

Co-Creation of Experiences at Dark Tourism Festivals

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Abstract: This work-in-progress paper presents a novel area of thanatourism research, dark tourism festivals. These alternative festivals are located at the lighter end of the thanatourism spectrum, focusing on fun, culture and entertainment. This paper focuses in particular on the co-creation of festival experience at dark tourism festivals. Preliminary findings are presented, predominantly based on data gathered at the Whitby Goth Weekend, which will later be supplemented by research at other dark tourism festivals. Preliminary findings indicate that aspects such as emotional involvement, authenticity, performance and embodiment are important elements during the co-creation process. Embodied performances during which participants engage in creative practices, such as dressing up in elaborate costumes whilst having their photographs taken, enable them to escape from the routines of their day-to-day lives. Initial findings also indicate links between the festival experience and the concept of liminality. Also, participants engage in meaningful social bonds and essentially take ownership of the festival experience. Whilst engaging in these activities, participants become part of the co-creation of a performance. Festival spaces are specifically managed to enable co-creation, whereby festival participants form part of a sharing economy and actively co-create the festival experience together with the organisers, who enable this process by providing a safe and inclusive festival space.

Keywords: dark tourism, festivals, co-creation of experience, liminality, performance, sharing economy

1. An introduction to the study of dark tourism festivals

This research project develops new academic theory in relation to the subject area that is “dark tourism festivals”. The term dark tourism, also known as “thanatourism”, is used to describe touristic activities at sites that are associated with death, disaster and tragedy (Foley and Lennon, 1996; Seaton, 1996). Yet dark tourism activities can also involve visiting sites that have macabre elements or that involve thrill- and fright-seeking activities (Bristow and Keenan, 2018; Mionel, 2020). In academic theory, dark tourism sites and activities can be plotted along a dark tourism continuum, ranging from “darkest” to “lightest” (Stone, 2006). This area of research, dark tourism festivals, is located at the lighter end of this spectrum, as these festivals are usually not very death- or tragedy-oriented. Instead, dark tourism festivals focus on the macabre and fright aspects, aiming to provide fun experiences in the culture and entertainment industry.

This work-in-progress paper examines how the co-creation of experiences is achieved at dark tourism festivals. Co-creation is achieved through participation in memorable experiences, which enables people to “live”, their creative potential (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Tan, Kung and Luh, 2013; Campos *et al.*, 2018). When tourists, or festival participants, are encouraged to participate rather than look, meaningful and personal experiences are created (Gretzel, Fesenmaier and O’Leary., 2006; Campos *et al.*, 2018). As part of this overall research project, two case study festivals are being examined: the Bram Stoker Festival in Dublin and the Whitby Goth Weekend in the UK. Both festivals are relatively new events, with the Whitby Goth Weekend established in the mid-nineties and the Bram Stoker Festival first held in 2012. Figure 1 presents an overview of the main type of visitor for each festival. These visitors can also be viewed as “actors” who are involved in the co-creation of festival experience (Morgan, 2007). Participants at the Whitby Goth Weekend celebrate Gothic culture and dress up in elaborate costumes. Photography is also an important element of the festival experience (see Figure 2). In contrast, the Bram Stoker Festival was set up to elevate links between Dublin-born “Dracula” author Bram Stoker and the city of Dublin. At this festival participants enjoy family-friendly spooky encounters and literature events.

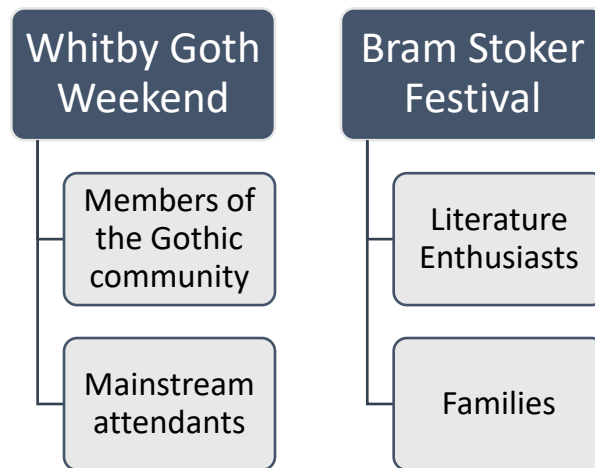


Figure 1: Main types of visitors at the Whitby Goth Weekend compared with Bram Stoker Festival visitors

2. Research methodology

The researcher applies two main methodological tools: firstly participant observation drawing on ethnographic principles, and secondly semi-structured interviews with management (Remenyi, 2013). Thus far the researcher has had the opportunity to engage in participant observation at the Whitby Goth Weekend in October 2021 (see photo in Figure 2), where members of the festival management team, participants as well as locals were interviewed. At the time of writing this paper, further field work at this festival is planned for April 2022.



Figure 2: Participants at the October 2021 Whitby Goth Weekend taking part in performance and co-creation

Future data collection will need to be balanced out and supplemented, therefore research at the Bram Stoker Festival is scheduled for October 2022. Additional visits to dark tourism festivals in Ireland such as the Derry Halloween Festival and the Púca Festival in County Meath are also planned. This data will further be enriched by conducting additional interviews with policy makers and government agencies that are involved in dark tourism festival management, organisation and promotion.

3. Preliminary findings – experience, emotional involvement and liminality

Experiences have the ability to touch human beings in powerful ways and this is particularly relevant in a tourism context: “especially during free time people express their quest for ever more unique experiences reflecting their own personal stories” (Binkhorst and Dekker, 2009, p. 311). This has also been observed at the Whitby Goth Weekend, where participants frequently commented on the importance of “feel” and ambiance at the festival. It was also found that emotional involvement is crucial: the creation of memorable experiences, as well as the meeting of friends are often-cited examples by participants.

As outlined previously, festival participants at the Whitby Goth Weekend dress up in elaborate costumes. They change character and experience a personal transformation for a limited amount of time, entering a zone of liminality. The concept of liminality describes a “transitory and betwixt space (...) where people detach themselves from social norms and their everyday self” (Wu *et al.*, 2020, p. 1). Yet research in relation to liminality at festivals in particular is limited, even though attendance at festivals clearly represents an escapism or “anti-structure” experience for most, as can also be seen in Figure 2 (Jaimangal-Jones, Pritchard and Morgan, 2010; Wu *et al.*, 2020). Preliminary findings at the Whitby Goth Weekend indicate that the holistic experience of a festival visit provides entry into so-called “in-between spaces” (Andrews and Roberts, 2012). Further research at other dark tourism festivals is required to establish whether the concept of liminality can be applied in other dark tourism festival contexts too.

4. Preliminary findings – embodied performances, inclusive spaces and the co-creation of experiences

The festival experience, the emotional involvement of participants and experiencing liminal spaces form the basis of another process: the co-creation of dark tourism experiences. Participants at the Whitby Goth Weekend “own” the experience, with authenticity cited as a crucial factor by festival management. It has been shown that “authenticity is a core feature of the sharing and experience economies” (Paulauskaite *et al.*, 2017, p. 2). Additional factors such as “social interaction, novelty, creativity, enjoyment and the creation of memorable experiences” have also been cited as crucial elements of co-creation processes (Rachão *et al.*, 2020, p. 1050).

Participants take ownership of the festival experience by engaging in creative practices (Tan, Kung and Luh, 2013) such as dressing up in elaborate costumes and posing for photographs in staged environments. This co-creation takes place in different contexts of culture, art and the macabre, where spaces are specifically managed to enable co-creation. Organisers actively manage festival co-creation by providing participants with creative spaces (Morgan, 2007). Whitby Abbey and its surrounding graveyard for example serve as a backdrop that encourages the positioning of gothic “actors”. This is a process that encourages photography and performance. To create a truly distinctive festival experience, participants need to be given the opportunity to immerse themselves in these creative processes (Morgan, 2007). Through the use of creativity, costumes and photography the participants experience the festival – yet, at the same time, they also partake in a performance. This process is aptly explained in earlier festival studies, where festival participants “become living signs of themselves” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1984, p. 18). These types of performances are also a form of “embodiment”, a concept which is central to experience in tourism (McEvoy, 2014). At Whitby, additional creative performance elements are encouraged in other festival spaces: in the town’s most atmospheric locations, at the festival music venues and in retail spaces. Hospitality spaces in particular also enable shared experiences among participants.

Initial research indicates that dark tourism festival participants become part of a sharing economy, actively co-creating the festival experience, together with the organisers. The Whitby Goth Weekend has been cited by organisers, locals and participants as a very inclusive space, welcoming participants from various backgrounds. Festival managers actively encourage participation from a wide range of actors, providing a safe space for participants from different “walks of life”. The participants are provided with a secure space in which they can overturn the routines of their day-to-day lives and engage in meaningful social bonds. During this process, they essentially take ownership of the festival experience and initiate a co-creation process that is all the while supported by the organisers, who act as “facilitators” of this sharing economy.

5. Conclusion - co-creation factors at the two case study festivals

At this early stage in the research, initial findings are provided below in Table 1, providing an overview of possible influencing factors that affect the co-creation process at the two case study festivals.

Table 1: Comparison of co-creation influences at the Whitby Goth Weekend and the Bram Stoker Festival

Co-creation influences	Whitby Goth Weekend	Bram Stoker Festival
Festival origins	1994 - “grass-roots” led, set up as a meeting of Goth pen-friends; continues to be a “meeting of friends”	2012, set up by Dublin City Council to establish awareness of Bram Stoker-Dublin connection
Physical locations	Whitby atmospheric town sites, facilitating photographic opportunities	Dublin city sites, facilitating a multitude of festival activities
Local awareness	High-level	Low-level
Organisational structure	Multi-layered; demand-driven	Top-down approach; supply-led

Co-creation influences	Whitby Goth Weekend	Bram Stoker Festival
Performance and embodiment	Participants are performers	Participants mainly observe performers
Virtual environments	Blogs and Facebook groups mainly led by fans and festival participants	Social media appearance led by professional marketing agency

6. Further research opportunities

This work-in-progress paper has gathered initial insights into the area of co-creation of experiences within a dark tourism festival context. Elements such as emotional involvement, embodied performances, providing inclusive spaces and the experience of liminal spaces have been found to affect the co-creation process. Further research is required to examine the more specific elements that enable co-creation at dark tourism festivals. Usual festival activities have been curtailed due to the ongoing effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, and many dark tourism festivals have not taken place for two years. Therefore, future research will focus on conducting field work at other dark tourism festivals, such as the Bram Stoker Festival in Dublin, the Derry Halloween Festival and the Púca Festival in County Meath. Additional interviews with professionals in the festival industry will also be conducted and interviews with policy makers as well as members of tourism management organisations are currently scheduled. During future field work at various dark tourism festivals, the researcher will engage in participant observation and interviews with locals and festival participants will be conducted.

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