

Home of the Brave! New Perspectives on Military Tourism

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Abstract: Purpose: This study aims to deepen understanding of the tourist experience in European military museums by examining elements that influence both positive and negative evaluations and analysing how interactive features encourage a closer understanding of military history. Methodology: A content analysis of 17,500 TripAdvisor reviews from 35 European military museums was conducted using Leximancer 5.0, revealing thematic patterns across visitor experiences. Findings: Three key clusters emerged: the lively museum experience, the daily guided tour, and the practical facilities. Immersive displays and engaged staff enhance satisfaction, while ticketing delays and accessibility issues are primary sources of dissatisfaction. Practical implications: Museum directors should prioritise interactive exhibitions, streamline ticketing procedures, and improve transportation access to boost visitor engagement and expand audience reach. Originality: This study introduces a SWOT framework and Leximancer-based thematic analysis of military museum visitor experiences, highlighting the emotional aspects of heritage tourism.

Keywords: Military Tourism, Battlefield Tourism, Military Museums, Online Reviews, Europe

1. Introduction

Military tourism plays a role in broadening our perspectives, helping to rebuild common ground, and learning to create connections rather than encourage division. The concept of Military Tourism refers to visiting sites associated with war and conflict. A significant body of literature has focused on fortifications, museums with extensive collections of weapons and military artifacts, factories producing weapons and equipment, and battlefields (Venter, 2017; Graham & Lennon, 2002). Despite increasing interest in battlefield and military tourism, important gaps remain in understanding its complex impacts and the diverse motivations of visitors to Military Museums. Current research has primarily examined specific aspects of battlefield tourism, including its role in political identity (Brown & Ibarra, 2017), visitor motivations (Chen & Tsai, 2019), and regional tourism development (Zienkiewicz et al., 2021). However, these studies often treat battlefield and military tourism as separate, unrelated phenomena, without thoroughly exploring their connections. Furthermore, the emotional and psychological effects on different visitor groups are still insufficiently studied. There is also a lack of research specifically analysing visitors' experiences in Military Museums across Europe (see Table 1 for recent evidence).

Studying military museums is essential because they preserve and interpret the history of conflict, offer insights into the complexities of battles, and encourage discussions about how war impacts civilisations. Military museums serve as vital educational resources and spaces for reflecting on military history, the evolution of defence technologies, and the human toll of conflict. By connecting visitors with the past, they provide new perspectives on geopolitical realities and promote reconciliation and peacebuilding. Therefore, the present research aims to gain a deeper understanding of visitors' experiences at military museums. In brief, this study has three main objectives: (1) to explore how visitors describe their experiences at military museums; (2) to evaluate the ratings that indicate museum quality; and (3) to perform a SWOT analysis to identify the internal and external factors that influence best practices in museums.

This study includes 17,500 TripAdvisor reviews of 35 Europe's military museums, covering both positive and negative feedback. The Leximancer 5.0 software was used to qualitatively analyse the collected data. Leximancer is a text analytics tool designed to interpret data semantically, identify concepts and themes, and reveal relationships between them (Leximancer, 2023). Unlike other content analysis programmes such as CATPAC and Atlas, Leximancer employs an algorithm based on lexical co-occurrence to perform content analysis, thereby reducing researcher bias and enhancing reliability (Sanz-Blas et al., 2019).

Table 1: Recent Studies Contributing to the Debate on Military Tourism (Source: author)

Research Field/Authors	Main Research Objective
Battlefield Tourism	
Clarke & McAuley, 2020	Explores battlefield tourism dimensions including identity, place branding, thana tourism, and nostalgia.
Brown & Ibarra, 2017	Examines how visits to Spanish Civil War sites contribute to political identity.
Chen & Tsai, 2019	Insights into engagement with historical sites with complex narratives at the intersection of cultural heritage and personal interpretation.
Noivo et al., 2022	Identifies aspects that promote heritage through historical event recreations.
Military Tourism	
Zienkiewicz et al., 2021	Strategies to promote military tourism in northern Poland, considering historical significance, infrastructure, and visitor experiences.
Chylińska, 2022	Lower Silesia as an essential region for military tourism in Poland.
Juan et al., 2020	Develops a scale (Conceptualizing Views on War) to examine tourists' behavioral intentions towards dark tourism sites.
Dark Tourism	
Heritage/Military Museums	
Czarnecka, 2020	Polish-Romanian and Polish-Bulgarian research on the purpose of Military Museums.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Military Tourism

Military tourism is a relatively new segment of travel, also known as war tourism, battlefield tourism, or armament tourism. Although not yet officially defined, it involves visiting locations associated with war and conflict, such as fortifications, weapons museums, and battlegrounds (Venter, 2017; Graham & Lennon, 2002). Participants often attend military-themed events like historical reenactments, fan conventions, and military picnics, attracting a wide range of tourists.

As Venter (2017) explains, military tourism is closely linked with heritage tourism, which is itself a part of mass tourism. Heritage tourism, focused on exploring historical and cultural legacies, includes the specific niche of military tourism (Alabau-Montoya & Ruiz-Molina, 2020). Such sites serve as powerful reminders of human conflict, providing visitors with a unique insight into past struggles and difficulties.

Military tourism also overlaps with dark tourism, which Stone (2012) describes as exploring sites associated with death, suffering, and the macabre. Within dark tourism, military tourism stands out as a distinct category that highlights the solemn aspects of armed conflicts throughout history. Battlefields, forts, and military cemeteries are often recognised as heritage sites, while concentration camps and war memorials further establish the link between military and dark tourism. This dual recognition positions military tourism at the intersection of heritage and dark tourism, underscoring its role as a reflective journey into the historical and darker sides of human conflict (Noivo et al., 2022).

2.2 Military Museums

Military museums are a growing part of military tourism attractions. They showcase important historical artefacts and serve as vital elements within the tourism system (Venter, 2017), with collections that include weapons, equipment, tactics, and personnel involved in past conflicts. Museums may focus on a particular military branch, unit, or conflict, and are found across the globe (Szitanyi, 2015). They also exhibit material culturally linked with armies, such as uniforms, medals, weapons, and flags (Scott, 2015).

The military histories depicted in these museums have traditionally emphasised "the common soldier, the experience of war, and the place of the armed forces in society" (Hacker & Vining, 2013, p.42). Museums should be reliable sources of information and offer a genuine connection to the past (Scott, 2015), while also honouring the women and men who served their countries (Venter, 2017).

However, military museums remain contested spaces. Winter (2012) warns that "bringing war to life" can be dangerous, given the large gap between the real past and the reconstructed past. He argues museums must exhibit the less pleasant aspects of history, even where this disrupts romantic or nostalgic notions. In military museums, war may be portrayed as either positive or negative, evoking feelings of pride or guilt (Scott, 2015). Between the 1960s and 2000s, many European countries abolished mandatory military service, prompting museums to modernise their collections and broaden their appeal to civilian audiences while maintaining traditional exhibitions for established visitors (Raths, 2013).

3. Methodology

3.1 Data Collection

Qualitative research was carried out to explore the personal experiences of museum visitors at military exhibits across Europe. For this project, 500 TripAdvisor comments from each of Europe's top 35 military museums were collected, totalling 17,500 reviews. TripAdvisor, founded in 2000, started travel-related word-of-mouth by enabling travellers to share opinions on travel and hospitality experiences (Chittiprolu et al., 2021), and is now regarded as the leading online travel guide and a significant influence in the hospitality sector (Saydam et al., 2022). Reviews were collected from each museum's opening through the date of data collection, including the review title, author, profile review count, and overall satisfaction rating (1-5 stars).

The sample covers museums across England, France, Malta, Poland, Austria, Spain, Finland, Ireland, Russia, Guernsey, Albania, and the Czech Republic, showcasing diverse European military heritage contexts. Prominent examples include the Lascaris War Rooms in Malta, the Musée de l'Armée des Invalides in France, and the Imperial War Museum in England.

3.2 Data Analysis With Leximancer

Leximancer V5.0 produces a colourful visual concept map in which main concepts are shown in clusters that reflect their relationships; larger circles indicate more significant themes (Sanz-Blas et al., 2019). Concepts mentioned together tend to cluster closely on the map, indicating semantic co-occurrence. Leximancer has been widely used in tourism and hospitality research (Goh & Wilk, 2022), including studies of Petra, Jordan (Olorunsola et al., 2023), and the Shaanxi History Museum in Xi'an, China (Chen & Ryan, 2020).

For this study, overly generic terms (such as "lots", "left", "during") and location-specific proper nouns (e.g., "English", "German", "Malta") were removed. A data cleaning procedure merged plural and singular forms, such as "display/displays", "museum/museums", and "visit/visiting/visited", to ensure consistent thematic mapping.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Concept Map View of Military Tourism Based on Tourists' Post-Experiences

Analysis of the 17,500 reviews (Figure 1) revealed three thematic clusters: The Museum Lively Experience (centred on "museum", 36,337 hits; "display", 9,788 hits; "story", 4,775 hits); The Daily Tour (centred on "day", 21,035 hits); and The Facilities (centred on "tickets", 4,555 hits). "Castles" (2,286 hits) also emerged as a related military heritage concept. Ticket-related comments were most frequently associated with negative reviews, while the Daily Tour cluster attracted the most consistently positive evaluations.

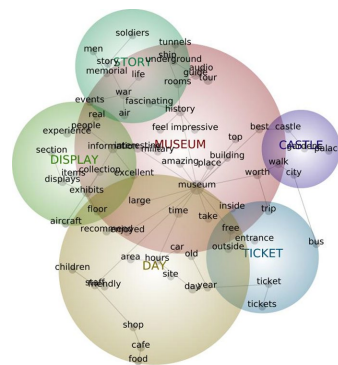


Figure 1: Overall analysis based on tourists' post-experience. (Source: Leximancer outputs)

4.1.1 The Museum Lively Experience

The visitor experience in military museums extends well beyond static displays and historical objects. The set of ideas outlined by "The Museum Lively Experience" explores what captures visitors' interest and resonates most with those engaging with historical narratives. The concepts of "displays", "collections", and "exhibits" are fundamental, with visitor feedback expressed through words such as "amazing", "enjoyed", and "big". The museum becomes a stage, with each exhibit acting as a monument to the wonder experienced by visitors (Venter, 2017):

"Unbelievable breadth and amount of exhibits. Not just aircraft but military vehicles and equipment of every description."

"I am a history buff so I loved it. The exhibitions on the more recent history (World War II) are somewhat disappointing but I enjoyed it overall. Would recommend it."

"This large museum building is part of an interesting historical military base. Lots to see."

The museum also appeals to a variety of interests, from specialist military history enthusiasts to casual visitors. Brown & Ibarra (2017) observe that well-curated sites can serve diverse demographic groups, and the concepts of "location" and "children" confirm how military museums strike a balance between attracting knowledgeable visitors and casual observers:

"Simply amazing. This museum is designed to engage the world's youth with the history of the Warsaw uprising. It's interactive and interesting."

"This museum has a nice tagline about war belonging in museums. We had a group with both people interested in military history and those who were not, but both enjoyed the visit for somewhat different reasons."

This cluster raises important questions about how dynamic curation can captivate a wide range of interests and encourages further research into how this approach promotes inclusivity, transforming military museums into engaging, interactive environments appealing to a wide range of visitors.

4.1.2 The Daily Tour

This cluster represents visitors' opinions on the tours offered by most military museums. These tours are a preferred way of viewing exhibits, aligning with Chen & Ryan's (2020) findings on the organization and popularity of guided tours as a means to enhance visitor experiences. Other military tours take visitors underground through wartime tunnels and caves. Words such as "experience", "underground", and "down" are associated with this theme:

"After arriving at the well-organised reception, you're given a helmet and audio kit and taken down 20 metres in a lift shaft to start the tour of the limestone quarry and tunnels."

"Very good guided tour and it did bring home what life was like in the caves in the First World War."

"The tour is suitable for all ages and it would be an excellent educational opportunity for younger members of the family."

The "staff" theme reveals the human dimension of military museums. Comments using "friendly" and "knowledgeable" were consistently positive:

"Really friendly staff, decent food available, kids' play areas, but most importantly, tonnes and tonnes of tanks!"

"Knowledgeable staff and enthusiasm to share, set alongside some incredible machines and displays plus an excellent shop and facilities."

Graham & Lennon's (2002) study on human resource management in the Scottish visitor attraction sector aligns with these findings, underscoring the pivotal role of staff in shaping visitor perceptions and educational outcomes within cultural institutions.

4.1.3 The Facilities

Beyond captivating exhibits, the visitor experience depends on practical factors within the "Facilities" cluster. Ticketing costs and accessibility are most frequently remarked upon. Whether admission fees are perceived as reasonable is a recurring concern:

"Very much worth even the full entrance fee, but as older people we got in even more cheaply."

"Quite expensive to spend the whole day there and ultimately if museums aren't your thing, you need only an hour or two here."

Accessibility is also a recurring theme, as many museums are situated outside city centres. Prior research from Chen & Ryan (2020) recommends that museums adapt their facilities to meet visitor needs. Improving ticketing signage, transportation links, and other enhancements can directly address visitor concerns and improve satisfaction.

"The palace is a fair distance outside of the city center and old town areas, there's a 40-minute trip by bus, but somehow it takes longer by car."

"Starting with the location, it is rather far from the bus stop." (Rating 1)

4.2 Cluster Analyzed by Ratings That Reflect the Quality of the Museums

Without a doubt, more strengths were identified than weaknesses. Of the 80 concepts, 64 relate to positive features of the military museums. Adjectives such as "interesting", "impressive", "fascinating", "excellent", "beautiful", and "amazing" are often used to describe military exhibits and period reconstructions (Figure 2). In the "Museum lively experience" cluster, we conclude that military museums make an excellent impression primarily by portraying parts of Europe's history as it happened (Lawin & Stasiak, 2009).

The more positive perceptions appeared in the context of exhibits, displays, layouts, tours, and staff. The use of Leximancer complements Goh & Wilk's (2022) study by demonstrating that online reviews offer validity for decision-making, allowing museum managers to see a visual representation of the most important visitor-related concepts.

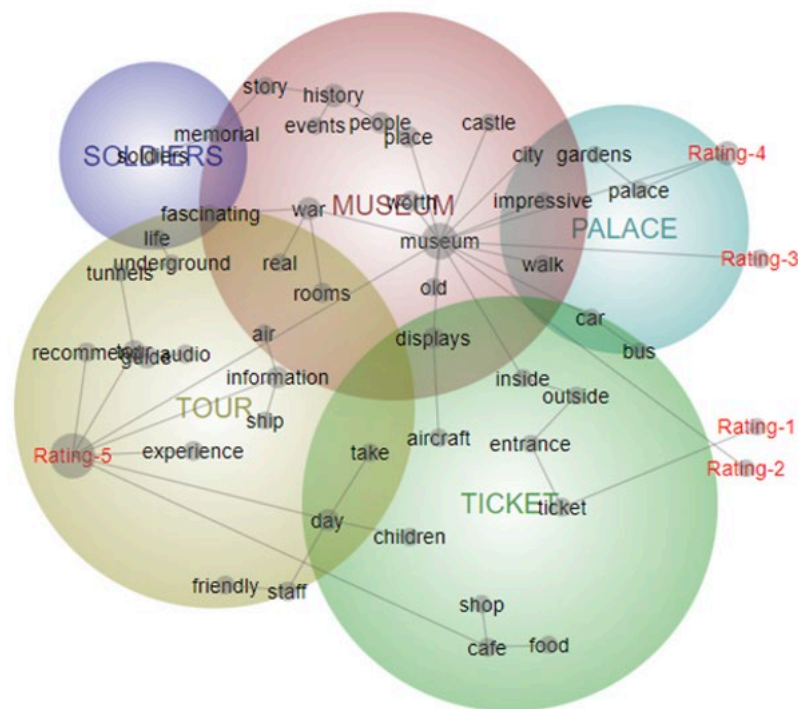


Figure 2: Analysis of ratings that reflect the quality of the museums. (Source: Leximancer outputs)

4.3 SWOT Analysis

Using concept maps and cluster analysis on 17,500 reviews of 35 European military museums, we further identified external and internal factors that support or hinder this sector. This was achieved through a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis (Misra & Miller, 2022; Martín-Cáceres & Cuenca-López, 2016). Internal factors, including strengths and weaknesses, cover the museums' facilities, conditions, prices, and supplementary services. External factors, comprising opportunities and threats, relate to mobility, surroundings, and competing attractions.

The text highlights the use of Leximancer software to create tags on a concept map indicating internal and external SWOT elements, an approach consistent with Goh & Wilk (2022). Each of the 80 concepts was contextually verified against the full review dataset to ensure accurate attribution to SWOT categories.

Table 3: SWOT Analysis of Military Museums Comments (Source: author)

Internal	External
<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guided tours (knowledgeable guide or audio) • Family-friendly daily visits • Immersive period reconstructions and battle memorials • Interactive displays and collections (ships, aircraft, vehicles) • Original arms, uniforms, and period objects • Virtual reality experiences (e.g., 4DX) • Well-curated, informative exhibitions • Proximity to historic places and events 	<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scenic gardens and surroundings • Cultural events complementing museum visits • Online ticket booking ahead of time • Dedicated transportation to museums • Souvenir stores with varied merchandise • Airline/hotel packages for military museum visits • Partnerships with food & beverage chains
<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crowded rooms at peak hours • Long queues for ticket purchase (often outdoors) • Limited language options for information • Expensive on-site cafés and facilities • Poor signage and lighting • Audio guides with limited artifact coverage • Understaffing • Disconnected, static exhibitions 	<p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competition from dark tourism (war cemeteries, concentration camps) • Forts, Castles, and heritage tourism alternatives • Film-induced tourism (e.g., Saving Private Ryan) • Medieval fairs and cultural festivals • Negative effect of current global conflicts deterring visitors

4.3.1 Internal Factors

TripAdvisor comments focused predominantly on internal factors, providing rich insights into visitor experiences inside the museums themselves. Of the 80 concepts, 64 were linked to positive interior aspects. Adjectives such as "interesting", "impressive", "fascinating", "excellent", "beautiful", and "amazing" were consistently used:

"Great experience for the family and amazing interactive displays to educate and entertain. Experience both the War Rooms as they were and the impressive Churchill Museum..." (Rating 5)

"Fascinating museum with such an amazing collection. If you haven't been recently, it has been superbly updated. Does a great job of informing without glorifying War." (Rating 5)

"I won't talk about the exhibits in this review except to say that they were exceptional. I just wanted to mention how cheerful, friendly, and knowledgeable the staff were, it made our trip." (Rating 5)

However, not all opinions were favourable. Concepts such as "café", "food", "shop", "ticket", and "lack of Staff" were viewed negatively and considered weaknesses. Brida et al. (2013) found that food and beverage spending is typically related to cultural visitor profiles. Tourists consistently complained about the cost and quality of on-site café services:

"To charge nearly full price for a 3-year-old when there is very little here for young kids is criminal. Compared to other major attractions in the area, the prices here are double." (Rating 1)

"But it seems like the museum has no system for effective ticket sales. It is not possible to buy a ticket from a machine. You have to buy a ticket at a counter, and the capacity is low. The queues were long, and I would estimate about one hour in line." (Rating 1)

4.3.2 External Factors

Other types of tourism compete with military museums for visitors, notably dark tourism related to wars, military cemeteries, and concentration camps, as well as visits to forts and castles (Noivo et al., 2022). Film and TV-induced tourism also draws attention to war events: tourists want to experience the heat of battle as depicted by Steven Spielberg in "Saving Private Ryan", visiting Omaha Beach to connect with the realities of war (Beeton, 2006).

Concepts related to opportunities were mostly linked to location and surroundings, with words such as "views" and "area" identified as beneficial for the military museums studied:

"Worth a visit to see this magnificent structure. Outside and inside are spectacular as are the views from the tower." (Rating 5)

The main threats were related to transportation, particularly the distance of museums from city centres and expensive parking. These logistical challenges discourage potential visitors and represent an area where targeted improvement could significantly boost attendance.

5. Conclusion

This study offers a detailed understanding of European military museums from the visitor's perspective, highlighting what visitors find most important in their experience. The "museum" cluster confirmed that military museums leave a strong impression by showcasing aspects of Europe's history. The "tour" cluster indicated that guided visits are highly valued as educational, engaging, and suitable for all age groups. The "staff" cluster showed that staff are generally seen as friendly and attentive, although ticket prices, café costs, and accessibility are areas that could still be improved.

Addressing the cost and difficulty of reaching museums can have a positive economic impact: easier access attracts more visitors, boosting local tourism and supporting financial sustainability (Chen & Ryan, 2020). The SWOT analysis confirmed that strengths, such as immersive exhibits, interactive displays, and informative tours, significantly outweigh weaknesses. By leveraging data-driven approaches, museum managers can continually improve offerings and better meet visitor expectations in an increasingly competitive cultural tourism landscape (Goh & Wilk, 2022; Lemelin et al., 2016).

Our findings indicate that visitors focus more on the overall experience rather than potential controversies sparked by military museums. The research highlights the importance of adapting facilities to visitor needs; more engaging and accessible environments lead to higher satisfaction and encourage repeat visits.

6. Theoretical and Practical Implications

6.1 Theoretical Implications

There is a lack of studies exploring key aspects of military museum visitor experiences, which limits comparisons with previous research. However, the use of Leximancer complements Goh & Wilk's (2022) study by confirming that online reviews, such as those from TripAdvisor, can provide valuable insights for academic and managerial decision-making. The focus of visitor comments internally offers a detailed understanding of perceived strengths and weaknesses, giving scholars in tourism and museum studies a basis for more in-depth investigation into visitor satisfaction and engagement.

Furthermore, the positive language used to describe exhibits indicates a strong emotional connection between visitors and the military history on display, offering a theoretical foundation for examining the psychological and emotional aspects of heritage tourism. Negative feedback concerning cafés, food quality, and ticketing provides theoretical insights into how additional services affect the perceived value of a museum visit.

6.2 Practical Implications

Practically, this study offers insights on multiple levels: visitor pricing strategies, location and surroundings, visitor engagement, and operational efficiencies. Negative feedback about ticket prices provides museums with an opportunity to reassess pricing, particularly for different age groups, and to introduce bundled services that improve perceived value.

Positive comments lay the foundation for understanding what attracts visitors. Museum curators can design exhibits that meet expectations and emphasising friendly and knowledgeable staff highlights the importance of training programmes. Weaknesses in cafés and ticketing reveal specific areas for operational improvement. Finally, tackling transportation issues and enhancing the museum's surroundings can convert external opportunities into meaningful visitor experiences.

7. Limitations and Further Research

This study is restricted to a single platform (TripAdvisor) and 500 reviews per museum, focusing solely on European sites. Future research could benefit from including other platforms (Instagram, Facebook, YouTube) to compare online content shared by travellers, providing a more comprehensive picture. Additionally, online reviews might underrepresent moderately satisfied travellers. Future studies should investigate military museums by region or thematic focus and utilise primary data collection methods such as surveys or interviews for more in-depth insights.

Ethics Declaration

Ethical clearance was not required for this research. The study used publicly available online reviews from TripAdvisor and did not involve human participants in primary data collection.

AI Declaration

No AI tools were used in the creation of this paper. All content, analysis, and writing were produced by the author(s).

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