

Visitor Experiences at Dark Tourism Sites in Malaysia: A Thematic Analysis of Online Reviews on Kellie's Castle and Penang War Museum

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ABSTRACT

This study examines visitor experiences at two prominent dark tourism sites in Malaysia: Kellie's Castle and Penang War Museum. Data comprised 300 online reviews (150 for Kellie's Castle and 150 for Penang War Museum), drawn from TripAdvisor (n = 200) and Google Review (n = 100). Reviews were screened for relevance, length, originality, and English language. The analysis revealed five interconnected themes that characterise visitor experiences: (1) Historical discovery and learning, (2) Emotional resonance and affective responses, (3) Authenticity and site interpretation, (4) Supernatural expectation gap, and (5) Social sharing and memory construction. What we found was that historical discovery emerged as the most prominent theme and was frequently associated with positive visitor evaluations, while supernatural expectations frequently led to disappointment due to mismanaged site interpretation. This paper adds to dark tourism literature by showing how online reviews can give us rich insights into how visitors make sense of their experiences at dark tourism sites. For site managers, we recommend better interpretive materials, improved maintenance, and more honest marketing about what visitors can actually expect.

Keywords: Dark tourism, visitor experience, thematic analysis, online reviews, Kellie's Castle, Penang War Museum, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Over the past twenty years, dark tourism has become a major focus in tourism research (Lennon & Foley, 2000; Stone & Sharpley, 2008). The phenomenon refers to travel to sites associated with death, tragedy, and suffering (Stone, 2006). The idea is not new since it goes way back of previous important tragic events and today's dark tourism covers everything from battlefields and genocide memorials to prisons and disaster sites (Hartmann, 2014). Seaton (1996) introduced the term "thanatourism" to describe travel motivated by the desire for encounters with death, a concept that has since evolved alongside "dark tourism" (Foley & Lennon, 1996).

The Malaysian context offers unique dark tourism sites that combine historical significance with supernatural narratives (Mohd Zahari et al., 2016; Tan & Lim, 2018). For example, Kellie's Castle in Perak is an unfinished mansion that a Scottish planter named William Kellie Smith built. What makes it interesting is how colonial history, ghost stories, and architectural mystery all come together there (Ming Tak & Ho, 2005). Similarly, Penang War Museum, constructed as a British fort in the 1930s and later used by the Japanese Imperial Army during World War II, embodies the convergence of wartime history and paranormal tourism (Mohd Zahari et al., 2016; Tan & Lim, 2018).

The digital era has transformed how tourists share and consume travel information. TripAdvisor and Google Review, for instance, have become the platforms where visitors share their experiences, and these reviews shape what other people expect and decide (O'Connor, 2010; Çakar, 2018). These platforms provide researchers with unprecedented access to authentic visitor narratives that reveal motivations, experiences, and post-visit reflections.

Problem Statement

Even though dark tourism has obtained a lot of attention from researchers, not many studies have looked at visitor experiences at Malaysian sites using qualitative analysis of online reviews (Mohd Zahari et al., 2016; Tan & Lim, 2018). Existing studies have predominantly focused on Western contexts or employed quantitative approaches that may not capture the richness of visitor experiences (Ivanova & Light, 2017; Miles, 2014). Furthermore, the intersection between historical appreciation and supernatural expectations at dark tourism sites remains underexplored (Garcia, 2012; Silverman, 2015). This study addresses these gaps by employing systematic thematic analysis to understand how visitors construct meaning through their experiences at Kellie's Castle and Penang War Museum.

Research Objectives

This study pursues three interconnected objectives:

1. To identify what kinds of experiences visitors talk about in their reviews of Kellie's Castle and Penang War Museum.
2. To examine the emotions and meaning-making that come through in what visitors write.
3. To develop themes that can guide site management and marketing.

Significance of the Study

This research contributes to dark tourism literature by providing empirical evidence from the Malaysian context, an underrepresented region in dark tourism scholarship (Tan & Lim, 2018). The study demonstrates the value of online review analysis as a methodological approach for understanding visitor experiences (Çakar, 2018). On a practical level, our findings provide site managers some concrete ideas on how to improve visitor satisfaction and match what they offer with what visitors actually want.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dark Tourism: Conceptual Foundations

Dark tourism is a complex thing that it is hard to pin down with just one definition (Stone, 2006). Stone (2006: 146) puts it this way: dark tourism is 'the act of travel to sites associated with death, suffering and the seemingly macabre'. Tarlow (2005: 48) described it as "visitations to places where tragedies or historically noteworthy death has occurred and that continue to impact our lives." Foley and Lennon (1996) came up with the term to describe how we are drawn to sites of death and disaster, and they pointed out how media plays a big part in shaping these attractions.

The concept encompasses significant variation in "darkness intensity" (Stone, 2006). Sharpley (2005) proposed a continuum ranging from "lightest" dark tourism (sites with limited death association) to "darkest" dark tourism (sites explicitly dedicated to death and suffering). This spectrum includes war memorials, concentration camps, disaster sites, prisons, and cemeteries (Stone & Sharpley, 2008).

Dark Tourism in Asia

Researchers are paying more attention to dark tourism in Asia these days, but there is still a lot less work done compared to Western contexts (Tan & Lim, 2018). Asian dark tourism sites include the Jeju April 3rd Peace Park in South Korea (Kang et al., 2012), Hiroshima Peace Memorial in Japan, and various war-related sites across Southeast Asia (Henderson, 2000). Mohd Zahari et al. (2016) analysed dark tourism in Malaysia and found that tour operators were not really pushing these products, which may have held back market growth. Tan and Lim (2018) conducted a systematic review of dark tourism in Malaysia, identifying Penang War Museum and Kellie's Castle as key sites warranting further investigation.

Supernatural Dimension of Dark Tourism

Supernatural narratives are part of dark tourism, though they often take a back seat to historical content (Garcia, 2012). Garcia (2012: 14) states that supernatural tourism involves the desire to encounter ghosts, an interest in the supernatural, and visitation of places associated with the spirit world. These elements tend to surface at sites where tragic events have spawned ghost stories and paranormal legends over time (Holloway, 2010).

Research on haunted attractions suggests that supernatural narratives work well as marketing tools since they draw in visitors who want entertainment alongside historical engagement (Inglis & Holmes, 2003). Holmes and Inglis (2004) looked at how ghost stories get packaged for tourist consumption and found that they appeal to people looking for both authentic supernatural experiences and a bit of fun. Silverman (2015) studied paranormal investigators and their relationship with haunted sites, noting that ghost hunters play a part in turning these spaces into commercial attractions.

At the same time, scholars have raised concerns about leaning too heavily on supernatural narratives in dark tourism marketing. Barbu Kleitsch and Bader-Jurj (2026) caution against what they call the "spectral-sensational" approach where supernatural elements are pushed so hard that they risk making light of the historical suffering these sites represent. This tension between keeping visitors entertained and maintaining historical integrity is something that sites like Kellie's Castle and Penang War Museum have to navigate carefully, given that ghost stories and real history exist side by side at both locations.

Visitor Experiences And Meaning-Making

Understanding visitor experiences at dark tourism sites requires attention to both cognitive and emotional dimensions (Kang et al., 2012; Biran et al., 2011). Biran et al. (2011) identified three conceptual approaches to dark tourism: supply perspective (focusing on site characteristics), demand perspective (focusing on visitor motivations), and integrated perspective (combining site features and visitor experiences).

The benefit-based approach (Driver et al., 1987; Manning, 1999) offers a framework for understanding what visitors seek and obtain from their experiences. Kang et al. (2012) applied this approach to the Jeju April 3rd Peace Park, identifying obligation and education as primary drivers of visitation. Packer and Ballantyne (2016) developed a multidimensional model of visitor experiences encompassing physical, cognitive, emotional, spiritual, and social dimensions.

Online Reviews as Research Data

User-generated content on platforms such as TripAdvisor has become a valuable data source for tourism research (O'Connor, 2010). Çakar (2018) employed content analysis of online reviews to examine nostalgic experiences at Gallipoli, demonstrating the utility of this approach for understanding dark tourism experiences. Online reviews give us authentic, unsolicited stories from visitors, which is the kind that reflects real experiences and honest emotional responses (Creswell, 2014). The value of such data lies in its naturally occurring nature, free from researcher-induced bias common in interviews or surveys (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

We used qualitative content analysis with thematic analysis techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Thematic analysis allows for systematic identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns within qualitative data. It works well for online review data because it helps us organise and make sense of different visitor perspectives (Creswell, 2014). The analysis employed multiple coding strategies—open coding, process coding, and emotional coding—to capture the richness and complexity of visitor experiences (Saldaña, 2013; Charmaz, 2014).

Study Setting

The study focused on two dark tourism sites in Malaysia. Kellie's Castle, located in Batu Gajah, Perak, is an unfinished mansion built by Scottish planter William Kellie Smith in the early twentieth century (Ming Tak & Ho, 2005). The site is renowned for its architectural uniqueness and the ghost stories associated with its history. Penang War Museum, situated at Bukit Batu Maung, Penang, is a restored British fortification that was used by the Japanese Imperial Army during World War II (Mohd Zahari et al., 2016). The site contains bunkers, tunnels, and prison cells that commemorate the wartime experience (Tan & Lim, 2018).

Data Source

We picked TripAdvisor and Google Review as our main data sources - they're the biggest players in the online review space and have a solid track record in tourism research (O'Connor, 2010; Çakar, 2018). TripAdvisor, in particular, has been validated as a reliable platform for collecting visitor-generated content across tourism attractions worldwide (Baka, 2016). Google Review was included as a supplementary source to capture reviews from a broader demographic of visitors who may not actively use TripAdvisor (Ayeh et al., 2013).

Data Collection

We collected 300 online reviews between October and November 2019. Now, you might be wondering. The reasons for 2019 data were first, 2019 gives us a snapshot of what things looked like before COVID-19 turned everything upside down. Studies have documented significant changes in tourism behaviour post-2020 (Gössling et al., 2021; Zenker & Kock, 2020). The 2019 reviews thus serve as a valuable reference point that reflects "normal" operating conditions, before pandemic-related restrictions, capacity limits, and altered visitor expectations. This baseline is essential for understanding how dark tourism sites operated during stable conditions and for identifying changes that may have occurred subsequently.

Second, the quality and richness of online reviews from this period are well-documented. The pre-pandemic period was characterised by high levels of user-generated content on tourism platforms, with TripAdvisor and Google Review serving as primary channels for visitor feedback (O'Connor, 2010). Reviews from this period offer detailed, authentic narratives that provide comprehensive insights into visitor experiences.

Third, the methodological approach of this study—thematic analysis using open, process, and emotional coding—does not require recent data to generate meaningful findings. The data are analysed for their intrinsic value in revealing patterns of visitor meaning-making, motivation, and satisfaction. These patterns reflect enduring aspects of visitor experience that remain relevant regardless of the collection date.

Fourth, there is established precedent in academic literature for using pre-pandemic data when the research questions focus on fundamental aspects of visitor experience that are not time-dependent (Çakar, 2018; Baka, 2016). Thematic insights regarding visitor motivations, emotional responses, and authenticity perceptions are relatively stable and not contingent on the specific collection year.

Sample Selection Criteria

Reviews were selected based on the following criteria:

1. We focused on 2019 reviews to keep the dataset consistent
2. Relevance: Reviews must explicitly describe the visitor's experience at the site.
3. Language: Only English-language reviews were included to ensure consistency in analysis.
4. Length: Reviews with substantive content (minimum 20 words) were preferred.
5. Originality: Duplicate or promotional reviews were excluded.

The sample comprised 150 reviews for Kellie's Castle and 150 reviews for Penang War Museum. The initial search yielded 480 reviews. After removing duplicates, promotional posts, reviews shorter than 20 words, non-English reviews, and reviews that did not describe a personal visit, 300 reviews remained. Reviews were manually compiled in Microsoft Excel and imported into NVIVO 12. No usernames or identifying information were recorded.

Data Analysis Strategy

We conducted the analysis in three coding phases, following what Saldaña (2013) and Charmaz (2014) recommend for thematic analysis:

In this study, visitor experience refers to the overall narrative account provided by the reviewer; satisfaction refers to explicit evaluative statements (e.g., “worth visiting,” “disappointed”); expectations refers to pre-visit anticipations; and emotional responses refers to affective language (e.g., “amazed,” “creepy”). These constructs are related but not treated as synonymous.

Expectations were identified through process coding of pre-visit statements (e.g., “heard it was haunted,” “expected ghosts”) and emotional coding of disappointment or surprise. These were contrasted with on-site descriptions (e.g., “no ghost,” “not scary”) to identify the expectation gap.

Phase 1: Open Coding. We started with line-by-line analysis of each review, looking for specific ideas and meanings. Codes were developed inductively from the data, capturing both explicit content and implicit meanings. This phase generated 87 distinct codes across both sites. Open coding allowed the emergence of patterns without predetermined categories, ensuring the analysis remained grounded in the data (Creswell, 2014).

Phase 2: Process Coding. Next, we used process coding to pick out the actions, events, and sequences in what visitors wrote. This approach captured the temporal dimensions of visitor experiences, including pre-visit expectations, on-site activities, and post-visit reflections. Process coding is particularly valuable for understanding how experiences unfold over time (Saldaña, 2013).

Phase 3: Emotional Coding. Emotional coding identified affective expressions within reviews. This included direct emotional language (e.g., “disappointed,” “amazed,” “creepy”) and indirect emotional indicators (e.g., use of exclamation marks, intensity words, and qualitative descriptors of feelings). Emotional coding captures the affective dimension of experiences, which is central to understanding visitor satisfaction and meaning-making (Charmaz, 2014).

Coding was conducted by two researchers. A subsample of 10% was independently coded, achieving 85% agreement; discrepancies were resolved through discussion. To enhance rigour, a peer debriefer reviewed the coding framework and emerging themes. An audit trail of codes, categories, and theme decisions was maintained.

Following coding, codes were grouped into categories based on conceptual similarities, which were then synthesised into overarching themes. Theme development proceeded iteratively, with constant comparison between codes, categories, and emergent themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Trustworthiness

We established trustworthiness using several strategies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Prolonged engagement with the data ensured familiarity and depth of understanding. Thick description provides readers with sufficient contextual detail to assess transferability. Reflexivity was maintained through systematic memoing throughout the analysis process. Peer debriefing was conducted with colleagues familiar with qualitative research to validate emerging themes.

Peer debriefing was conducted with colleagues familiar with qualitative research. An audit trail was maintained throughout coding and theme development. Reflexivity was supported through memoing, and thick description was used to contextualise findings.

Ethical Considerations

This study used publicly available online reviews. No personal identifiers were collected, and all excerpts were anonymised. Reviews were treated as public narratives, and no attempt was made to contact or identify reviewers. Data were stored securely and used solely for research purposes.

FINDINGS

Overview of Reviewer Characteristics

Analysis of reviewer characteristics reveals patterns consistent with broader tourism trends. Most visitors rated their experiences positively, with 70 reviewers rating Penang War Museum as "excellent" and 60 rating Kellie's Castle as "excellent." Couples represented the most common traveller type (Penang War Museum: 70; Kellie's Castle: 90). English was the dominant language across all reviews. A total of 300 reviews were analysed ie 150 for Kellie's Castle and 150 for Penang War Museum. By platform, 200 reviews were from TripAdvisor (100 for each site) and 100 from Google Review (50 for each site). The distribution is summarised in Table 2.

Table 2 Data distribution

Site	TripAdvisor	Google Review	Total
Kellie's Castle	100	50	150
Penang War Museum	100	50	150
Total	200	100	300

Open Coding Results

Our open coding gave us 87 initial codes across both sites. These codes were then grouped into 15 categories based on conceptual similarity. Table 1 presents the 15 categories with representative examples and their frequencies:

Table 1 Open Coding Results

Code Category	Examples of Codes	Frequency
1. Historical learning	"history," "learned," "education"	140

2. Photography	"photos," "pictures," "Instagram," "scenery"	90
3. Architecture	"building," "design," "structure"	65
4. Supernatural experience	"ghost," "haunted," "spooky," "eerie"	70
5. Maintenance	"dirty," "poor condition," "unclean"	45
6. Value for money	"expensive," "worth," "entrance fee"	40
7. Site interpretation	"signs," "information," "exhibits"	38
8. Staff/service	"reception," "friendly," "helpful"	30
9. Recommendation	"recommend," "must visit," "worth visiting"	55
10. Accessibility	"drive," "transportation," "location"	28
11. Safety	"dangerous," "stairs," "secure"	20
12. Atmosphere	"vibe," "ambience," "feeling"	35
13. Night tours	"night tour," "paranormal tour"	18
14. Family experience	"family," "children," "kids"	32
15. Site context	"scenery," "landscape," "surroundings"	42

Note. Authors' own work based on 300 online review collected from TripAdvisor and Google Review (2019).

It is important to note that historical learning was the most frequently coded theme (140/300 reviews) and was often accompanied by positive evaluative language. However, the analysis does not establish a causal relationship between historical learning and satisfaction. Rather, it shows that historical discovery was a prominent and recurrent feature of positively framed reviews.

Process Coding Results

Process coding revealed distinct temporal patterns in visitor experiences. The analysis identified three phases of visitor engagement:

- Pre-Visit Phase.** Reviews frequently referenced expectations formed before arrival. These expectations derived from "reading about the place," "hearing stories," and "seeing photos online." One visitor noted: "I've heard of Kellie's Castle for years and really looking forward to the visit."
- On-Site Phase.** Activities described included "walking around," "reading signs," "taking photos," "climbing stairs," "exploring tunnels," and "following red arrows." Visitors described sequential experiences, such as: "First we went to the main building, then we explored the bunkers, and finally we climbed to the top for the view."
- Post-Visit Phase.** Reflections included "this place is interesting," "worth visiting," "will recommend," "one time is enough," and "educational tour for my sons." Some visitors expressed disappointment: "I don't imagine coming back for a repeat visit."

Emotional coding results

When we looked at emotions in the reviews, we found all sorts of responses, from positive to negative and everything in between:

- Positive Emotions:** Joy, satisfaction, wonder, and appreciation were expressed through language such as "amazing," "beautiful," "fantastic," "interesting," "enjoyed," and "lovely." One visitor wrote: "Beautiful place to take IG photos. Have a glimpse of the house of the rich in the 19th century."

- 2) Negative Emotions: Disappointment, frustration, and fear were evident in comments such as "disappointed," "let down," "dangerous," "dirty," "expensive," and "spooky." A visitor commented: "Honestly the whole place felt like the owner had no actual idea what any of the buildings were originally used for."
- 3) Ambivalent Emotions: Mixed feelings combined positive and negative elements: "While I enjoyed my visit being interested in WW2 history, I think it's badly let down but it's operator." Another reviewer expressed: "The castle has a very interesting yet sad history."

Thematic Synthesis

Through iterative synthesis of codes and categories, five interconnected themes emerged that characterise visitor experiences at Kellie's Castle and Penang War Museum.

Theme 1: Historical Discovery and Learning

Time and again, visitors talked about their experiences in terms of discovering and learning history. This theme was the most frequently represented across all reviews, with 140 of 300 reviews containing references to historical elements. Visitors expressed appreciation for the opportunity to learn about World War II history, colonial Malaya, and the specific narratives associated with each site.

At Penang War Museum, visitors engaged with wartime history through physical remnants, including bunkers, tunnels, cannons, and prison cells. One visitor described: "It was interesting to see the actual fort where soldiers spent time." Another noted: "We learned lots of history - too much even! in 4 hours we didn't have time to read everything."

At Kellie's Castle, visitors learned about William Kellie Smith's life, his Scottish background, and the construction of the castle. A visitor explained: "My daughter insisted we go there. Interesting castle. Lots of stairs to climb. Nice view at the top. Could see whole plantation. History behind it tells a lot."

The historical learning theme encompassed both formal educational elements (signs, exhibits, information panels) and informal learning through exploration and observation. Visitors valued sites that facilitated understanding of the past, even when interpretive materials were limited. However, criticism emerged when historical information was perceived as inadequate or inaccurate: "It really needs a guided or audio tour to make it worthwhile."

What this informs us is that for a lot of visitors, history is not just a bonus, it is the main reason they come, and it is what makes the visit worthwhile.

Theme 2: Emotional Resonance and Affective Responses

Visitor narratives revealed complex emotional responses, ranging from solemn reflection to excitement and fear. At Penang War Museum, visitors frequently described feelings of solemnity and sadness: "One can't help but feel solemn and get some heavy vibes walking through this 'museum'," and "the encroaching jungle does give it an overall heavy sadness."

At Kellie's Castle, emotional responses were more varied, including admiration for the architecture, curiosity about the unfinished structure, and fascination with ghost stories. One visitor expressed: "The castle has a very interesting yet sad history." Another described: "It's a cloudy day and the place is kinda eerie."

Emotional responses were often tied to site authenticity and atmosphere. Visitors who perceived sites as authentic historical spaces reported stronger emotional engagement. Conversely, artificial elements such as "cheap Halloween props" at Penang War Museum were criticised for undermining emotional impact: "The majority of the place is barracks after barracks that all look the same, most of which you can't enter because they're filled with cheap Halloween props to make it look 'scary'."

So what we are seeing here is that dark tourism is deeply emotional when visitors come looking for feelings, and they react to what the site stirs up in them. For site managers, this means getting the interpretation and presentation right because that is what shapes how visitors feel.

Theme 3: Authenticity and Site Interpretation

This theme looks at how visitors see authenticity, what they think of the interpretation, and how the sites present their history and ghost stories. Visitors demonstrated sophisticated awareness of how sites are constructed and managed, frequently commenting on interpretation methods, exhibit quality, and overall site presentation.

Criticism was directed at Penang War Museum for its limited interpretive materials: "There was no information to explain any of the artifacts on display (not that there were many actual artifacts to see), there was really no explanation of anything." Visitors expressed frustration with "anti-Japanese propaganda" that lacked depth and specificity: "The Japanese atrocities are cited everywhere. None of those atrocities are described or explained in any way, they're just mentioned repeatedly."

At Kellie's Castle, visitors appreciated the architectural authenticity but criticised maintenance standards: "All around were littered with cow's dung. The grass were not mown." The presence of paintball activities was identified as detracting from the site's atmosphere: "Agree with others that the paint ball intrusion does spoil the feel somewhat."

Authenticity concerns extended to safety issues: "The railing on the roof is not in proper condition. Need extra precautions if bringing small children for a visit." One visitor warned: "I would not suggest for kids as the safety feature in the building is lacking especially the narrow staircases."

The authenticity and site interpretation theme highlights the importance of presenting dark tourism sites in ways that respect their historical significance while meeting visitor expectations for informational content, safety, and overall presentation.

Theme 4: The Supernatural Expectation Gap

This theme is all about the gap between what visitors expect from the supernatural side of things and what they actually get. While both Kellie's Castle and Penang War Museum are marketed as haunted locations, visitor narratives reveal a significant gap between expectations and experiences.

Some visitors expressed disappointment at not encountering supernatural phenomena: "It's a cloudy day and the place is kinda eerie but no sight of any ghost here." Another visitor went to Penang War Museum seeking "a glimpse into the spiritual world as a way of claiming God's existence" but found "the horror of war is really terrifying" instead.

However, supernatural narratives continued to attract visitors and shape their experiences. At Kellie's Castle, ghost stories contributed to the site's appeal: "Visited the castle because it is famously known for being haunted." One reviewer noted: "Stories of he and his daughters ghost still are in the castle."

The supernatural expectation gap reveals that while ghost narratives serve as effective marketing tools, they may create expectations that are not fulfilled, leading to visitor disappointment. Visitors who arrived primarily for historical experiences expressed greater satisfaction than those seeking paranormal encounters. This theme suggests a need for more transparent communication about what visitors can expect at these sites.

Expectations were evident in 70 reviews, where visitors stated they had heard the site was haunted or expected paranormal encounters. Actual experiences were coded when visitors reported "no sight of any ghost," "not scary," or disappointment. The gap was most visible when reviewers contrasted pre-visit expectations with on-site experiences.

Theme 5: Social Sharing and Memory Construction

The last theme is about something a bit different that it is about how visitors use online reviews to build and share their memories. Reviews functioned as narrative accounts that allowed visitors to process their experiences and recommend them to others.

Recommendation language was prevalent: "Worth a visit to snap a photo or two," "Kellie's Castle is worth visiting," and "The war museum is quite a drive, but you see quite a bit along the way." Visitors frequently provided practical advice to future visitors, such as "bring a flashlight," "take plenty of water," and "be there before 10am and avoid weekends."

Photography emerged as a key practice for memory construction. One visitor explained: "Basically nothing much there but nice view. Indeed the castle have a story behind so Google and do your home work before visit or else you will feel meaningless with the visit and just snapping the photo."

Social sharing also involved the construction of evaluative judgments. Visitors positioned themselves as knowledgeable consumers who could discern quality and value: "For RM5 we paid (for locals), we don't expect to see toilets like that. U can get better toilet at R&R."

This theme demonstrates how online reviews serve as platforms for memory construction and social evaluation. Visitors use reviews not only to share experiences but also to establish their credibility as cultural consumers and to guide future visitors.

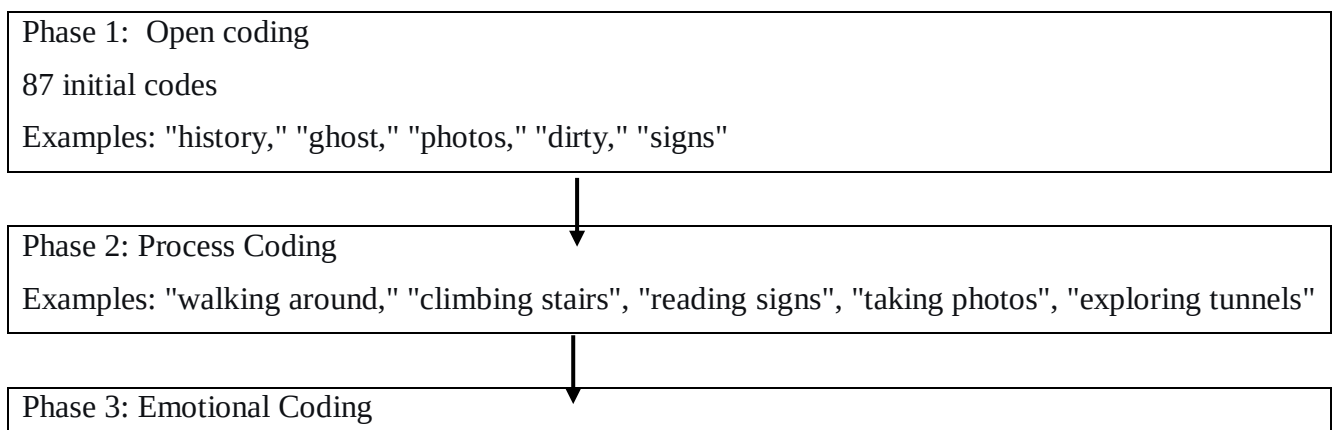
SUMMARY OF THEMATIC FINDINGS

The five themes identified through systematic coding provide a comprehensive understanding of visitor experiences at Kellie's Castle and Penang War Museum. Historical discovery and learning emerged as the dominant experience, shaping visitor satisfaction and providing the foundation for other experiential elements. Emotional resonance varied across sites, with solemnity predominating at Penang War Museum and more varied responses at Kellie's Castle.

Authenticity and site interpretation represented critical factors that influenced visitor perceptions. Site management practices, including maintenance, interpretation quality, and presentation, significantly impacted visitor satisfaction. The supernatural expectation gap highlighted tensions between marketing narratives and visitor experiences, suggesting opportunities for more transparent communication. Finally, social sharing and memory construction revealed how visitors used online platforms to process experiences and guide future visitors.

To provide a clear overview of how these themes were derived, Figure 1 illustrates the analytical process from initial coding through to theme development..

Figure 1 Analytic Process: Initial Codes to Themes



Examples: "amazed," "disappointed," "solemn," "creepy"
"beautiful," "frustrated," "heavy vibes"

Phase 4: Category Formation

15 categories (as in Table 1)

Historical learning, Photography, Ghost experience,
Maintenance, Value for money, Site interpretation, etc.

Phase 5: Theme Development

1. Historical discovery and learning
2. Emotional resonance and affective responses
3. Authenticity and site interpretation
4. The supernatural expectation gap
5. Social sharing and memory construction

(Source: Authors' own work)

These five themes give us a rich picture of what visitors actually experience at dark tourism sites. They showed us that a visit is shaped by many factors. These include historical curiosity, emotional engagement, and perceptions of authenticity. Visitors also bring expectations about the supernatural, and they share their experiences with others. This matters because most earlier studies only counted visitor numbers or used surveys. Those methods did not capture this kind of depth.

DISCUSSION

Historical Discovery as the Core Experience

The strong focus on historical learning here supports what other researchers have found about why people visit dark tourism sites (Kang et al., 2012; Biran et al., 2011). Unlike the "darkest" dark tourism sites such as concentration camps, where solemn remembrance predominates (Stone, 2006), these Malaysian sites offer lighter dark experiences where historical education serves as the primary appeal. This finding supports Sharpley's (2005) continuum concept while suggesting that Malaysian dark tourism may align more closely with "light" dark tourism.

What is also interesting is how historical discovery ties in with nostalgia when visitors link their own experiences to the bigger historical story (Çakar, 2018). The prominence of historical discovery suggests that site managers should prioritise historical interpretation, keeping in mind that satisfaction is shaped by multiple factors, including interpretation quality, authenticity, and safety.

Penang War Museum reviews were dominated by solemnity, wartime history, and criticism of interpretive depth. Kellie's Castle reviews were more varied, with stronger emphasis on architecture, photography, and supernatural narratives. Both sites shared concerns about maintenance, safety, and the gap between marketing and experience.

The two sites differed in emotional tone and narrative emphasis. Penang War Museum evoked solemnity and sadness, while Kellie's Castle evoked curiosity, admiration, and supernatural fascination. Both sites, however, revealed similar tensions between historical interpretation and commercial presentation. This suggests that dark tourism sites in Malaysia may share common management challenges despite differing historical contexts.

Interpretation and Authenticity Challenges

The criticism we saw about interpretation quality at these sites is not unique since it is actually a common challenge in dark tourism management (Uzzell & Ballantyne, 1998; Wight & Lennon, 2007). Effective interpretation at dark tourism sites balances educational content with emotional engagement, a balance that was reportedly lacking at these sites. The absence of audio guides and the presence of "cheap Halloween props" at Penang War Museum indicate that interpretation choices can undermine authenticity.

Our findings around authenticity echo what Silverman (2015) and Bowman & Pezzullo (2009) have said about heritage and the construction of dark tourism experiences. Visitors' sensitivity to artificial elements suggests that dark tourism sites must maintain authenticity to achieve satisfying experiences. The maintenance issues at Kellie's Castle and the limited exhibits at Penang War Museum represent gaps between visitor expectations and site delivery.

The Role of Supernatural Narratives

The gap between supernatural expectations and reality points to a real tension in how these sites are marketed versus how they're actually experienced. Even though that the ghost narratives attract visitors, they may create unfulfilled expectations when supernatural elements are not sufficiently present. This finding extends Garcia's (2012) work on ghost tourism by demonstrating that supernatural attractions may function as marketing tools rather than core experiences.

The interplay between ghost and historical narratives at these sites suggests that visitors often arrive with multiple motivations. Some seek historical knowledge, others seek thrills, and many seek both. Sites that successfully integrate these elements—offering historical education alongside supernatural entertainment—may achieve greater visitor satisfaction.

Online Reviews as Narrative Construction

Our social sharing theme shows something interesting that the online reviews are not just about recording experiences, but they are also about building memories and evaluating things socially (Çakar, 2018). Visitors use reviews not simply to record experiences but to position themselves within cultural hierarchies of taste and knowledge. The recommendation language and practical advice in reviews reflect visitors' desire to guide future tourists, establishing themselves as credible cultural commentators.

This narrative construction has practical implications for site management. Positive reviews can serve as effective marketing, while negative reviews provide insights into areas requiring improvement. The detailed practical advice in reviews—bringing flashlights, taking water, avoiding weekends—offers specific suggestions that site managers could incorporate into their communications.

Temporal Considerations and Data Relevance

We should probably address the rationale using 2019 data because the data were collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the thematic findings address fundamental aspects of visitor experience that are not time-dependent. The use of 2019 data that predates the COVID-19 pandemic, provides a valuable baseline for understanding visitor experiences during stable operational conditions. The thematic findings — historical discovery, emotional resonance, authenticity concerns, and supernatural expectations — represent enduring features of dark tourism experiences that transcend temporal boundaries (Stone & Sharpley, 2008; Biran et al., 2011). Similarly, issues of site interpretation, maintenance, and safety are ongoing concerns for site management regardless of the temporal context (Miles, 2014; Ivanova & Light, 2017).

The 2019 data offer a pre-pandemic baseline that may be valuable for understanding changes that occurred following COVID-19 disruptions. Studies have documented significant changes in tourism behaviour post-2020 (Gössling et al., 2021; Zenker & Kock, 2020). The findings from this study can serve as a reference

point for comparative research examining how these dark tourism sites have evolved in response to changing visitor expectations and operational constraints.

Furthermore, the methodological approach of thematic analysis focuses on identifying patterns and themes that transcend temporal boundaries. The rich narrative data from 2019 provide insights into visitor meaning-making that remain relevant for understanding how tourists engage with dark tourism sites. The findings contribute to theoretical understanding of dark tourism experiences and offer practical recommendations that are applicable regardless of when the data were collected.

Though 2019 data provide a valuable pre-pandemic baseline, recent developments at both sites including Kellie's Castle's rebranding efforts and the introduction of night tours at Penang War Museum suggest that visitor experiences may have evolved. Future research should examine post-pandemic reviews to assess whether the themes identified in this study remain stable or have shifted in response to changing site management strategies and visitor expectations

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of Findings

We set out to understand what visitors experience at Kellie's Castle and Penang War Museum, and we did that by systematically analysing what they wrote in online reviews. Five interconnected themes emerged: Historical Discovery and Learning, Emotional Resonance and Affective Responses, Authenticity and Site Interpretation, The Supernatural Expectation Gap, and Social Sharing and Memory Construction.

Historical discovery was identified as the dominant theme in visitor narratives, frequently linked to positive evaluations. Emotional responses varied across sites, with solemnity predominant at Penang War Museum and more varied responses at Kellie's Castle. Authenticity concerns—particularly regarding site interpretation, maintenance, and safety emerged as critical factors shaping visitor satisfaction.

The supernatural expectation gap highlighted tensions between marketing narratives and actual experiences, suggesting that while ghost stories attract visitors, they may create unmet expectations. Finally, the social sharing theme revealed how online reviews function as sites of memory construction and social evaluation.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to dark tourism literature in several ways. First, it extends understanding of dark tourism in the Malaysian context, an underrepresented region in dark tourism scholarship (Tan & Lim, 2018). Second, the study demonstrates the utility of systematic qualitative analysis of online reviews for understanding visitor experiences, complementing previous quantitative approaches (Çakar, 2018).

The five themes in the analysis help us understand at a theoretical level ie how visitors make meaning at these sites. Historical learning emerges as a core experience that shapes other experiential dimensions, suggesting that dark tourism should be understood as heritage tourism with added emotional and supernatural elements.

The supernatural expectation gap also challenges the idea that ghost tourism is what mainly drives people to visit. Though ghost narratives indeed attract visitors, historical learning may be more central to satisfying experiences. This finding extends Sharpley's (2005) continuum concept by suggesting that sites may simultaneously occupy multiple positions depending on how they are experienced.

These findings extend Kang et al. (2012) and Biran et al. (2011) by showing that historical learning is not merely a motivation but a central meaning-making resource. They also extend Sharpley's (2005) continuum by demonstrating that a single site can occupy multiple positions ie historical, emotional, and supernatural depending on visitor expectations.

Practical Recommendations

The findings from this study point to several practical implications for site managers at Kellie's Castle and Penang War Museum. However, rather than presenting these as a simple checklist, it is important to consider them as interconnected strategies that address the underlying tensions identified in our thematic analysis, particularly the gaps between visitor expectations and actual experiences, and between historical authenticity and commercial presentation.

Rethinking Interpretation

Our findings reveal that visitors consistently expressed frustration with inadequate interpretive materials. This is not merely a matter of adding more signs. Rather, it reflects a deeper issue, i.e. the failure to facilitate meaningful engagement with the sites' historical significance. Recent research supports this concern. Seger-Guttmann et al. (2025) demonstrated that dark heritage sites can evolve from being merely sites of tragedy to places that offer transformative experiences when interpretation taps into personal, spiritual, communal, and global domains of meaning-making. Similarly, Mahdzar et al. (2025) found that unique learning experiences significantly influence visitors' behavioural intentions at Malaysian dark tourism sites, while entertainment alone failed to drive satisfaction or loyalty.

The challenge, therefore, is to move beyond superficial information provision toward what Ge and Rahman (2026) describe as interpretation that is perceived as authentic, socially engaging, and emotionally meaningful. At Kellie's Castle and Penang War Museum, this means developing interpretive materials whether audio guides, digital platforms, or guided tours that connect visitors emotionally and cognitively to the historical narratives. The use of audio guides has been shown to enhance both emotional and cognitive involvement at heritage sites (Fareed & Amer, 2025). For Malaysian dark tourism sites specifically, Saad et al. (2025) argue that enhancing awareness and interest requires addressing gaps in both local literature and practical strategies.

Site managers should consider investing in audio guides that offer multilayered narratives - not just factual accounts but stories that humanise the historical figures and events associated with these sites. Given that our findings show historical learning is the primary driver of visitor satisfaction, getting interpretation right is not optional since it is considered the basic thing.

Authenticity as a Non-Negotiable Asset

Our thematic analysis of the 2019 data revealed that visitors were notably sensitive to inauthentic elements at both sites. At that time, reviewers frequently cited "cheap Halloween props" at Penang War Museum as detracting from the historical atmosphere, and some maintenance issues at Kellie's Castle eg poorly kept grounds and inadequate bathroom facilities were among the recurring complaints. However, recent observations suggest that site management has made considerable improvements in the post-pandemic period. The interpretive displays at Penang War Museum now feature historically appropriate artefacts and military equipment that visitors find engaging, while Kellie's Castle has undergone visible upgrades to its landscaping and visitor amenities, including refreshment outlets, souvenir shops, and live entertainment.

This evolution raises an important question: have these sites successfully closed the authenticity gap identified in the 2019 data? The answer appears to be mixed. Even though physical improvements are obvious, the fundamental challenge of maintaining authenticity in dark tourism settings remains pertinent (Sann et al., 2025). Research on electronic complaints about dark tourism destinations has consistently identified historical site management as a primary source of visitor dissatisfaction, suggesting that cosmetic upgrades alone may not be sufficient (Sann et al., 2025). Visitors to dark tourism sites continue to expect a level of authenticity that respects the historical aura of these locations. This expectation does not change over time (Ironsides & Smith, 2024).

The improvements observed at both sites demonstrate that management has responded to earlier criticism. However, the underlying tension between commercial viability and historical integrity persists. The presence

of retail outlets and busking at Kellie's Castle, for instance, enhances visitor experience but also introduces commercial elements that could potentially dilute the site's historical ambience. Similarly, though the Penang War Museum's upgraded displays are visually attractive, the question remains whether they facilitate deeper historical understanding or merely serve as photo opportunities.

For site managers, the lesson is clear that the physical upgrades are necessary but not sufficient. Authenticity in dark tourism is not merely about appearances. It is about creating conditions for meaningful engagement with difficult histories (Ge & Rahman, 2026). Visitors can appreciate modern amenities while still demanding that the sites' historical integrity remains intact. The challenge is to strike a balance i.e maintaining high standards of presentation and visitor comfort without compromising the sites' character as places of historical significance and reflection.

Marketing with Integrity

Perhaps the most significant tension identified in our findings is what we termed the supernatural expectation gap i.e the mismatch between marketing that emphasises ghostly encounters and the actual experiences of visitors' report. This is not merely a matter of unmet expectations but more to represent a fundamental failure in destination communication that can undermine trust. Ironically, this sensational story ignites even more visit intention.

Recent scholarship on dark tourism marketing has grappled with this exact tension. Barbu Kleitsch & Bader-Jurj (2026) identified four narrative-affective clusters in dark tourism promotional campaigns i.e sacral-memorial, historical-didactic, spectral-sensational, and hybrid commercial. The spectral-sensational approach, which emphasises ghostly encounters and supernatural thrills is precisely what many dark tourism sites employ to attract visitors. However, Barbu Kleitsch & Bader-Jurj's research underscores the need for "transparency, contextual sensitivity, and responsible storytelling in the marketing of trauma-related heritage". When marketing over-promises on supernatural encounters, it not only disappoints visitors but can make the historical suffering that these sites represent seem less important than it really is.

Furthermore, Saad et al. (2025) found that dark tourism in Malaysia needs more marketing and higher awareness but also noted that inadequate promotion and potentially, we would argue that inappropriate promotion might hinder industry growth. The solution is not to abandon supernatural narratives but to integrate them responsibly with historical content. Our findings suggest that visitors who arrive primarily for historical experiences report greater satisfaction than those seeking paranormal encounters. This indicates that marketing should position supernatural elements as complementary rather than putting it for a richer historical learning.

Site managers should consider adopting what Barbu Kleitsch & Bader-Jurj (2026) terms a "hybrid commercial" approach which is one that balances historical-didactic content with carefully framed supernatural elements, ensuring that visitors understand what they will actually experience. This requires honest communication about the nature of ghost tours and paranormal offerings, in order to manage expectations through a clear pre-visit information.

Safety as a Dimension of Visitor Experience

Safety concerns emerged as a recurring theme in our analysis, particularly at Kellie's Castle where visitors noted unsafe railings and hazardous staircases throughout the building. Safety might appear to be a basic operational concern. In the context of dark tourism, it takes on additional significance. Dark tourism sites are often physically challenging environments such as abandoned buildings, underground tunnels, and deteriorating structures are part of their appeal. However, this very characteristic makes safety management critical.

Research on heritage tourism has emphasised that visitor safety is not merely a legal obligation but an ethical responsibility that affects overall experience quality (Nag & Mishra, 2024). When visitors feel unsafe, their capacity for emotional and cognitive engagement with the site's historical narratives is

diminished. Our findings indicate that safety concerns such as the flimsy rope railing (other section, no railings at all) on Kellie's Castle's

roof directly contribute to negative reviews and reduced recommendation intention.

For site managers, addressing safety concerns is not just about risk mitigation. It is more about enabling the kind of immersive experience that visitors seek. Sensory experiences play a particularly impactful role in fostering word-of-mouth and revisiting intentions. However, negative sensory experiences such as fear for personal safety can have the opposite effect. Site managers should conduct regular safety audits, particularly in areas identified as hazardous, and communicate safety measures clearly to visitors. This includes practical guidance on navigating dark areas, climbing stairs, and avoiding potential hazards.

Strategic Engagement with Online Reviews

Our study demonstrates that online reviews are not merely feedback mechanisms but sites of memory construction and social evaluation. Visitors use reviews to process their experiences, establish their credibility as cultural consumers, and guide future visitors. This presents both an opportunity and a challenge for site management.

In general, engaging with user-generated content can significantly enhance destination attractiveness and competitiveness. Specifically, responding to negative reviews with constructive responses can control the damage and demonstrate that the management values visitor feedback. However, the value of online reviews extends beyond damage control. Our findings show that visitors frequently provide practical advice such as bringing flashlights or taking water that site managers could incorporate into their pre-visit communications.

Site managers should establish systematic processes for monitoring and responding to online reviews. This includes acknowledging positive feedback, addressing negative comments constructively, and using visitor suggestions to inform operational improvements. The practical advice that emerges from reviews such as the need for better lighting in dark areas at Penang War Museum represents actionable intelligence that can directly enhance visitor experience.

Maintaining Dual Appeal Through Integrated Experiences

Our findings indicate that both sites benefit from what we term "dual appeal" ie attracting visitors interested in historical learning and those seeking supernatural thrills. However, the challenge lies in integrating these appeals rather than presenting them as separate or competing offerings. Mahdzar et al. (2025) found that emotional engagement and unique learning experience rather than entertainment alone drive visitor satisfaction and loyalty at Malaysian dark tourism sites. This suggests that even visitors initially attracted by supernatural narratives may derive greater satisfaction from meaningful historical engagement.

The night tours at both sites represent successful examples of integrated offerings. However, our findings suggest that these tours would benefit from stronger historical framing. Rather than presenting ghost tours as purely supernatural experiences, site managers could frame them as explorations of the sites' darker histories where ghost stories serve as entry points to understanding historical trauma, colonial legacies, and wartime suffering. This approach aligns with what Ironside & Smith (2025) describes as connecting visitors with the dark heritage and supernatural legends of a place through storytelling that is both immersive and educational.

For site managers, this means developing offerings that appeal to multiple visitor segments without compromising historical integrity. Daytime visits should prioritise historical interpretation, while night tours can incorporate supernatural elements within a framework that acknowledges the sites' tragic histories.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the data were collected from English-language reviews only, potentially excluding perspectives from non-English-speaking visitors. Second, online reviews represent self-selected narratives from visitors motivated to share their experiences, potentially biasing towards either very satisfied or very dissatisfied visitors.

Third, we need to keep in mind that the 2019 data provides us a good baseline, that things have changed since then that the management might be different, visitor expectations have shifted, and COVID-19 changed tourism behaviour. Future research should examine more recent data to assess these changes.

Fourth, the study focused on two specific sites, limiting generalisability to other dark tourism contexts. Future research should include additional dark tourism sites to enable comparative analysis.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Several directions for future research are suggested. First, comparative studies across multiple dark tourism sites in Malaysia and Southeast Asia would enable identification of contextual factors influencing visitor experiences. Second, mixed-methods approaches combining online review analysis with interviews and surveys could provide richer understanding of visitor motivations and responses.

Third, longitudinal studies examining changes in visitor experiences over time would reveal how site development and management influence visitor perceptions. The 2019 data collected for this study could serve as a baseline for such longitudinal analysis.

Fourth, cross-cultural analysis comparing reviews in different languages would illuminate cultural differences in dark tourism experience construction.

Fifth, research examining the relationship between social media use and dark tourism experiences would contribute to understanding how digital technologies shape meaning-making processes. Finally, studies exploring site management perspectives would complement visitor-focused research, providing balanced understanding of dark tourism development and challenges.

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