

A Cohort Analysis of the Perceived Market Potential of Thanatourism in Malaysia

Christy Bidder^{1*}, Boyd Sun Fatt² & Spencer Hedley Mogindol³

^{1,2,3}Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Sabah, 88997 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia
chris822@uitm.edu.my
*Corresponding Author

<https://doi.org/10.24191/gading.v27i2.480>

Received: 24 May 2024

Accepted: 10 June 2024

Date Published Online: 31 October 2024

Abstract: Thanatourism has experienced significant growth, both in terms of its commercial potential and scholarly attention. In Malaysia, the government has expressed interest in developing thanatourism as a source of tourism revenue and a means of preserving the nation's history and heritage. However, despite the increasing commercial interest and the considerable potential of thanatourism in the country, there is a notable lack of scholarly research, particularly concerning the market potential of thanatourism in Malaysia from a local perspective, and across different generational cohorts. In response to this gap, the present study seeks to advance the literature on thanatourism within the Malaysian context by examining local residents' understanding, acceptance, and perception of the market potential of thanatourism, through the lens of generational cohorts. This was achieved via a quantitative, descriptive, cross-sectional study. The research sample comprised Malaysian adults aged 18 and above, with data collected through online surveys. A total of 356 responses were analysed using descriptive analysis, independent-samples t-test, and Eta squared statistical tests. The key findings indicated that both older and younger participants had prior exposure to thanatourism but lacked a comprehensive conceptual understanding of the phenomenon. Younger participants tended to associate thanatourism with supernaturalism, as their primary source of knowledge stemmed from entertainment-focused, technology-driven social media platforms. They also demonstrated greater enthusiasm and acceptance of thanatourism, with a more optimistic view of its market potential. Furthermore, both older and younger participants ranked education as a key reason for the development of thanatourism in Malaysia. However, their secondary motivations differed: older individuals prioritised commemoration, whereas younger individuals favoured entertainment. Theoretically, the study contributes to the body of literature on thanatourism in Malaysia by offering generational insights into this niche area of tourism. Practically, it provides an understanding of how local residents perceive thanatourism, which in turn assists in gauging their level of acceptance towards the sustainable development of this tourism sector in the country. Based on the study's findings, future research may explore the role of religious or traditional beliefs in shaping individuals' acceptance of thanatourism and their perceptions of its market potential.

Keywords: Cohort analysis, generational comparison, local acceptance, market potential, thanatourism

Introduction

The United Nations World Tourism Organization defines tourism as 'a social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes' (UNWTO, 2024). Representing 10 per

cent of the global gross domestic product (GDP), the tourism industry is one of the world's largest economic sectors (Buhalis et al., 2023). In Malaysia, tourism accounts approximately 9 per cent to the nation's total economic output (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2024). Zhang et al. (2023) attributed the tremendous significance and rapid growth of tourism to improvements in living standards, which have consequently led to increased demand for tourism (Shen et al., 2018; Khanna et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2023). The growing supply and demand for tourism have fostered the development of new types of tourism (Zhang et al., 2023), aligning with a shift in tourists' interests, which have increasingly favoured higher standards, specialisation, personalisation, and novelty in experiences (Millan et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2023; Butler, 2024). In the context of novelty, i.e., the desire for new or unusual experiences (Sharma & Nayak, 2019), dark tourism—or more appropriately, thanatourism—has emerged as a promising form of tourism (Sharma & Nayak, 2019; Iliev, 2020; Zhang, 2021). For instance, Zhang (2021) found that experiencing tourism in the context of natural disasters can provide novel tourist experiences that are cognitive, emotional, introspective, sensory, relational, and hedonic.

Thanatourism has seen growth in both its commercial potential and the scholarly attention it has attracted (Lennon & Foley, 2000; Martini & Buda, 2018; Panayidou et al., 2024; Kiralova & Sperkova, 2024). In terms of commercialisation, there has been an expansion of dark sites included in travel itineraries across various countries, along with the development of attractions associated with this niche tourism sector. Globally, the value of the thanatourism market was projected to reach US\$30 billion in 2022, with strong trends such as the increasing popularity of dark destinations, new tour launches, and heightened traveller interest in sites associated with dark histories (Future Market Insights, 2022).

Malaysia is not behind this trend of rising thanatourism. The government has recognised and promoted thanatourism as a potential source of tourism revenue (Abbasi & Mohamed, 2013) and a means of preserving the nation's history and heritage (Hassandarvish, 2024). For example, Tourism Malaysia's director-general, Manoharan Periasamy, highlighted the need to revamp the country's tourism strategy to attract a segment of travellers seeking niche experiences such as dark tourism, a growing trend that appeals not only to more adventurous travellers but also significantly contributes to the preservation of Malaysia's history and heritage (Hassandarvish, 2024). In 2021, the state government of Sabah emphasised the development and promotion of thanatourism as part of its initiatives to revitalise the state's tourism sector (Miwil, 2021). For instance, the Sabah Tourism Board (2022) reported the potential of packaging a dark tourism experience on Sulug Island, located within the Tunku Abdul Rahman Marine Park. This underdeveloped island has earned the nickname 'Kota Kinabalu's darkest island' due to its connections to World War II. To ensure the effective and sustainable development of thanatourism sites in Sabah, the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, and Environment organised a three-day workshop aimed at addressing any misconceptions surrounding this emerging tourism segment (Inus, 2022). Consequently, in line with government investment, an increasing number of dark tourism destinations and attractions have been identified and developed across Malaysia (Mohd Zahari et al., 2016), including museums, cemeteries, churches, war relics, prisons, and memorials (Tan & Lim, 2018).

Despite the ostensibly huge potential of developing thanatourism and promoting it as part of the tourism offerings in Malaysia, Jamin et al. (2020) alerted that thanatourism sites in Malaysia have yet to receive global attention and recognition and, thus, are not capable of attracting international visitors. This shortcoming can be attributed to several factors, including the overemphasis on the negative aspects of thanatourism rather than its potential benefits (Jamin et al., 2020), the perception of thanatourism as taboo due to conflicts with local beliefs and values (Tan & Lim, 2018), and cultural differences that create barriers between various cultures (Nik Mohd Nor et al., 2020). Furthermore, a lack of awareness and knowledge about thanatourism contributes to the reluctance of tour operators to promote and market this niche tourism segment (Mohd Zahari et al., 2016).

Additionally, within the Malaysian context, there is a paucity of scholarly work on thanatourism. Previous studies have primarily focused on the benefits and value of thanatourism (Mahbob et al., 2014; Jamin et al., 2020), its growth potential (Mohd Zahari et al., 2016; Ahmat et al., 2021), the challenges and opportunities it presents (Ibrahim & Chai, 2010; Masanti, 2016), and tourist motivation, satisfaction, and return intentions (Khamis & Shariff, 2016). However, none of these studies have explored local perspectives on the market potential of thanatourism in Malaysia. While

Mohd Zahari et al. (2016) examined the growth potential of thanatourism, their analysis was from the perspective of tour operators. There is also a lack of research investigating generational perspectives on the acceptance and perception of thanatourism's market potential. Hence, this study aims to explore how different generations perceive thanatourism.

Based on the above discussion, the purpose of this study is to advance the literature on thanatourism within the Malaysian context by examining its market potential from a local perspective across different generations. Specifically, this study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- i. to examine the locals' understanding of thanatourism in Malaysia from a generational perspective
- ii. to analyse the locals' acceptance and perception of the market potential of thanatourism in Malaysia from a generational perspective

Literature Review

Defining Dark Tourism

There is no singular or universally accepted definition of thanatourism due to its highly complex and subjective nature, as well as its ever-expanding categories and sub-categories (Stone & Sharpley, 2008). The first term associated with this phenomenon, 'dark tourism', was coined by Foley and Lennon (1996), who defined it as 'the presentation and consumption by visitors of real and commodified death and disaster sites' (p. 198). Over time, a range of other terms related to the concept of dark travel have emerged. For example, Seaton (1996) introduced the term 'thanatourism', which he described as travel to locations motivated wholly or partially by the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death.

Spectrum of Dark Tourism

As Stone (2006) noted, thanatourism attractions are multifaceted and complex in their design and purpose. Different researchers have developed various categories and sub-categories of thanatourism products, depending on the supply and demand aspects of this niche form of tourism. The process of categorising thanatourism products is complicated by numerous factors, such as consumer tastes, which are often influenced by mass media, marketing strategies employed by suppliers, and the constant changes within the broader political and cultural spheres (Seaton, 1999). Consequently, there exist multiple shades of darkness within the thanatourism continuum. These shades may evolve or change in response to events such as wars, terrorist attacks, or the fall of regimes, or when new modes of representation—such as films, novels, and memoirs—imbue moral significance to sites of death and the macabre (Rojek, 1997). Given the complexity of classification and the continuous evolution of thanatourism, Stone (2006) proposed a spectrum that highlights a continuum from the darkest to the lightest forms of dark tourism, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Dark Tourism Motivations

Individuals visit dark tourism sites for a variety of reasons. According to Foley and Lennon (1996), the earliest and darkest forms of dark tourism were primarily driven by morbid curiosity or fascination with death. Stone and Sharpley (2008) concurred with this perspective, suggesting that the sequestering of death from public life has led people to visit dark tourism sites as a means to confront and examine death, a subject often considered taboo or feared in many societies. However, over time, researchers have identified additional motives for engaging in dark tourism, including the search for social meaning (Sharpley, 2009), shared mourning and remembrance (Sharpley, 2009; Winter, 2011a), national identity or a sense of belonging (Winter, 2011b; Hyde & Harman, 2011; Cheal & Griffin, 2013), the desire for integration with death to evoke excitement and understanding (Stone & Sharpley, 2008; Sharpley, 2009), family bonding and sightseeing or recreation (Fabros et al., 2023).

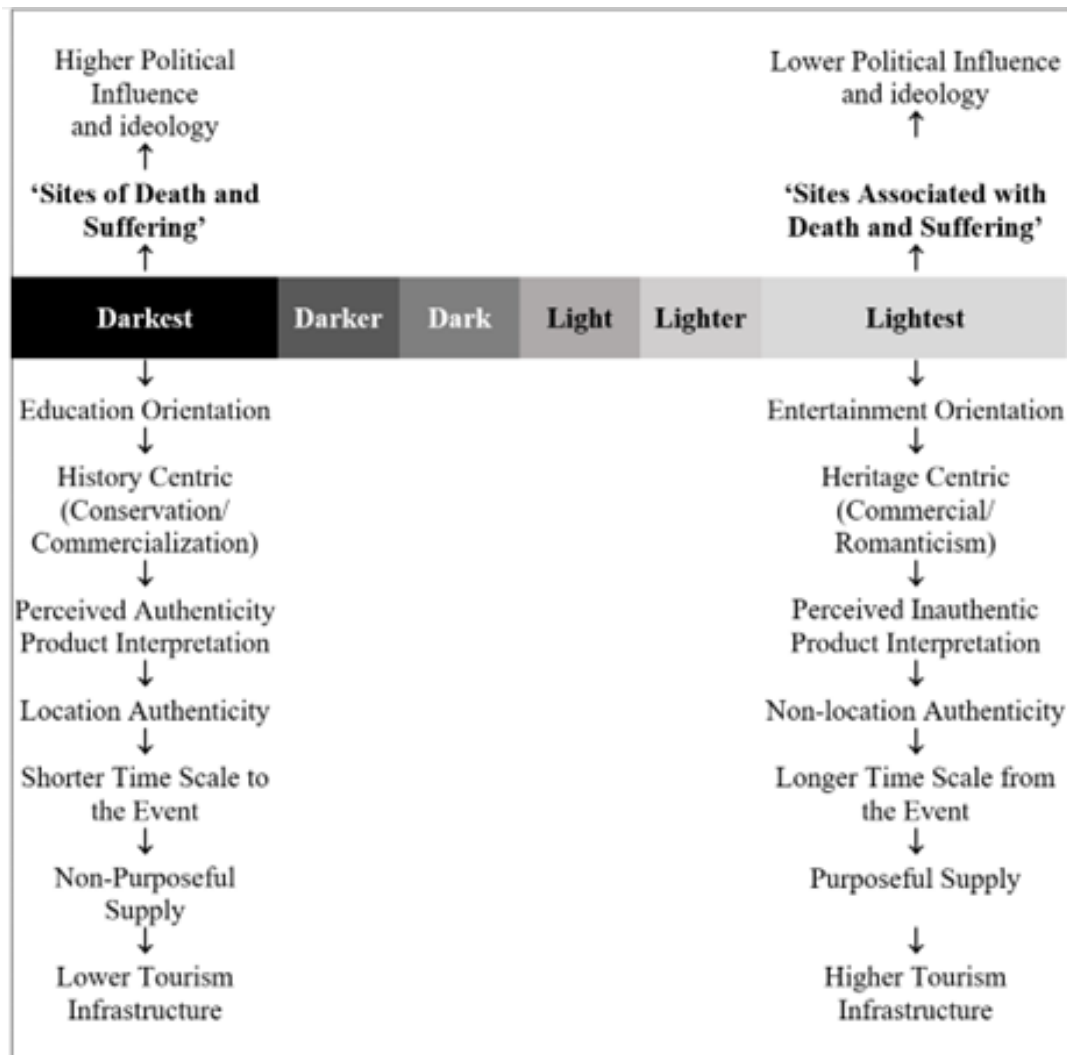


Fig. 1 Dark tourism spectrum (Stone, 2006)

Dark Tourism Research in Malaysia and Research Gap

In the Malaysian context, there is a scarcity of scholarly research on thanatourism. Previous studies have largely focused on the benefits and values of thanatourism (Mahbob et al., 2014; Jamin et al., 2020), its growth potential (Mohd Zahari et al., 2016; Ahmat et al., 2021), challenges and opportunities (Ibrahim & Chai, 2010; Masanti, 2016), as well as tourist motivation, satisfaction, and return intention (Khamis & Shariff, 2016). None of these studies, however, have explored local perspectives on the market potential of thanatourism in Malaysia. While Mohd Zahari et al. (2016) examined thanatourism's growth potential, their analysis was limited to the viewpoint of tour operators. Furthermore, there is a lack of research investigating generational perspectives on local acceptance and perceptions of thanatourism's market potential. Addressing these research gaps, the present study aims to advance the literature on thanatourism in Malaysia by examining its market potential from the local perspective across different generations.

Methodology

The present study adopted a quantitative approach which collected and analysed numerical data. Specifically, a descriptive methodology was employed, and the study was a one-off cross-sectional analysis, gathering data from the target sample at a single point in time (Kumar, 2011). Additionally, the research incorporated cohort analysis by dividing respondents into two groups based on age to facilitate generational comparisons.

The sample comprised Malaysian adults aged 18 and above. A convenience sampling method was employed, allowing anyone with access to the research instrument to participate (Kumar, 2011). Data collection was conducted over two periods: four weeks in May 2023 and another four weeks in November 2023, resulting in 356 responses.

The research instrument was an online survey, designed and distributed via Google Forms. The survey was disseminated on platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram. It consisted of three sections: 1) Section A, which contained six nominal and ordinal items relating to respondents' demographic characteristics, including gender, age, education, state of origin, ethnicity, and religion; 2) Section B, which comprised four nominal items addressing respondents' general understanding of thanatourism, measured using binary variables (yes/no items); and 3) Section C, which included 15 ordinal items concerning respondents' acceptance and perception of the market potential of thanatourism in Malaysia. These items were measured using a Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), or from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (very important). The survey items were primarily adapted from previous studies by Ibrahim and Chai (2010), Mohd Zahari et al. (2016), and Tan and Lim (2018).

Data analysis was conducted using the SPSS software, version 28. Descriptive statistical tests were applied to all sections of the questionnaire to determine frequencies, means, and standard deviations. An independent-samples t-test was utilised to compare two groups: older respondents, comprising Generation X and early Millennials aged 33 and above, and younger respondents, comprising late Millennials and Generation Z aged 32 and younger. This comparison aimed to explore their acceptance and perception of the market potential of thanatourism in Malaysia.

Moreover, to determine the effect size, Eta squared (η^2) was calculated using the formula below, where t represents the t-value and N = number of older respondents. To interpret the magnitude of the effect size, Cohen's (1988, pp. 284-287) guidelines were referred, where .01 = small effect, .06 = moderate effect, and .14 = large effect. There are several different effect size statistics, the most used being Eta squared and Cohen's effect size interpretation (Pallant, 2016).

$$\eta^2 = \frac{t^2}{t^2 + N - 1}$$

Findings and Discussion

Respondents' demographic profile

Table 1 provides an overview of the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The majority were female (59.4%), with male respondents constituting 40.6%. Nearly half of the respondents belonged to the Gen Z category (47.5%), followed by Millennials (34.2%) and Gen X (18.3%). Almost all respondents had completed some form of formal education: primary education (13.2%), secondary education (20.7%), post-secondary education (30.1%), and tertiary education (32.6%). In terms of state of origin, the majority were from Sabah (56.5%), followed by Sarawak (33.2%) and Peninsular Malaysia (10.3%). The largest ethnic group among respondents were the Indigenous groups from Sabah (44.8%), followed by the Indigenous groups from Sarawak (28.4%), Malays (17.5%), and Chinese (9.3%).

Table 1. Respondents' demographic background

Gender	Female	59.4%	State/ Origin	Sabah	56.5%
	Male	40.6%		Sarawak	33.2%
Age Group	Gen X (1965-1980)	18.3%	Ethnicity	Peninsular Malaysia	10.3%
	Millennials (1981-1996)	34.2%		Malay	17.5%
	Gen Z (1997-2005)	47.5%		Chinese	9.3%
Highest Level of Education	No formal education was completed	3.4%	Indigenous groups in Sabah	44.8%	
	Primary education	13.2%	Indigenous groups in Sarawak	28.4%	
	Secondary education	20.7%			
	Post-secondary education	30.1%			
	Tertiary education	32.6%			

Generational comparison on locals' understanding and knowledge of thanatourism

Table 2 presents an analysis of the locals' understanding of thanatourism in Malaysia from the perspectives of both older and younger respondents. A greater proportion of younger respondents had heard of the term thanatourism (68.4%) compared to older respondents (41.7%). Younger respondents primarily obtained their information from social media (48.5%), followed by television documentaries or films (22.3%), travel magazines (13.1%), academic materials (5.5%), newspaper articles (5%), formal talks (4%), and other sources (1.6%). Conversely, older respondents derived their understanding of thanatourism mainly from nationwide or state-owned newspapers (37.8%), followed by television documentaries or films (21.9%), formal talks (12.7%), academic materials (11.6%), travel magazines (9%), social media (4.9%), and other sources (2.1%). This finding indicates that younger respondents relied more on entertainment-oriented channels, where technology played a key role in shaping their understanding of thanatourism. Older respondents, on the other hand, sourced their information from more formal, education-oriented platforms that involved expert or industrial analysis.

When asked to identify types of sites, attractions, or activities related to thanatourism, the younger and older respondents exhibited different perspectives. Younger respondents associated thanatourism primarily with ghost-related or paranormal tours/exhibitions/activities (25.7%), followed by graveyards/cemeteries (21.6%), former prisons and courthouses (16.8%), places of mass killings, atrocities, and disasters (13.1%), sites of remembrance for the recently deceased (12.5%), war battlefields (5.2%), and museums with educational or commemorative displays of suffering (5.1%). Older respondents, however, linked thanatourism mainly with sites of remembrance for the recently deceased (28.4%), followed by museums with educational or commemorative displays of suffering (24.7%), war battlefields (14.6%), places of mass killings, atrocities, and disasters (12.2%), former prisons and courthouses (10.1%), graveyards/cemeteries (6.1%), and ghost-related or paranormal tours/exhibitions/activities (3.9%).

This reveals a fundamental difference in understanding between older and younger respondents: younger respondents gravitated towards associating thanatourism with supernaturalism, likely influenced by their primary source of information—social media. Much of the thanatourism content on social media is centred around themes of spectral appearances, ghost hunting, otherworldly existence, and inexplicable mysteries. For example, in Malaysia, the YouTube channel Dark Tourism Malaysia is dedicated to exploring dark sites, often with a focus on supernaturalism, in line with the

channel's aim to 'share the atmosphere of the night in places of horror associated with the supernatural and mystical' (Dark Tourism Malaysia, 2023)

Table 2. Generational comparison on locals' understanding and knowledge of thanatourism

Item		Frequency	
		Older Respondents	Younger Respondents
Have you ever heard of the term thanatourism?	Yes	41.7%	68.4%
	No	58.3%	31.6%
If your answer to Question 1 is a YES, how did you hear about thanatourism?	Social media	4.9%	48.5%
	Newspaper articles	37.8%	5%
	TV (documentaries/movies)	21.9%	22.3%
	Travel magazines	9%	13.1%
	Academic materials	11.6%	5.5%
	Formal talks	12.7%	4%
	Others	2.1%	1.6%
Which of these sites, attractions, or activities can be related to thanatourism?	Ghost-related or paranormal tours/exhibitions/activities	3.9%	25.7%
	Graveyards or cemeteries	6.1%	21.6%
	Sites of remembrance and respect for the recent dead	28.4%	12.5%
	Former prisons and courthouses	10.1%	16.8%
	Museums with educative or commemorative displays of death or suffering	24.7%	5.1%
	Place of mass killings, atrocities, and disasters	12.2%	13.1%
	War and battlefields	14.6%	5.2%

Generational comparison on locals' acceptance towards thanatourism in Malaysia

Table 3 presents the findings on the acceptance of thanatourism in Malaysia among older and younger respondents. Both groups indicated a moderate degree of acceptance, with responses neither agreeing nor strongly agreeing. Notably, younger respondents exhibited less agreement with the notion that thanatourism contradicted local beliefs and values ($\bar{x}_{older}=3.80$, $\bar{x}_{younger}=3.54$) or that visiting dark tourism sites conflicted with their religious teachings ($\bar{x}_{older}=3.68$, $\bar{x}_{younger}=3.04$). Among the five items in Table 3, three items (3, 4, and 5) showed a statistically significant difference between older and younger respondents, with a large effect size. These results indicate that, compared to younger respondents, older respondents found it less acceptable to market death and suffering for tourism due to their religious and cultural beliefs ($\bar{x}_{older}=2.96$, $\bar{x}_{younger}=3.82$, $p<.05$, $\eta^2=.23$) and were less inclined to visit thanatourism sites ($\bar{x}_{older}=2.81$, $\bar{x}_{younger}=3.77$, $p<.05$, $\eta^2=.12$) or participate in thanatourism activities ($\bar{x}_{older}=2.93$, $\bar{x}_{younger}=3.86$, $p<.05$, $\eta^2=.11$).

This finding is intriguing as it challenges the findings of some previous studies (see Masanti, 2016; Tan & Lim, 2018) that highlighted the potential difficulty in developing thanatourism in Malaysia as the phenomenon could contravene local religious and cultural beliefs and values. The finding of this study, thus, calls into question whether religious and cultural beliefs and values have a profound bearing on the locals' acceptance of thanatourism. The answer to this question may be contingent upon one's degree of religiosity or strength in traditional cultural beliefs. In other words, the extent to which one is conservative vs. liberal or traditional vs. modern may influence one's level of acceptance toward thanatourists.

Table 3. Generational comparison on locals' acceptance towards thanatourism in Malaysia

Item	Response Mean ¹		Sig. (2-tailed)	η^2
	Older respondents	Younger respondents		
Thanatourism is a taboo that contradicts local beliefs and values.	3.80	3.54	.396	.04
Visiting thanatourism sites is against my religious teachings.	3.68	3.04	.340	.04
Despite my religious and cultural beliefs and values, I feel it is acceptable to market death and suffering for tourism consumption.	2.96	3.82	.000	.23
I want to visit thanatourism sites/exhibitions.	2.81	3.77	.008	.12
I want to take part in thanatourism activities.	2.93	3.86	.015	.11

¹Based on a five-point Likert scale, one = strongly disagree and five = strongly agree.

Generational comparison on locals' perception of the market potential of thanatourism in Malaysia

Table 4 shows that younger respondents had higher mean scores than older respondents regarding the development and promotion of thanatourism in Malaysia, indicating a more positive outlook among the younger cohort. With the exception of item 3, all items in Table 3 exhibited statistically significant differences between the two groups, with a large effect size of at least .10. This finding reveals that, in comparison to older respondents, younger respondents believed Malaysia had many dark sites that could be turned into tourist attractions ($\bar{x}_{\text{older}}=2.84$, $\bar{x}_{\text{younger}}=3.82$, $p<.05$, $\eta^2=.10$), that dark tourism was an untapped potential tourist product in Malaysia ($\bar{x}_{\text{older}}=3.17$, $\bar{x}_{\text{younger}}=3.75$, $p<.05$, $\eta^2=.10$), and that Malaysia should develop and promote thanatourism in the country ($\bar{x}_{\text{older}}=3.31$, $\bar{x}_{\text{younger}}=4.12$, $p<.05$, $\eta^2=.13$).

Table 4. Generational comparison on locals' perception of the market potential of thanatourism in Malaysia

Item	Response Mean ¹		Sig. (2-tailed)	η^2
	Older respondents	Younger respondents		
Malaysia has many dark sites that can be turned into tourist attractions.	2.84	3.82	.036	.10
Thanatourism is an untapped potential tourist product in Malaysia.	3.17	3.75	.050	.10
Malaysia can be one of the top thanatourism destinations in Asia.	3.06	3.56	.062	.07
Malaysia should develop and promote thanatourism in the country.	3.31	4.12	.027	.13

¹Based on a five-point Likert scale, one = strongly disagree and five = strongly agree.

Generational comparison on the locals' perceived important reasons for developing thanatourism in Malaysia

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of various reasons for developing thanatourism in Malaysia. As indicated by the mean scores in Table 5, older and younger respondents differed in their assessments. However, only two items displayed statistically significant differences between the two groups. The first is item two, where younger respondents rated entertainment with a much higher score than older respondents ($\bar{x}_{\text{older}}=2.56$, $\bar{x}_{\text{younger}}=4.11$, $p<.05$, $\eta^2=.12$), indicating that younger respondents perceived thanatourism to be tremendously crucial as a niche tourism that would provide fun, enjoyable, and unusual experiences of horror. The second item is item four, where older respondents rated commemoration to be a much more important reason for developing thanatourism than younger respondents ($\bar{x}_{\text{older}}=4.32$, $\bar{x}_{\text{younger}}=3.49$, $p<.05$, $\eta^2=.11$). This indicates that older respondents viewed thanatourism more as a phenomenon where one would remember and honour the deceased or sites where lives had been lost.

Another interesting observation is that, despite the above differences, both older and younger respondents shared the perception that developing thanatourism in Malaysia would be educationally significant as visiting thanatourism-related sites or activities could supplement individuals' learning of dark histories, thus enhancing their knowledge of difficult histories/heritages in a socially acceptable and sanitised manner ($\bar{x}_{\text{older}}=4.42$, $\bar{x}_{\text{younger}}=4.08$).

Furthermore, younger respondents found the commercial value of thanatourism to be more important than older respondents ($\bar{x}_{\text{older}}=3.98$, $\bar{x}_{\text{younger}}=4.38$). This finding supports the previous finding that younger respondents had greater acceptance towards thanatourism and had a more positive outlook on the market potential of this niche tourism in Malaysia. Furthermore, both older and younger respondents did not perceive thanatourism as important in terms of reinforcing national identity or sense of patriotism ($\bar{x}_{\text{older}}=1.95$, $\bar{x}_{\text{younger}}=1.83$) or in creating experiences of contemplation/meditation on life and death ($\bar{x}_{\text{older}}=2.04$, $\bar{x}_{\text{younger}}=2.31$).

Overall, younger respondents demonstrated greater enthusiasm and acceptance towards thanatourism, with a more optimistic view of its market potential. This may be because younger respondents perceive thanatourism through the lens of entertainment, as represented by Stone's (2006) thanatourism spectrum. In other words, younger respondents may only support the development of thanatourism if it is presented in a light-hearted, enjoyable, and educational manner, without conflicting with religious or cultural traditions. Similar to other forms of tourism, thanatourism should be positioned in a commercial setting that evokes happy and positive feelings.

Table 5. Generational comparison on locals' perceived importance of reasons for developing thanatourism in Malaysia

In your opinion, what are the reasons for the importance of developing thanatourism in Malaysia?	Response Mean ¹		Sig. (2-tailed)	η^2
	Older respondents	Younger respondents		
Economic <i>Commercialising dark sites as tourist attractions/activities to generate tourism revenue.</i>	3.98	4.38	.402	.04
Entertainment <i>Providing fun, enjoyable, and unusual experiences of horror.</i>	2.56	4.11	.008	.12
Education <i>Supplementing individuals' learnings of dark histories.</i>	4.42	4.08	.402	.04

Commemoration <i>Remembering and honouring the deceased or sites where lives have been lost.</i>	4.32	3.49	.015	.11
Political <i>Reinforcing national identity or sense of patriotism.</i>	1.95	1.83	.449	.03
Spiritual <i>Creating experiences of contemplation/meditation on life and death.</i>	2.04	2.31	.259	.05

¹Based on a five-point Likert scale, one = not at all important and five = very important

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the body of thanatourism literature within the Malaysian context by examining the acceptance and perception of the market potential of thanatourism from the local perspective across different generations. Specifically, it explored the locals' understanding, acceptance, and perception of thanatourism's market potential from a generational viewpoint. The key findings revealed that younger individuals were more familiar with the concept of thanatourism than older individuals, although both groups exhibited a basic level of knowledge about the phenomenon. Younger respondents reported that they primarily gained their knowledge of thanatourism through entertainment-oriented, technology-driven sources, such as social media. They were inclined to associate thanatourism with supernatural themes, including spectral appearances, ghost hunting, otherworldly entities, and inexplicable mysteries. Another significant finding raises questions about the extent to which religious and cultural beliefs influence locals' acceptance of dark tourism. In terms of acceptance and perceived market potential, younger individuals demonstrated greater enthusiasm and acceptance towards thanatourism and expressed a more positive outlook on its market potential. When asked to rate the importance of developing thanatourism, both older and younger individuals ranked education highly. However, they differed in their secondary reasons, with older individuals prioritising commemoration and younger individuals favouring entertainment.

This study makes a theoretical contribution by examining local acceptance and perceptions of the market potential of thanatourism in Malaysia from a generational perspective, an analysis that was not previously conducted. Further, the study also has practical implications. To effectively and sustainably capitalise on the potential of thanatourism in Malaysia, it is crucial to first understand how locals perceive thanatourism and whether they are willing to support the development of this niche tourism sector. Community insights are vital, as local acceptance and involvement are essential for the successful and ethical development of thanatourism. Without local support, there is a significant risk of facing opposition, which could lead to unsustainable or even unethical development of thanatourism in the country.

Suggestion for Future Research

To enhance the generalisability of the findings, future studies could increase the sample size. Additionally, future research could explore the role of religious or traditional beliefs in shaping individuals' acceptance of thanatourism and their perception of its market potential.

Co-Author Contribution

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest in this article. Christy Bidder was the primary contributor to the study, responsible for developing the research instrument, collecting the data, conducting the analysis, and writing the manuscript. Boyd Sun Fatt assisted in designing the research instrument and collecting data. Spencer Hedley Mogindol contributed to the data analysis and co-authored the Materials and Methods section.

Acknowledgements

We would like to extend our gratitude to all individuals who participated in the online survey. We also express our sincere appreciation to the reviewers for their valuable insights, which contributed to the improvement of this research paper.

References

- Abbasi, D. S., & Mohamed, B. (2013). Local perception of tourism development: A conceptual framework for the sustainable cultural tourism. *Journal of Management and Sustainability*, 3(2), 31-39. <https://doi.org/10.5539/jms.v3n2p31>
- Ahmat, N., Ariffin, H., & Abdul Hamid, N. (2021). The Potential of Dark Tourism for Malaysian Tourism Industry: A Review. *Journal of Human Capital Development*, 14(2), 73–86.
- Buhalis, D., Leung, X. Y., Fan, D., Darcy, S., Chen, G., Xu, F., Tan, G. W-H., Nunkoo, R., & Farmaki, A. (2023). Tourism 2030 and the contribution to sustainable development goals: the tourism review viewpoint. *Tourism Review*, 78(2), 293-313. <https://doi.org/10.1108/TR-04-2023-620>
- Butler, R. (2024). Tourism destination development: the tourism area life cycle model. *Tourism Geographies*, 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2024.2325932>
- Cheal, F., & Griffin, T. (2013). Pilgrims and patriots: Australian tourist experiences at Gallipoli. *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 7(3), pp. 227-241.
- Cohen, J. (1988). *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Dark Tourism Malaysia. (2023). Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCzkZct0mrMU3BF9SuGy_pvg
- Iliev, D. (2020). Consumption, motivation and experience in dark tourism: a conceptual and critical analysis. *Tourism Geographies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2020.1722215>
- Fabros, M. G. M., Lopez, E. L. F., & Roma, M. N. (2023). Dark tourism in the Philippine context: indicators, motivations, and spectrums. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 7(1), 100452. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2023.100452>
- Foley, M., & Lennon, J. J. (1996). JFK and dark tourism: A fascination with assassination. *Journal of International Heritage Studies*, 2(2): 198-211
- Future Market Insights. (2022). Dark tourism market overview (2022 to 2023). Retrieved from <https://www.futuremarketinsights.com/reports/dark-tourism-sector-overview>
- Hassandarvish, M. (2024). More than beaches: Malaysia's dark tourism beckons brave travellers. Retrieved from <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2024/08/13/more-than-beaches-malaysias-dark-tourism-beckons-brave-travellers/145893>
- Hyde, K., & Harman, S. (2011). Motives for a secular pilgrimage to the Gallipoli battlefields. *Tourism Management*, 32(6), pp. 1343-1351.
- Ibrahim, S., & Chai, A. (2010). The dark within – exploring challenges and opportunities for dark tourism in Malaysia. In K. Din & J. Mapjabil (Eds.), *Tourism research in Malaysia: what, which way and so what?* (pp. 351-365). Sintok: Universiti Utara Malaysia.
- Inus, K. (2022). Efforts made to turn Sulug Island as Sabah's dark tourism hub. Retrieved from <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2022/07/27/efforts-made-to-turn-sulug-island-as-sabah039s-dark-tourism-hub>

- Jamin, A., Mohd Zain, Z., Sakarji, S. R., Ahmad, N., & Mohd Beta, R. M. D. (2020). The benefits of dark tourism experience among visitors in Malaysia. *International Conference on Economics, Business and Economic Education*, 2020, 219-228. <https://doi.org/10.18502/kss.v4i6.6600>
- Khamis, M. K. F., & Shariff, F. M. (2016). Motivation factors, satisfaction and return intention toward dark tourism sites in Malaysia. In S. Mohd Radzi, M. H. Mohd Hanafiah, N. Sumarjan, Z. Mohi, D. Sukyadi, K. Suryadi & P. Purnawarman (Eds.), *Heritage, culture and society: research agenda and best practices in the hospitality and tourism industry* (pp. 121-124). London: Taylor & Francis Group.
- Khanna, R., & Sharma, C. (2021). Does financial development raise tourism demand? A cross-country panel evidence. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research*, 47(6), 1040-1070. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10963480211060789>
- Kiralova, A., & Sperkova, R. (2024). Mapping the dark: a bibliometric examination of research in dark tourism. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 10(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2023.2294552>
- Kumar, R. (2011). *Research methodology: A step-by-step guide for beginners*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Lennon, J. J., & Foley, M. (2000). *Dark tourism: The attraction of death and disaster*. London: Continuum.
- Mahbob, S., Mohd Zahari, M. S., Zainuddin, Z., & Suhaim, M. Z. (2014). Educational value of dark tourism: tour operators perceived importance and action behavior. In N. Sumarjan, M. S. Mohd Zahari, S. Mohd Radzi, Z. Mohi, M. H. Mohd Hanafiah, M. F. Saiful Bakhtiar & A. Zainol (Eds.), *Hospitality and tourism: synergizing creativity and innovation in research* (pp. 359-363), London: Taylor & Francis Group.
- Martini, A., & Buda, D. M. (2018). Dark tourism and affect: framing places of death and disaster. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 23(6). <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2018.1518972>
- Masanti, M. (2016). Understanding dark tourism acceptance in Southeast Asia: The case of WWII Sandakan-Ranau death march, Sabah, Malaysia. In P. Mandal & J. Vong (Eds.), *Development of tourism and the hospitality industry in Southeast Asia* (pp. 113-125). Singapore: Springer.
- Millan, M. G.D., Millan Vazquez de la Torre, M. G., & Hernandez Rojas, R. (2021). Dark tourism in Southern Spain (Cordoba): an analysis of the demand. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(5), 2740. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18052740>
- Miwil, O. (2021). Three potential 'dark tourism' sites identified at Sabah's Crocker Range. Retrieved from <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2021/09/731597/three-potential-dark-tourism-sites-identified-sabahs-crocker-range>
- Mohd Zahari, M. S., Hanafiah, M. H., Syed Mahboob, S. S., & Md Zain, N. A. (2016). Dark tourism: is it a growth segment for the Malaysia tourism industry? *Tourism and Hospitality Management*, 22(1), 47-56. <https://doi.org/10.20867/thm.22.1.5>
- Nik Mohd Nor, N. M. S., Mohamed Idris, A. K., Hashim, N., Tarmazi, S. A. A., & Dawi, S. D. (2020). A study of Sarawak ethnic food 'Tuak' as means of communication in understanding culture. *Gading Journal for Social Sciences*, 23(1), 1-5.
- Pallant, J. (2016). *SPSS survival manual: A step by step guide to data analysis using IBM SPSS* (6th ed.). McGraw-Hill Education.
- Panayidou, C., Christou, P., & Saveriades, A. (2024). Dark tourism development in a leisure destination: the perceptions of the local community in Cyprus. *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743873X.2024.2328721>
- Rojek, C. (1997). Indexing, dragging and the social construction of tourist sights. In C. Rojek & J. Urry (Eds.), *Touring cultures: Transformations of travel and theory* (pp. 52-74). London: Routledge.
- Sabah Tourism Board. (2022). Experiencing dark tourism on Sulug Island. Retrieved from <https://sabahtourism.com/press-release/experiencing-dark-tourism-on-sulug-island/>
- Seaton, A. V. (1996). From thanatopsis to thanatourism: guided by the dark. *Journal of International Heritage Studies*, 2(2), 234-244.
- Seaton, A. V. (1999). War and thanatourism: Waterloo 1815-1914. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 26(1), 130-158.
- Sharma, P., & Nayak, J. K. (2019). Dark tourism: tourist value and loyalty intentions. *Tourism Review*, 74(4), 915-929. <https://doi.org/10.1108/TR-11-2018-0156>

- Sharpley, R. (2009). Dark tourism and political ideology: towards a governance model. In R. Sharpley & P. R. Stone (Eds.), *The darker side of travel: the theory and practice of dark tourism* (pp. 145-166). Bristol: Channel View Publications.
- Shen, Q., Sun, T., & Luo, K. (2018). Describing the dynamic evolution of tourism ecology efficiency based on super-efficiency. *Ekoloji*, 27(106), 517-524.
- Stone, P. R. (2006). A dark tourism spectrum: towards a typology of death and macabre related to tourist sites, attractions and exhibitions. *Tourism: An Interdisciplinary International Journal*, 52, 145-160.
- Stone, P., & Sharpley, R. (2008). Consuming dark tourism: a thanalogical perspective. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 35(2): 574-595.
- Tan, G. A., & Lim, S. (2018). The 'Pearl of the Orient' as a dark tourism destination in Malaysia. *International Journal of Tourism Cities*, 4(1), 68-80. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJTC-04-2017-0023>
- United Nations World Tourism Organization. (2024). Glossary of tourism terms. Retrieved from <https://www.unwto.org/glossary-tourism-terms>
- Winter, C. (2011a). Battlefield visitor motivations: explorations in the Great War town of Ieper, Belgium. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 13(2), pp. 164-176.
- Winter, C. (2011b). Battlefield tourism and Australian national identity: Gallipoli and the Western Front. In E. Frew & L. White (Eds.), *Tourism and national identities: An international perspective* (pp. 176-189). Oxon: Routledge.
- World Travel and Tourism Council. (2024). Malaysia's travel and tourism sector projected to exceed previous heights. Retrieved from <https://wtcc.org/news-article/malaysias-travel-and-tourism-sector-projected-to-exceed-previous-heights#>
- Zhang, Y. (2021). Unpacking visitors' experiences at dark tourism sites of natural disasters. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 40, 100880. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2021.100880>
- Zhang, P., Wang, J., & Rui, L. (2023). Tourism-type ontology framework for tourism-type classification, naming, and knowledge organization. *Heliyon*, 9(4), e15192. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e15192>