

# Blended Intensive Programmes as a Tool for Critical Tourism Education: Insights from Military Tourism in Portugal

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**Abstract:** This paper examines Erasmus+ Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs) as both an educational format and a research platform for critical tourism education. Using a Lisbon-based BIP in which 21 Generation Z tourism students engaged with six Portuguese military-heritage sites, the study explores how they evaluate and reimagine the design of interpretation. An interpretivist qualitative approach combined non-participant observation, informal stakeholder mini-interviews, reflective journals, and student artefacts. Cross-case qualitative content analysis identified recurring expectations shaping Gen Z military-heritage engagement, leading to a four-pillar interpretation framework: (1) narrative-first technology; (2) multisensory and inclusive access; (3) community co-creation as authenticity; and (4) choice-based immersion and gamified edutainment. These pillars are synthesised into a concise Gen Z “signature” of visitor expectations and paired with low-, medium-, and high-resource recommendations for progressive implementation. The study demonstrates BIPs as living-lab settings that bridge classroom learning, applied research, and site-level innovation, while positioning student co-production as a legitimate route to context-sensitive and ethically alert interpretation practice.

**Keywords:** Military Tourism; Blended Intensive Programme; Generation Z; Tourism Education; Museums; Sustainable Visitation

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## 1. Introduction

Niche tourism is expanding as destinations move beyond mass models to meet evolving visitor expectations (Novelli, 2005). Military tourism, spanning museums, battlefields, fortifications and memorial routes, shares interpretive terrain with dark tourism because it engages conflict and contested histories (Seaton, 1999; Lennon and Foley, 2000). Nevertheless, well-curated military heritage need not foreground morbidity; it can prioritise learning, plural remembrance and community narratives over spectacle (Venter, 2017).

Military attractions are adapting to digital-native audiences who value interactivity, inclusion and sustainability (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007; Gretzel et al., 2015; Francis and Hoefel, 2018). Generation Z (mid-1990s to early 2010s) often lacks direct memory anchors in military contexts and is sensitive to representation, accessibility, and emotional tone (Light, 2017). Empirical evidence on Gen Z perspectives in military heritage remains sparse (Kupczyk et al., 2021), risking either sensationalist framings or passive museology that underserves contemporary expectations.

Tourism education has likewise shifted towards experiential, reflective formats. Erasmus+ Blended Intensive Programmes combine online preparation with short intensive mobility and intercultural teamwork, with reported benefits for professional and sustainability competencies (Perfözl and López-Varela, 2022). This creates a timely opportunity to align pedagogic innovation with changing visitor markets.

### 1.1 Research Questions

1. RQ1: How can Erasmus+ BIPs function as mechanisms for experiential learning and critical reflection in tourism education?
2. RQ2: How do Gen Z tourism students assess the strengths and limitations of Portuguese military-heritage attractions?
3. RQ3: What actionable strategies follow from these assessments to support more inclusive, sustainable, and immersive visitor experiences?

This study contributes by (1) evidencing BIPs as dual teaching–research infrastructures that generate a structured qualitative corpus; (2) providing a cross-site Gen Z evaluation of military-heritage interpretation; and (3) translating these evaluations into a practice-ready four-pillar framework and Gen Z “signature”, supported by feasibility-tiered recommendations.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Military Tourism**

Military tourism includes museums, fortifications, re-enactments, battlefields and interpretation centres (Seaton, 1999; Dunkley et al., 2011). Its narratives intersect with national identity and politicised memory, making interpretive choices ethically charged (Winter, 2009; Knudsen, 2011). Curatorial stances range from reconciliation-oriented approaches to celebratory narratives of heroism and technological prowess (Hyde and Harman, 2011; Dunkley et al., 2011). Traditional object-led, chronological displays can disengage younger visitors (Slade, 2003), reinforcing calls for interpretation that integrates digital mediation, experiential design and ethical reflexivity (Light, 2017; Butler and Suntikul, 2013).

### **2.2 Dynamic Visitor Markets and the Rise of Generation Z**

Shifting demographics and technologies have reset expectations for heritage experiences (Chon, Pizam and Mansfeld, 2012). Generation Z (c. 1995–2010) typically seeks: (1) interactive and personalised journeys, often mediated by mobile, AR/VR, and gamified tasks; (2) value-driven content emphasising sustainability, inclusivity, and ethical consumption; and (3) opportunities for co-creation and social meaning (Gretzel et al, 2015; Francis and Hoefel, 2018). As both current visitors and prospective industry professionals, Generation Z occupies a dual role, making their perspectives especially consequential for product design and education. In museums, this translates to a preference for multisensory engagement, choice-based depth, and explicit narrative scaffolding, rather than object-led didacticism (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007; Ratto and Boler, 2014). In military heritage specifically, Gen Z often lacks familial memory anchors and responds better when past conflicts are connected to current concerns—diversity, peace, social justice—and when multiple perspectives (civilians, opposing forces, local voices) are represented; attention to cognitive load (audio clarity, captioning, pacing) also matters (Light, 2017; Marwick and Boyd, 2014; Francis and Hoefel, 2018).

### **2.3 Tourism Education and BIPs**

Alongside changes in visitor markets, higher education in tourism has undergone a significant transformation. Tourism education has shifted from transmission models towards experiential, critical, and reflective pedagogies that build professional competence and civic/ethical awareness (Tribe, 2002; Airey and Tribe, 2005; Dredge, Airey and Gross, 2014; Pritchard, Morgan and Ateljevic, 2011; Sotomayor, 2021). Erasmus+ BIPs combine pre-programme online preparation with short, intensive physical mobility to deliver project-based, intercultural teamwork, digital skills, and stakeholder engagement (European Commission, 2025). Reported benefits include improved learning outcomes, strengthened sustainability competencies, and the productive use of AR/VR within curricula (Finlay, Tinnion, and Simpson, 2021; Tomej et al, 2022; Shen et al, 2022; Perfözl and López-Varela, 2022). Crucially, BIPs can also act as research environments: site visits, informal stakeholder interviews, guided reflection, and student outputs yield qualitative data akin to focus groups and ethnographic fieldnotes, blurring teaching–research boundaries in productive ways (Fullagar and Wilson, 2012; Goh, 2011; Perfözl and López-Varela, 2022).

### **2.4 Synthesis and Identified Gap**

Existing work shows (1) the interpretive complexity of military heritage; (2) Gen Z’s preference for inclusive, interactive and plural narrative designs; and (3) the pedagogic value of blended experiential learning. What remains underdeveloped is their integration. Few studies explicitly use BIPs as empirical inquiry platforms, foreground Gen Z assessments of military heritage, and translate these assessments into operational design guidance. This study addresses that gap through a BIP-based, cross-case Gen Z evaluation yielding a transferable interpretation framework.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Design

An interpretivist, relativist, and subjectivist stance guided the study, aligning with meaning-centred inquiry. The empirical context was an Erasmus+ BIP titled *Military tourism, re-enactment and immersive experiences: bringing history back to life*, held in Lisbon, Portugal (12–16 May 2025) with online sessions on 22 April and 27 May 2025. Participants were Generation Z tourism students (N = 21) from three universities in Belgium, Greece, and Portugal, randomly assigned to five mixed groups. The BIP integrated lectures, stakeholder engagement, field visits, and on-site exhibition tasks to elicit evidence-based insights on interpretation, inclusion, and sustainability.

#### 3.2 Data Collection

Data were generated in three phases aligned with the BIP, combining preparatory inputs, in-situ activities, and post-hoc consolidation to enable triangulation. Specific case areas are listed in Section 3.3.

##### 3.2.1 Pre-mobility

Online sessions introduced current debates in military heritage (interpretation, edutainment, accessibility, sustainability), ethical protocols, and the learner-observer role. This ensured students were mentally acquainted with the necessary framework before the field week started.

##### 3.2.2 Field Week (on-site)

On the first day, students received further lectures, followed by discussions on what to look out for and how to collect the needed information. At multiple heritage settings (see 3.4), groups conducted (i) non-participant observation of guided interpretation, scenography, digital touchpoints, wayfinding, audio environments, and visitor behaviours; (ii) informal mini-interviews with available staff/guides using the topic guide; and (iii) brief time-boxed reflections on narrative stance, emotional load, and inclusivity. Artefacts comprised field notes, interview notes, photographs of interpretive elements (excluding identifiable visitors), screenshots/QR captures where permitted, and brief voice memos. Teams kept a daily log separating “low-cost/high-impact” from “investment-dependent” proposals.

##### 3.2.3 Post-mobility Consolidation

On the final day of the BIP, the groups reconciled notes, cross-checked them against site materials, and produced a written brief for each case. A presentation was produced per group and presented to selected key local military tourism stakeholders. After the BIP, a virtual plenary session served as a member check to clarify ambiguities and align terminology. Materials were compiled into a BIP Mini-Guidebook, which served as the analytic corpus; only anonymised outputs were retained.

##### 3.2.4 Data Characteristics and Quality

Multi-modal evidence (observation, interviews, reflections, artefacts) enabled source triangulation; mixed-national teams provided investigator triangulation. The standard instrument pack ensured cross-case consistency while allowing site-specific nuance. Terminology was standardised during consolidation to preserve comparability; data handling and anonymisation procedures are detailed in Section 3.4.

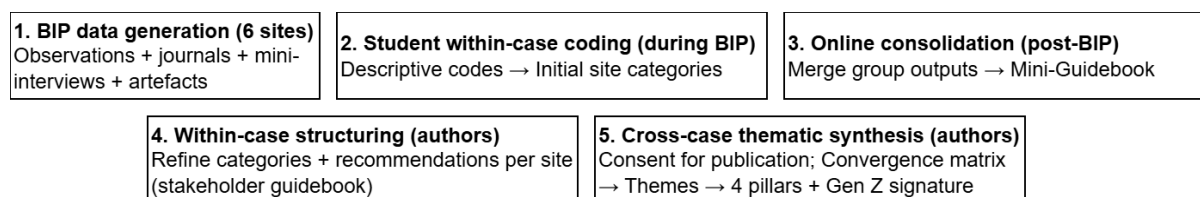
### 3.3 Case Studies

Six cases were selected to span urban, maritime and rural military heritage sites/experiences. Each illustrates distinct interpretive conditions and audiences. i. BOOST – Escape Game (Lisbon city centre): urban heritage storyline anchored in Lisbon’s history and landmarks (Boost Portugal, n.d.); ii. Navy Museum – Frigate D. Fernando II e Glória and Submarine Barracuda (Belém): Portuguese naval history across a 19th-century frigate and a Cold War submarine (Direção Cultural da Marinha, 2024); iii. Historical Route of the Lines of Torres (CIS Sobral; Forte do Alqueidão): Napoleonic-era defensive lines north of Lisbon, with associated fortifications and context (Rota Histórica das Linhas de Torres, n.d.); iv. Vimeiro Battle Interpretation Centre: the 1808 Peninsular War Battle of Vimeiro and its battlefield context (VisitPortugal, n.d.); v. Aljubarrota/CIBA and Batalha Monastery: the 1385 Battle of Aljubarrota and the commemorative Gothic monastery at Batalha (UNESCO World Heritage

Centre, n.d.a); vi. Convent of Christ, Tomar: A Templar and Order of Christ convent-fortress complex spanning the medieval and Manueline periods (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.b).

### 3.4 Data Analysis

The analytic corpus consisted of the Mini-Guidebook produced during and immediately after the field week. This corpus collated six case briefs (n = 6; one per site) and all supporting materials generated in the BIP: non-participant observation notes, individual reflective journals (n = 21), informal semi-structured mini-interviews with guides/staff (n = 7), group discussion notes and presentations, and related digital/visual artefacts (e.g., photographs, QR/web captures of interpretive content). All materials were anonymised before analysis; quotations are attributed by group number, and participation had no assessment consequences.



**Figure 1: Pipeline explaining the data analysis process**

Analysis followed a two-cycle qualitative content approach (see Figure 1), moving from within-case coding to cross-case synthesis. The first analytic cycle focused on producing robust within-site feedback. During the field week, each mixed-national student group compiled its site observations into a standardised case template and conducted descriptive, within-case coding of recurrent ideas in their written feedback. This group coding generated preliminary site-level categories capturing strengths and improvement needs. Two weeks after the BIP, an online consolidation meeting aligned terminology across groups and instructed students on how to merge each group’s site feedback into a single, coherent case brief for each site, forming the Mini-Guidebook corpus. The researchers then conducted a further round of within-case coding on these consolidated briefs to structure and clarify the site feedback for stakeholders, refining categories and organising recommendations per site.

The second analytic cycle addressed cross-case interpretation. Once students had been informed of the intention to publish and had provided written consent for the use of their anonymised materials, the authors compared the consolidated, researcher-coded case outputs across all six sites. Pattern/thematic coding was used to cluster recurring categories into higher-order themes, supported by a cross-case convergence/divergence matrix as the principal synthesis instrument. Themes were retained as framework-relevant when they recurred across several cases (typically three or more) and/or were strongly emphasised within a case. At the same time, divergences were recorded to preserve contextual specificity. The resulting cross-case thematic set was abstracted into four interpretive pillars and a concise “signature” of Generation Z visitor expectations.

The cross-case themes and ensuing pillars were refined through iterative author comparison and discussed with participants during the post-mobility consolidation plenary.

### 3.5 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

The BIP was designed and facilitated by the authors, who therefore occupied a dual educator–researcher position. To limit social desirability effects, students were constantly encouraged to adopt a critical professional stance, were assured that participation and expressed views had no assessment consequences and worked in mixed-national teams. The student cohort also occupied a dual role as both visitors and emerging tourism professionals; this practice-aware lens is analytically valuable for interpretation design, but it also frames their evaluations toward feasibility, sustainability, and experience innovation. Finally, the inclusion of non-Portuguese participants provided reflective distance from local memory politics, supporting candid critique, while also implying that some perceptions may differ from those of locally embedded publics. These boundary conditions are considered when interpreting transferability.

## 4. Results and Discussion

This section synthesises qualitative findings from the BIP “Military Tourism, Re-enactment and Immersive Experiences: Bringing History Back to Life” to: (1) evidence the BIP as a platform for hands-on, reflective learning; (2) analyse Generation Z views on current military-heritage practice; and (3) derive strategies for sustainable, inclusive visitation. In doing so, it contributes to debates on pedagogic innovation, visitor engagement, and the ethical and interpretive renewal of military heritage, demonstrating the value of reflective, practice-based learning and how Generation Z translates it into concrete design choices across specific heritage contexts.

### 4.1 BIP as a Platform for Critical Reflection

The BIP combined online pre-visit preparation, intensive fieldwork, stakeholder engagement, and post-visit reflection. This sequence—observation, interpretation, co-creation—positioned students as emerging professionals who critically assessed practice. A shared Mini-Guidebook served both as a teaching tool and primary dataset, turning the programme into a living lab for critical tourism education and practical recommendation-building. This aligns with evidence that experiential, reflective pedagogies foster critical awareness and ethical sensitivity (Airey and Tribe, 2005; Pritchard, Morgan and Ateljevic, 2011) and shows that BIPs are structured contexts for qualitative inquiry that support both learning and research (Perfözl and López-Varela, 2022).

Student recommendations were self-reflective, treating technology as a means to strengthen narrative rather than an end in itself. They prioritised accessibility, community participation, and phased, low-cost steps alongside higher-investment upgrades—signalling a professional focus on feasibility, implementation order, and ethics over mere consumer appeal. This is consistent with findings that younger audiences value the added meaning that technology, when appropriately approached, can bring to heritage experiences (Gretzel et al., 2015) and with museum practice that emphasises dialogic engagement rather than instruction alone (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007).

### 4.2 Cross-site Gen Z Evaluations With Quotes

Across six cases, students showed a clear Generation Z mindset focused on interactive experiences, inclusive design, community involvement, and technology that enhances storytelling rather than overshadows it. These preferences support earlier studies on digital-native visitors’ desire for interactivity and co-creation (Gretzel et al., 2015; Francis and Hoefel, 2018) and extend those findings to military heritage, seldom examined from this demographic viewpoint. The following synthesis provides detailed evidence, including direct quotes and group attribution, to illustrate this perspective.

#### 4.2.1 *BOOST (City Escape Game, Lisbon): Edutainment With Purpose and Closure*

Students liked BOOST’s fun format but wanted more historical detail and a clear ending. Group 4 said, “It would be great if the riddles gave a bit more background or historical context about the places visited.” They also requested structured reflection: “A quick summary or short debrief at the end would be useful.” Group 2 noted a market fit: “We liked that it was different from regular escape games. Maybe make the riddles more focused on facts or stories about Lisbon.” These comments highlight Gen Z’s desire for playful learning that deepens understanding and ends with a “closure” moment. This aligns with Ratto and Boler’s (2014) view that playful learning fosters engagement when linked to historical context and reflection.

#### 4.2.2 *Museu de Marinha (Fragata D. Fernando II e Glória; Submarino Barracuda): From Static Display to Lived Environment*

Inside the submarine, Group 2 wanted short explainers: “It would be cool to have short, modern info films... explain what daily life was like in a submarine.” On the 19th-century frigate, they suggested replacing mannequins with movement: “Instead of the static mannequins... use animatronics to show sailors in action.” Gen Z is not seeking spectacle but experiences that reveal routines, constraints and skills of maritime life. This supports Hooper-Greenhill’s (2007) claim that visitors seek multisensory, embodied encounters with history and echoes Slade’s (2003) critique of static, object-focused military displays.

#### 4.2.3 *Linhas de Torres (CIS Sobral de Monte Agraço; Forte do Alqueidão): Make the Landscape Legible, Then Layer Immersion*

At the hilltop fort, Group 2 urged, “Trim the grass and clear overgrowth so visitors can better see and understand the terrain and strategic layout,” and suggested “life-sized statues of soldiers” to enhance presence. They also proposed “an overnight experience where visitors can stay in the fort like Portuguese soldiers.” Group 4 recommended AR overlays to visualise troop movements, while Group 3 suggested tablets or QR-unlocked 3D reconstructions to address “open” views. Group 1 proposed quizzes integrated into the existing QR system. This case illustrates a Gen Z approach: (i) clarify basics; (ii) add light digital elements; (iii) offer optional depth through living history and AR.

Community emerged as a key factor for authenticity. Group 4 proposed volunteer guides, school partnerships and community workshops to build local involvement and pride. These ideas suggest that, for Generation Z, value stems from human connections more than technology—supporting Light’s (2017) call for a community-focused interpretation and redefining authenticity as co-creation rather than passive enjoyment.

#### 4.2.4 *Vimeiro Interpretation Centre and Battlefield: Multimodal Learning, Plural Narratives, and Load Management*

Students praised the digital approach: “The QR codes... are great—more of this should be used to help visitors understand complex strategies,” said Group 1. They wanted deeper immersion via virtual tours, quizzes, interactive battle maps, and AR/VR scenes. Group 3 sought a “more immersive” film with sound effects; Group 4 requested improved editing, synchronised subtitles and sign language. They also urged storytelling from multiple perspectives—those of civilians and opposing soldiers—to build empathy. Family ideas included paint-your-own figurines and a puppet show inspired by Karagiozis. Group 3 cautioned against “sensory overload” and advised more precise separation of audio, text and visuals. Finally, Group 5 envisioned a living-history camp with two-tier tickets, showing Gen Z’s preference for choice and clear social guidelines. These insights reinforce Hooper-Greenhill’s (2007) argument for inclusive accessibility and introduce a new focus on cognitive-load sensitivity, which is often overlooked in heritage research.

#### 4.2.5 *Aljubarrota/CIBA and the Monastery of Batalha: Design for Attention, Build a Night-time Offer, Widen Participation*

Groups 2–4 prioritised audio clarity: “Switching to headphones or headsets would make the sound quality better... a small change that could make a big difference.” They supported existing QR content linking battlefield and interpretation, and proposed family gamification and weekly late openings with light shows to boost a night-time cultural economy. Community engagement was central: discounted tickets, collaborations with local artists, and annual fairs to make the site a cultural hub rather than only historical. Gen Z’s message: fix basics, diversify access and integrate heritage into everyday life. This aligns with Francis and Hoefel (2018) on Gen Z’s social involvement and inclusivity, showing how such ideas can inform sustainable destination management.

#### 4.2.6 *Convento de Cristo, Tomar: Complex Heritage, Multi-voice Storytelling, and “AI as Helper, not Hero”*

Students viewed the convent as a rich narrative space. Group 1 proposed video mapping to show architectural changes and AR views of rooms across eras. Group 2 advised changing films from promotional to explanatory content and adding interactive 3D projections. For participatory edutainment, they suggested escape experiences, historical fencing lessons and a Knight Experience Room. Comfort was emphasised—colour-coded routes, noise-cancelling headsets, night tours and quiet hours. Local voices mattered: staff and residents’ personal stories, as well as children’s recordings, brought history to life. Group 3 summarised: “Every place has so much to offer—that is why we have to build on it. We want to showcase the place with the help of AI, but we do not want AI to become the place.” This encapsulates Gen Z’s stance—use AI to tell the story, not replace it—echoing Light’s (2017) concern that innovation must preserve interpretive authenticity while casting AI as facilitator rather than substitute.

### 4.3 The Four Pillars: a Cross-cutting Framework

The cross-site analysis yielded four interdependent pillars that translate Generation Z expectations into practical applications. Study sites evidence each pillar (see Table 1) and include indicative resource levels (low/medium/high).

**Table 1: The four pillars for a cross-cutting framework**

	<b>Pillar 1: Narrative-first technology (digital as scaffold, not spectacle)</b>	<b>Pillar 2: Inclusive and multisensory access</b>	<b>Pillar 3: Community co-creation as authenticity in practice</b>	<b>Pillar 4: Choice-based immersion and gamified edutainment</b>
Purpose	Use digital tools to clarify story, sequence, and “why it matters” rather than to overwhelm.	Make accessibility a baseline: clear audio, captioning, sign language options, tactile cues, and cognitive-load management.	Root heritage value in human relationships—local voices, schools, volunteers, and resident participation.	Offer layered paths from light-touch to deep immersion, preserving visitor autonomy.
Student Evidence	“Riddles should give more historical context.” (BOOST, G4)   “Use AI to support, not become, the place.” (Tomar, G3)	“Subtitle sync and sign language would improve accessibility.” (Vimeiro, G4)   “Quiet hours for sensory-sensitive visitors.” (Tomar, G4)	“Volunteer guides could involve local people.” (Torres, G4)   “Locals’ audio/video stories make it feel alive.” (Tomar, G1)	“Offer different versions based on what people like.” (BOOST, G4)   “Two ticket types: immersive and general.” (Vimeiro, G5)
Examples	Animated glass panels showing troop movements at Vimeiro (medium); short, in-situ explainer films inside the Submarino Barracuda (low); video mapping to illustrate architectural transitions at the Convento de Cristo (high).	Headset audio with caption synchronisation at CIBA/Batalha (low); tactile replicas at Convento de Cristo (medium); quiet hours and noise-managed routes (low).	Volunteer guides and school partnerships at Linhas de Torres (low/medium); resident discounts and local-maker collaborations at CIBA/Batalha (low); micro-story pods recorded by staff and residents at Convento de Cristo (low)	QR-driven quizzes at Vimeiro (low); modular difficulty riddles + structured debrief at BOOST Escape Game, Lisbon (low); living-history / overnight soldier-life scenarios at Forte do Alqueidão (high); family packs and escape-style experiences at Convento de Cristo (medium).

Collectively, these pillars operationalise calls for inclusive interpretation (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007), reflexive pedagogy (Pritchard, Morgan and Ateljevic, 2011), and meaning-centred digital engagement (Gretzel et al., 2015). Operationalising these pillars on site lies beyond the scope of the present study and is identified as a direction for future research

#### 4.4 Interpreting Generation Z’s “Signature” Across Sites

Across escape games, vessels, fortifications, interpretation centres, and a convent complex, five preferences were consistent:

- **Meaning before media:** quick orientation (maps, timelines, stakes); digital is used to support story order and salience.
- **Autonomy with safe choice:** layered depth and clear intensity labels (e.g., Explore/Engage/Immerse) rather than fixed paths.
- **Diverse, dialogic voices:** civilian, local, and opposing perspectives alongside official narratives.
- **Cognitive-load management:** clean audio, captions, quiet hours, and single-task interactions to reduce overload.
- **Time-smart programming:** evening formats and late entries to spread demand and broaden audiences.

These signatures align with the four pillars (narrative-first technology, multisensory and inclusive access, community co-creation as authenticity, and choice-based immersion and gamified edutainment) and provide managers with a practical checklist. Conceptually, they also reposition military heritage beyond a narrow “dark tourism” focus on spectacle: Gen Z prioritises narrative clarity, plural voices, inclusion and community value—treating sites as dialogic spaces for learning, empathy and sustainable remembrance.

## 5. Conclusion

This study positions military heritage beyond a narrow “dark tourism” lens by showing how Generation Z engages most deeply with narratives that are clear, plural, and offer opportunities for safe, self-directed exploration. This study contributes by: (1) demonstrating that BIPs can operate as living-lab platforms that integrate experiential tourism education with structured qualitative research; (2) offering cross-site insight into how Gen Z tourism students assess military-heritage experiences and interpretive practices; and (3) providing a practice-ready four-pillar interpretation framework and Generation Z “signature”, supported by feasibility-tiered recommendations for implementation.

Synthesising cross-case findings, researchers offer a four-pillar framework—narrative-first technology, multisensory and inclusive access, community co-creation as authenticity, and choice-based immersion and gamified edutainment—plus a concise Gen Z signature (meaning before media, autonomy with safe choice, diverse voices, load management, and time-smart design). Together, these provide actionable guidance for museums and site managers seeking engagement with integrity and care.

The study is limited by its single-country setting, student cohort, and short intervention window. Future work should test the framework with broader audiences, track behavioural and learning outcomes longitudinally, and experiment with co-creation models and accessibility metrics across different heritage contexts. In doing so, the sector can move from spectacle to interpretation, and from commemoration as consumption to remembrance as shared civic learning.

## Ethics Declaration

This study involved adult participants and was deemed minimal risk. Participation was voluntary, carried no academic consequences, and written informed consent was obtained. Data were reported in aggregate and handled in compliance with GDPR, with encrypted, access-restricted storage.

## AI Declaration

The authors used ChatGPT and Grammarly for language editing, including grammar checks, transition checks, and suggestions for trimming text to meet the word limit. All revisions were reviewed and approved by the authors, who take responsibility for the content.

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