a sensitive issue	3.93	1.002
Visiting dark tourism sites is a fulfilling experience that satisfies my curiosity	3.92	1.053
Malaysia has potential to be promoted as a popular dark tourism destination	3.69	1.075
Dark tourism is the act of visiting places associated with death	3.67	1.034
Dark tourism is related to ghosts and paranormal activity (e.g., visiting abandoned houses and buildings)	3.27	1.134
Dark tourism sites were established to exploit profit	3.16	1.192
Dark tourism is an interesting experience for me	2.98	1.329
Dark tourism sites offer educational value	2.89	1.330
Average mean scores :	3.44	
<b>Tourists' Awareness on Dark Tourism</b>		
<b>a. Tourism opportunity</b>		
I am aware that there are many dark tourism sites to be visited in Malaysia	3.21	1.381
The establishment of dark tourism in Malaysia is currently at a satisfactory level	3.19	1.345
New tourism packages of dark tourism were commercialised in Malaysia	3.07	1.306
The entrance fees at dark tourism sites in Malaysia is affordable	2.93	1.341
I could join a beyond the ordinary experience (e.g., relate to paranormal, death, tragedy, or macabre) experience in dark tourism sites in Malaysia	2.83	1.389
Even the location is far, dark tourism sites are still accessible for me to visit	2.80	1.310
I am aware that I can travel to the dark tourism sites in Malaysia	2.62	1.308
Average mean scores :	2.95	
<b>b. Cultural belief</b>		
I aware that dark tourism sites are locations that are often utilised for ritual purposes	3.30	1.325
Dark tourism is acceptable in my culture as long it does not go against their principles	3.14	1.210
I believe all ghost stories related to dark tourism sites	3.10	1.226
Commercialisation of tourism at dark tourism sites could impact the cultural authenticity of the place	3.09	1.185
I am aware that visiting places related to death can bring bad luck	3.03	1.327
My cultural beliefs prevent me from visiting sites associated with death	3.00	1.177
I will not visit places associated with death and tragedies to avoid encountering ghost	2.96	1.357
I do not believe in ghost, superstitions, and taboos associated with dark tourism sites	2.86	1.239
Average mean scores :	3.06	
<b>c. Heritage site</b>		

Visiting dark tourism sites allows me to catch a glimpse of what had happened in the past (e.g., during wartime that become country's history)	3.88	1.000
Malaysia has many war-related heritage sites that can be turned into dark tourism attractions	3.75	1.127
I am aware that dark tourism allows heritage sites explorations	3.59	1.133
I am aware that dark tourism sites just as same as heritage tourism sites	3.57	1.045
War-related heritage sites should be promoted as dark tourism attractions	3.50	1.201
Dark tourism sites in Malaysia are part of the country's heritage that should be conserved	3.35	1.167
Visiting heritage sites where death occurred did not bring horror or spooky feelings	3.28	1.193
Average mean scores :	3.56	

Note: n = 216.

Note: 5-point Likert scale of 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, and 5 = strongly agree.

Overall, when comparing between dimensions of Awareness on dark tourism in Malaysia, it was found that dark tourism opportunity receives lowest average mean score of 2.95. on the other hand, dimensions of cultural belief and heritage site are 3.06 and 3.56 each respectively. The results suggest that cultural beliefs and heritage sites are two important things considered by dark tourism tourists.

## Inferential Statistics

### Regression analysis

A regression analysis was performed to examine the relationship between dark tourism perception, tourism opportunity, cultural belief, and heritage site. Regression provides a coefficient ( $\beta$ ) that quantifies the strength and direction of relationships. Table 5 presents the model summary, indicating that the dependent variables (tourism opportunity, cultural belief, and heritage site) explain approximately 29.4% of the variance in the dark tourism perception ( $R^2 = 0.294$ ). The adjusted  $R^2$  value (0.284) suggests that even after accounting for potential overfitting, the model remains a moderately strong predictor of dark tourism perception. In social science, the  $R^2$  of 10% to 30% is considered to have a moderate explanatory power (Cohen et al., 2003).

Next, the ANOVA results present in Table 6, which assess the overall significance of the regression model. The F-statistics ( $F = 29.407$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) confirms that the model is statically significant. Therefore, the variables suggested in this study (tourism opportunity, cultural belief, and heritage site are able to account for a significant variance in perception of dark tourism.

Table 5: Model Summary.

Model	R	R Square	Adjust R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.542	.294	.284	4.27549

- Predictors: (Constant), Heritage site, Cultural belief, Tourism opportunity.
- Dependent Variable: Tourism perception.

Table 6: ANOVA.

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	1612.681	3	537.560	29.407	.001b
	Residual	3875.315	212	18.280		
	Total	5487.995	215			

- a. Predictors: (Constant), Heritage\_site, Cultural belief, Tourism opportunity.
- b. Dependent Variable: tourism perception.

Table 7 presents the results regression analysis result, highlighting the relationship between dark tourism perception as the dependent variable and the three dimensions of Awareness, namely tourism opportunity, cultural belief, and heritage site. Among all predictor variables, cultural beliefs ( $\beta = 0.267$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) and heritage site ( $\beta = 0.301$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) exhibits significant positive relationships with dark tourism perception. The findings recommend that stronger cultural beliefs and a well-preserved heritage site contribute positively to individuals' perception of dark tourism. Conversely, tourism opportunity ( $\beta = 0.035$ ,  $p = 0.416$ ) does not show a statistically significant impact on dark tourism perception, as its p-value exceeds the conventional threshold of 0.05. the result also indicates that variations in dark tourism opportunities do not significantly influence tourism perception in the given context. Next, the standardised coefficients reveal that heritage site ( $\beta = 0.328$ ) has the strongest influence on dark tourism perception, followed by cultural belief ( $\beta = 0.322$ ). Meanwhile, tourism opportunity ( $\beta = 0.055$ ) has a negligible effect on dark tourism perception.

Table 7: Coefficients.

		Understanding Coefficients		Standard Coefficient	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error			
1	(Constant)	12.729	1.605		7.931	.001
	Tourism opportunity	.035	.042	.055	.814	.416
	Cultural belief	.267	.050	.322	5.393	.001
	Heritage_site	.301	.064	.328	4.721	.001

- a. Dependent Variable: tourism perception.

To sum up, these findings underscore the importance of cultural and heritage elements in shaping visitors' perceptions of dark tourism, whereas tourism opportunity alone may not be a strong determinant. Hence, this study provides a significant contribution to the understanding of tourism perception by highlighting the dominant role of cultural and heritage elements in promoting dark tourism experience to the tourists. This novel insight advances the theoretical framework of dark tourism perception and opens new avenues for future research to identify additional factors that enhances the explanatory power of the model.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study examined the influence of tourism opportunity, cultural belief, and heritage site on perception of dark tourism in Malaysia. The findings indicate that dark tourism perception is significantly shaped by cultural beliefs and heritage sites. It was revealed in this study that tourism opportunity does not exhibit a strong effect on perception of dark tourism. With the regression model result of 29.4% of the variance in perception of dark tourism, suggesting that other factors may also contribute to shaping tourists' view upon dark tourism. Therefore, the results highlight the importance of cultural and heritage aspects in dark tourism experiences, emphasizing their role in influencing visitors' perceptions.

Despite the significant contribution of this study to understanding the role of cultural beliefs, heritage sites, and tourism opportunities in shaping tourists' perception on dark tourism, several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the sample of this study might not be generalised to other populations since the data were collected at only two dark tourism sites in Malaysia, that include Ghost Museum and Malaysia Prison Museum in Melaka. In addition, more than three-quarter of the respondents were Malay, who are living in the faith of Islamic religion and beliefs. Thus, future research should broaden the area and consider using a more diverse sample to enhance the external validity of the findings.

Secondly, in terms of theoretical perspective, future research should incorporate other potential determinants, such as destination image and motivation to travel to dark tourism destinations as predictors of dark tourism perception. Expanding the scope of variables in future research could improve the explanatory power of the model and provide a more comprehensive understanding of tourists' perception of dark tourism.



Notwithstanding its limitations, this study provides a strong foundation for future research to explore additional variables and at different locations. By addressing these gaps, future research can enhance tourism development strategies and create more meaningful, informative, and culturally enriched tourist experience.

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