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Emotional Overload! A Dialogic Autoethnography of Scholar-Participant-Consumer Reactions to the Marketing of Thanatourism

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Abstract

The terms “thanatourism” and “dark tourism” relate to visiting places of human tragedy, which are increasingly developed as tourist destinations. There is a need to trouble thanatouristic assumptions through sharing and discussing lived experiences. These challenge the simplistic mechanistic marketing and conventional research practices of thanatourism. This dialogic autoethnographic study responds to this need, addressing thanatourism from the subjective and emotional perspectives of “insider” scholar-participant-consumers. Two interactive dialogic stories are presented by the lead and second authors, with the fourth providing a theoretically informed response. In the final section, the third author, an experienced autoethnographer and outsider to the thanatouristic topic and context, interrogates the lead author on concepts and issues emerging in the autoethnographic dialogue. Through engaging with this study, the reader is offered a multilayered, polysemic, emotionally provocative account of the ethical interface between thanatourism, consumer behaviour and marketing practices, and an exemplar model for future autoethnographic work.

Keywords

thanatourism, marketing, consumer, dialogic autoethnography, narrative

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Emotional Overload! A Dialogic Autoethnography of Scholar-Participant-Consumer Reactions to the Marketing of Thanatourism

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The terms “thanatourism” and “dark tourism” relate to visiting places of human tragedy, which are increasingly developed as tourist destinations. There is a need to trouble thanatouristic assumptions through sharing and discussing lived experiences. These challenge the simplistic mechanistic marketing and conventional research practices of thanatourism. This dialogic autoethnographic study responds to this need, addressing thanatourism from the subjective and emotional perspectives of “insider” scholar-participant-consumers. Two interactive dialogic stories are presented by the lead and second authors, with the fourth providing a theoretically informed response. In the final section, the third author, an experienced autoethnographer and outsider to the thanatouristic topic and context, interrogates the lead author on concepts and issues emerging in the autoethnographic dialogue. Through engaging with this study, the reader is offered a multilayered, polysemic, emotionally provocative account of the ethical interface between thanatourism, consumer behaviour and marketing practices, and an exemplar model for future autoethnographic work.

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Methodology and Background Literature

Autoethnography is concerned with “...setting a scene, telling a story, weaving intricate connections among life and art, experience and theory, evocation and explanation...” (Holman Jones, 2005, p. 765). As a transdisciplinary methodological approach, autoethnography became popular in the closing decades of the last century. This increase in popularity was as a result of a perceived need among social and human sciences scholars to situate the writer-as-participant centre-stage. Subjectivity and emotionality came to be regarded as methodological and epistemological resources rather than, as before, denigrated as irritants (Ellis & Flaherty, 1992).

Autoethnography explicitly situates individuals in their cultural and social contexts (Grant, 2020a). This situation is done in critically reflexive ways, when theoretical and philosophical constructs are linked with personal narratives (Adams et al., 2015; Grant, 2018, 2020a, 2020b; Wall, 2008). Exemplified in this article, “dialogic” autoethnography between two or more people is a very useful methodological variant for conveying intersubjective

agreement and disagreement. Subjecting a single story to a reaction from other authors usefully expands its meaning (Ellis et al., 2011). Moreover, as co-researchers comment on the narratives they read, they too become narrators – contributors to stories – in the presentation of their reactions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Representing Consumption and Marketing in Thanatourism: A Brief Literature Overview

The term “thanatourism” (Seaton, 1996), sometimes referred to as “dark tourism” (Foley & Lennon, 1996; terms used interchangeably in this article), refers to the concept of visiting sites or places associated with human tragedy and suffering (Light, 2017), which form an increasing part of the tourist landscape (Martini & Buda, 2020). Thanatourism is defined as “The presentation and consumption of real and commodified death and disaster sites” (Foley & Lennon, 1996, p. 198). In regard to the increase in visitors to such sites, Dann (1994, p. 61) tells us that greedy tour operators can milk the “macabre.” Relatedly, although visitors can be supportive of such tourist destinations, they can also perceive them as “inauthentic, tacky, and sensationalist” (Kennell & Powell, 2020). It seems clear that thanatouristic sites are able to elicit strong, complex reactions from consumers (Buda, 2015; Seaton, 2009). However, the limited extant research dealing with the marketing of such sites is eclectic, fragmented (Light, 2017) and neglected (Farmaki, 2013; Johnston et al., 2016). Even more neglected is research on the consumer’s response to the marketing of dark tourism sites.

Our article directly responds to this gap in the literature from a researcher-participant-consumer perspective, in bringing together the experiences of marketing with the consumption of thanatourism. In line with the work of Shepherd et al. (2020), we have drawn on the concept of autoethnographic participant-researchers working as a dialogic “community.” As these authors point out, such an approach is rarely used in research related to tourism, or, in our experience, in marketing. Having chosen a lens focusing on the interplay between tourism, marketing and consumerism in a highly emotive context, our article is in general sympathy with the work of Shepherd and his colleagues but with a different focus and topic. We are in agreement with the assertion made by these authors that culturally-critical stories written by participant-researchers can be of great value for tourism and thanatourism research. We also concur with the need to trouble the rationalist emphasis of extant approaches to tourism scholarship, in order to gain an insight into the lived experience of the participant-researcher and their motivations and emotions.

Moreover, we share in the frustration with contemporary touristic qualitative research, expressed by Shepherd and his co-researchers, the aim of which is often to produce conventional thematic analytic categories. In contrast, our approach in this article utilizes storytelling and re-storying in order to achieve increasing depth of topic and provocative emotional insight. In doing so we refrain from aiming for narrative closure, described by Frank (2010) as “finalization.” The dialogic strategy of multiple voices enables us to offer an open-ended, polysemic – or plural meaning – perspective. In line with Frank’s metaphorical charge to let social science narratives “breathe,” we hope that this will enable readers to “pick up the baton” of our story and extend on it.

Lizzie and Jonathan

The storied accounts which follow in the next section are presented in in a dialogic, conversational way from the basis of our lived experiences as scholar-participant-consumers of thanatourism. Writing on the basis of entangled identities helped us reflect on our reactions to the marketing of thanatourism, in relation to how we deal with issues around associated

ethics, feelings, and emotions. An addition of a dialogic layer of commentary with links to theory is provided by Simon. This enabled all three of us to think more reflexively on how we maintain scholarly respectfulness when confronted with such marketing, and, indeed, with the concept of thanatourism itself.

Alec's involvement in the article came about as a result of an invitation to participate from Lizzie, in view of his many years of experience in autoethnography and his previous critical readership role for exemplar autoethnographic work recently published in this journal (Shepherd et al., 2020). Alec's contribution specifically aims to enhance the critical autoethnographic edge of the article-in-progress through critically but sympathetically probing Lizzie on key emerging issues and claims.

The Autoethnography

Lizzie's Story

Lizzie: "Well? Shall we go to Auschwitz," asked my friend Debs. "Sorry," was my reply. "Don't let me stop you, but I really can't go there." We were in Krakow for a long weekend, and were packing in as much sightseeing as we possibly could... but Auschwitz? Not for me. I am painfully aware of the magnitude of the horrors that were inflicted on so many people there, and I understand the need for places like this to remain as memorials, museums, and places of pilgrimage. But I simply cannot take the emotional overload that accompanies a visit to places of this nature and stays with me for a long time.

Jonathan: This is an interesting statement - as it perhaps alludes to a view of the site as perpetuated through popular culture and marketed through a variety of media. The assumed experience is the one that holds the accumulation of externalised perspectives of the atrocity, which in some ways may indeed differ from the lived experience by the tourist.

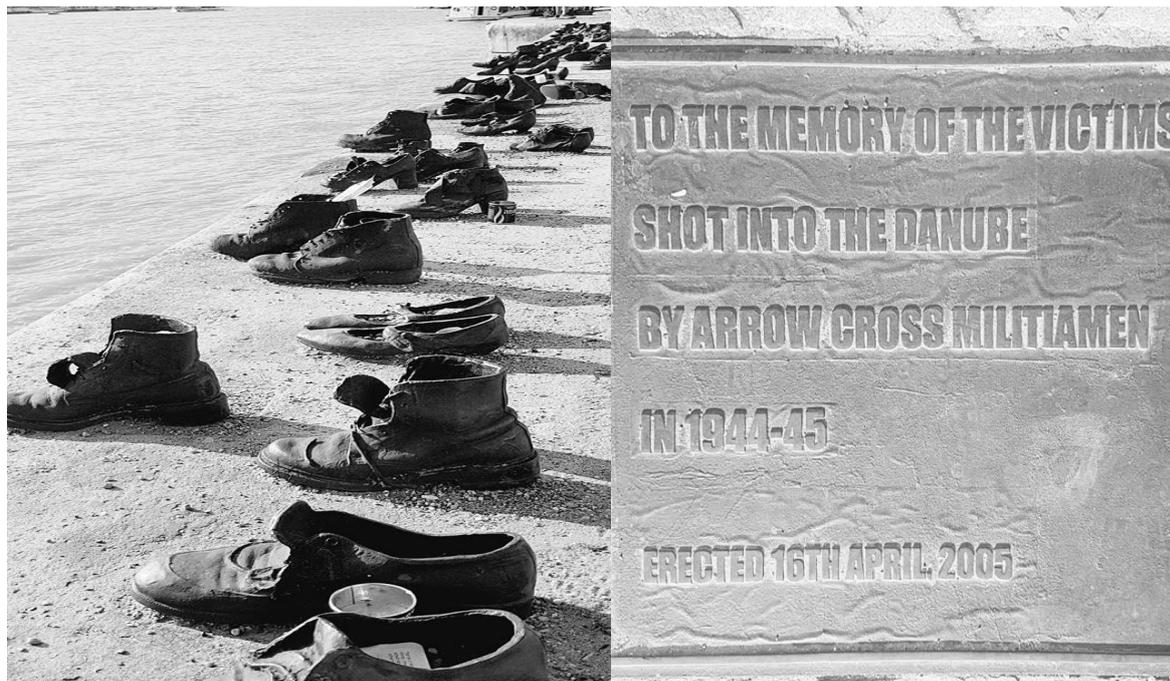
Lizzie: I also struggle with the fact that crafting a money-making tourist attraction out of such a dark time in the history of humankind has the potential of minimising the respect that should be shown for the victims. People are making money from this, which leaves a really nasty taste in my mouth. Even where entry to the memorial is free, there are tours and stop-offs that mention these places, and they are used in promotional material to sell tourism. I don't want to hear anymore. It feels disrespectful that places like this are used in marketing communications; these places carry some very personal and even intimate significance for some, and for tour companies to make money from encouraging tourists with voyeuristic tendencies to rock up just seems wrong to me.

Jonathan: I too have struggled with the "voyeuristic" perceptions of the "tourist gaze" in this case and have had to face the demons within in order to make an assessment of the reality versus the perceptual; the perceptual potentially being fueled by a marketed version of the reality - thus an accumulated perspective - which differs from the reality. Reality in a tourism sense is one whereby perhaps a "shared emotional experience" is had, and thus any voyeuristic emotion is dissipated by the "human good" as opposed to a marketed evil.

Lizzie: Every fibre of my being screams at me not to unleash the nightmares that would undoubtedly result in my visit to places like this. It's not just Auschwitz either; I have ducked out of visiting Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen, and many other thanatourism sites, all associated with the Holocaust.

But five years ago, I organised a tour to Budapest for a choir with which I sang. I had contacts in the area, and we worked together to create a schedule of concerts that included singing a repertoire of sacred music in St Stephen's Basilica - a very moving experience. Not as moving, however, as a stroll along the Danube with other choristers to visit *The Shoes*. This is a memorial to the Jews of Budapest who were lined up on the banks of the river, ordered to strip naked, and then executed by a firing squad. Their bodies fell into the water and were swept downstream. They were slaughtered not because of anything they had done, but simply because of the origins of their ancestors.

Figure 1



The memorial consists of a series of sixty pairs of shoes, authentic to the period and cast out of iron. The shoes modelled are not pristine. They reflect the fact that our shoes are a very personal possession, moulded to our feet, an integral part of a very personal and individual journey. There were ladies' high-heeled shoes, men's working boots, and, the most touching of all, tiny children's shoes. They are placed as they would have been had the owner kicked them off at the end of the day, and worn down at the heel and scuffed, shoes that have been part of someone's life, shoes that tell a story. They are sometimes filled with tiny piles of stones, a Jewish custom harking back to the days when burial sites were marked with piles of stones rather than a headstone, when the topping up of the stones allowed the grave to continue to be identified. That these people were being remembered and their deaths commemorated brought some comfort, but that was more than offset by the associated horrors.

Jonathan: Like many monuments of a contemporary nature, is there a curated emotion here? Without question, the inhumanity of the commemorated acts cannot be dismissed – nor should be – however the visible depiction of the shoes is an emotive cue for a visitor.

Lizzie: We stopped walking, and for twenty minutes or so, looked with tears in our eyes at the shoes, trying to imagine what the Jews of Budapest could have been feeling, knowing they were about to lose their lives. Mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, all with

one thing in common - they were about to be killed. Some of us, including myself, were crying, and standing among other tourists we hugged one another, trying to find solace in our close friendships.

Jonathan: The reaction here to the memorial is one that I too have experienced in relation to the holocaust. Is it the emotion of history? Or is it the individual's self-referencing, one that links a personal memory, an emotive past experience, to the immediate?

Lizzie: Almost as one, we seemed to communicate without words that we would pay our respects through song. We turned to face the river - this was not a performance to a crowd - and quietly sang the Welsh hymn "Gwahoddiad" (Invitation). The Welsh words translate as "I hear a gentle voice calling to me," and we felt as though we heard the voices of the slaughtered Jews on the banks of the Danube that sunny afternoon, such was the emotive power of the shoes memorial. The hymn unleashes emotions within me, anyway, taking me back to my Welsh chapel childhood. Add to that the powerful evocation of the memorial and you get melt-down.

Jonathan: I'm not at all surprised at this outpouring of emotion. If I were to have been present, I too would have been emotionally touched. The scene described is a powerful one. However, the thought of a Welsh choir, quietly performing in the language of my nation an emotive song, one that is embedded in my own family history, would in any case have been an emotional experience. Thus, to add the proximity of the memorial would have been an emotional cue hard to dismiss.

Lizzie: We walked away from the memorial very tearfully and were subdued for the rest of the day, and, as far as some of us were concerned, for the rest of our stay in Budapest. It was a powerful experience and one that has stayed with me to this day, and probably will be a vivid memory for the rest of my life. I know what happened. I acknowledge the devastation caused by genocide and the fact that, as a global society, we must learn that such acts are not acceptable. I will never, ever forget, and I have made sure that my children understand the enormity of the acts of evil that caused, and go on to cause, the death of races and societies all over the world, but I cannot embrace dark tourism.

Jonathan: There, therefore remains a question in my mind. Was this experience a tourist one as such, in that it was "manufactured?" Or was it an experience of personal emotive depth, cued by a tourist gaze and enhanced by curation, which drew meaning from a humanistic shared history and collective grief? Do we reflect our own personal humanity against the backdrop of the inhumanity of others?

Lizzie: I would go back - Budapest is a beautiful city, and there's lots to see. I would feel drawn to revisit the shoes memorial. It's important to remember.

Figure 2**Simon's Response and Links to Theory**

The instinctive reaction Lizzie gives to the request to visit Auschwitz is the most interesting part of this story. The knowledge that most people have of Auschwitz fills them with some level of uncertainty about the visit and ultimately how it will make them feel. It is well documented that when we encounter death and disaster within dark tourism, these have an impact on our feelings (Martini & Buda, 2020).

The names Lizzie uses to define the purpose of Auschwitz are interesting, and perhaps lay at the foundation of how one perceives such a place in their own understanding, emotional intelligence, and experience of such sites. Reflections on visiting thanatouristic sites vary, dependent on the background of the visitor, and are characterised by personal experiences rather than being an inherent characteristic of the place (Light, 2017). Previously, we would have talked about Auschwitz, the place, but now we talk of it as an experience, and this is a phenomenon that occurs across our lives in general (Lowenthal, 1998).

Lizzie has clearly been affected by how Auschwitz has been presented to the "paying public." Tourism is a strange beast: the point at which something becomes an attraction has long been debated and will continue to split opinion. Perhaps it is in essence a need to acknowledge our own voyeuristic nature that Lizzie finds so disturbing. This would support Rojek's (1993) findings that sensation sites reaffirm the identity of visitors.

I believe that the use of shoes at the memorial stimulates strong feelings within Lizzie because they are personal to each individual and as she says, "tell the individual's story." The horrors of death perhaps have been amplified at this site because there is an

intention to stimulate a response. It may be that the traditions of using shoes remind Lizzie of the journey of life (Thomas, et al., 2018).

It is interesting to read that Lizzie will never forget. She is clearly writing this piece sometime after the visit, and yet still has strong emotional attachments to the experience and feels that she needs to pass these emotions onto her own children. It almost feels as though she wants to protect them as well as inform them of the horrors of humanity. This theoretical principle has its foundations in the wider study of pilgrimage, predominantly in the notion of remembrance and its associated notions of memory (Urry & Larsen, 2011).

Lizzie states that she will return to Budapest, and that is quite interesting. Tourism, however, one defines it, is inherently about the return tourist, and a significant aspect of return is concerned with memory and remembrance. Lizzie clearly wants to remember!

Jonathan's Story

Jonathan: Back in the spring of 2018, our younger son was working with a Polish client based in Krakow. Both he and I share an interest in business, political, and military history, and so it made sense to arrange a visit to Krakow whilst he was there on business. Krakow, the second largest city in Poland, is one of those European cities that sits at a confluence of trade routes and historical events of global importance. It clearly has an impressive antiquity, and the central square is an architectural joy. As we checked into our rather grand hotel, it became clear why a large number of visitors are drawn to the city. Standing in the lobby, checking the place out, I was aware of the number of tour buses that were lined up outside, the general chatter amongst guests checking in, and the tour bus desk with its poster – a black and white image of the wrought iron gateway. This had the words: *arbeit macht frei* (work sets you free), the greeting above the gateway leading to the Auschwitz Nazi extermination camp, 30 miles West of Krakow.

Lizzie: My stomach has just flipped at the notion of a queue of tour buses that are destined to take people to Auschwitz. It seems so disrespectful to have these buses disgorge groups that may be intent on photographing the artefacts and taking selfies with the concentration camp in the background. Even the thought of the poster in the hotel lobby makes me feel quite uncomfortable at the thought that this is marketing something that caused so much suffering. I feel sick.

Jonathan: My intention here is not to detail our visit – historians have undertaken this task with far more eloquence than myself. Instead, I would like to briefly explore the marketization of this dark chapter in human history in and around the city of Krakow.

We had arranged to make a visit to both Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II–Birkenau, even though in my case I was somewhat reluctant to do so. In 2011 I had visited the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington with a dear friend, a Jewish retired academic. The visit in Washington was emotionally charged and left me feeling uncomfortable. I knew the history of the Ghettos, of course, yet felt somehow an ignorant spectator to the suffering of others – an emotional response that I did not want to repeat in Krakow. However, I agreed, with the caveat that I may not complete the tour if I felt so inclined. So, the tour was booked and went ahead – my son, wife, and I, on a tour bus early on a cold Saturday morning, driving through the city and then the countryside outside of Krakow, with 25 other “tourists.” A DVD was played during the hour drive, which began to condition “us tourists” for what lay ahead. The chatter subsided and by the time we arrived in the coach park at Auschwitz the only sound within was crushing silence.

Figure 3



The visit took place, history explained, stories told, events vocalized, and reflections made. On my way back to the bus, I walked for a while and in silence with the lady who had a personal connection and had been our guide. During the visit, our group had worn headphones, her factual tone establishing itself at the very centre of our heads, an intimate audio that made the commentary the more moving. Before leaving I thanked her and expressed my feelings of guilt for being a mere voyeur at such a place of loss for her and her family. Her reply surprised me – quite the opposite, she wanted tourists to come; without a personal visit, she said, you had no way to bear a true witness to the inhumanity of it all.

Lizzie: This makes me feel a little better. The fact that the DVD seemed to alter the moods of the tourists by making them more sober, and hopefully more respectful, allays my discomfort. I should say here that my discomfort is not with you and your family; I know that you all will have been respectful of the horrors suffered in this place. Maybe it says something about my implicit judgement of the others on the bus – people I do not know – imagining them perhaps in an unjust and unfair light. They may well all have been completely respectful, but I

feel that I am sitting in judgement of them. Maybe this is something that emanates from my travel experiences, where I often look at other tourists, some of whom don't appear to engage with the culture of the "locus," or destination – the authentic as opposed to that which is created for mass tourism.

Jonathan: The bus ride back to the city started silent, and in a reversal of the trip out, became more voluble the closer we got to the hotel. As we got off the tour operator asked us to ensure that we rated the trip on Tripadvisor!

Lizzie: Wow. Tripadvisor for Auschwitz. What are we rating here? Is it the scale of shocking inhumanity, or is it the organisation or value of the trip itself? How do you actually rate something like this? It seems wrong. Is this a celebration of evil, or is it just what needs to be done in this commercial world?

Jonathan: And the marketization, the marketeez of Krakow: In our hotel a visitor could do "the tour": Auschwitz and the Schindler Factory with the option of the salt mines added on. Online there are many reviews of the tours, and I think that as such there is nothing untoward in that. However, I find myself questioning the need to "rate" such a visit and I find the majority of comments banal. I have read somewhere that the Schindler Factory Museum really only came into being following the release of the film *Schindler's List*, perhaps to capture the "tourist spend" fueled by a consumer hungry for "the experience." The 1993 Hollywood film has been both praised, quite rightly, for raising the awareness of inhumanity, but equally derided for its inaccuracies (or Hollywoodisation of facts). That does not stop Krakow selling the idea of factual representation.

Lizzie: I think the banality of the comments is what I'd be afraid of reading, and that would make me angry. Within the concept of thanatourism, it's a fine line between raising awareness, and profiting from inhuman acts towards a race. Factual representation, or Disneyfication of the awful truth? Either way, it feels wrong to me. I struggle to understand how people can sleep easy having made money from this. Maybe I'm just too emotional about the whole thing.

Jonathan: As a summation to this reflection on our visit, I felt that a walk in the evening around the old Jewish quarter – a Jewish ghetto during Nazi occupation and a staging post for prisoners on route to the extermination camps 30 miles away – was perhaps the most valuable of experiences. Many of the buildings have been left untouched and are preserved as they were at liberation. However, this is not a museum in the traditional sense, but a vibrant, creative part of the city, full of bars, restaurants, and artisans of every type. No - what this quarter preserves for the city of Krakow, its ancestors and visitors is the vibrancy of youth, culture, and humanity. Whilst I would go back to Krakow, I don't think I would feel the need to return to Auschwitz. I've experienced it once, and I will not forget.

Lizzie: I've been to Kazimierz and Podgórze in Krakow and found it moving. Strangely perhaps, I don't feel that this is distasteful. Maybe that's because these are individual businesses making money from ventures that are almost coincidentally placed within these areas, and although they are making money from tourists, they are not actually promoting themselves in connection with the atrocities that occurred.

Figure 4**Simon's Response and Links to Theory**

The story of Auschwitz has been well documented, especially when one considers the vast amount of people that visit the site annually and the countless stories that have been retold (Keil, 2005). The idea of tour buses queueing outside the hotel draws similarities with the hordes of mass tourists boarding the coaches on the Costa Del Sol. Posters have long played a role in promoting tourist destinations, but it seems incredible that you would use the slogan of “work sets you free” to give people a feel for what they are about to experience (Lennon & Foley, 2000).

I am surprised, given how emotional Jonathan felt at visiting the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, that he would be convinced to visit Auschwitz. Perhaps there was something in the negativity of the marketing of the experience that enabled him to be able to accept the reality and place a caveat of removal from the experience if it became too much. Jonathan's experience is reflective of many pilgrim-touristic experiences when one considers the pilgrimage sites that are commonly referred to as thanatouristic attractions, such as battlefield and battle-burial sites (Dunkley et al., 2010).

The rating of the *Auschwitz Experience* would appear to be irrelevant when one starts to make an assumption - albeit it rather subjective - that Auschwitz is a memorial and not a folly of touristic imagination (Andriotis, 2011; Keil, 2005). Of course, this theoretical assumption relies upon the tourist fully understanding their role in the “visit.” In this case, Jonathan has both sympathy and understanding and that can be evidenced in his personal reflections, which are both realistic and demonstrate a human view of the reality of Auschwitz (Collins-Kreiner, 2010).

What will be interesting in the future is the question of return. For the tourism practitioner the concept of return has significant concern (Blackwell, 2007). Whether Jonathan will return is a complex question given how he has reacted to the visit. Such sites rely on repeat visits for their very existence (Dora, 2012).

Coda Dialogue Between Alec and Lizzie

Alec: I want to start by saying what a privilege it's been to be invited to be part of this autoethnographic study, mindful of the irony that I'm a tourist in the related disciplines of tourism, thanatourism and tourism marketing. I'd like to start with a general question, before working my way through questions that emerged for me in the article: Is there a relationship between spiritual or pilgrimage tourism and thanatourism?

Lizzie: I think there is an irrefutable relationship between spiritual tourism, pilgrimage and thanatourism. Simon has previously researched pilgrimage and we drew on his theoretical knowledge in this area. Even visits to the Holy Land are a form of thanatourism, which spectacularly combine spiritual, pilgrimage and dark tourism.

Alec: Okay, in that regard I'm very interested in what Simon has to say in his response to Jonathan's Auschwitz story - about the need for the tourist to understand "their role in the visit." To what degree is the feeling and thinking of both the pilgrimage and thanatourist manufactured?

Lizzie: Place is an important part of the marketing mix, and an important component of the "product" which, in this case, is the tourist destination. Our thinking and feelings as visitors are undoubtedly curated by both marketing communications, and the creation of the consumer experience itself. Lourdes is an interesting destination; you have the oxymoronic duality of the sacred and the incredibly profane, where the reverence of people admitted to the site of Bernadette's vision is practically demanded. The main street of Lourdes resembles a string of tacky shops on Blackpool seafront, with kiss-me-quick hats being replaced by plastic figurines of the Virgin Mary. We live in an age where we perhaps feel the need to commemorate and extend the life of an experience through the purchase of some sort of memento, and this is where the souvenir shops fulfil our needs and wants as consumers. In this regard, I think the entrepreneurial activity surrounding such sites demonstrates awareness of the emotions and cognition of visitors and taps into them very effectively to maximise visitor spend.

Alec: I was intrigued by the claim that writing from a multiple identity standpoint helped you and Jonathan reflect on your reactions to the marketing of thanatourism, in terms of how you each dealt with issues around associated ethics, feelings and emotions. Can you expand on this?

Lizzie: We found it enlightening to discuss our reactions, and also the differences in our attitudes and responses to the sites that we visited. We talked about the fact that we experience some cognitive dissonance, in the way in which we want to know what happened

but also want to hide from the horrors and protect ourselves. If these places didn't exist, future generations might well not realise the awful, historical truth. If they weren't marketed, then they would fail to generate the income that sustains them as tourist destinations. As marketers, we understand the necessity of developing a product that brings visitors through the doors and realizes profit, while also recognizing the need for marketing communications surrounding such sites. But as human beings with emotions that are triggered by the events commemorated by the sites, we feel something akin to distaste.

Alec: You say that the layer of commentary provided by Simon, and his links to theory, enabled all three of you become more reflexive in your thinking about marketing and thanatourism, and on how you maintain scholarly respectfulness to work in these areas. In what ways has this happened and how do *you* maintain this given the difficulties you have frequently expressed with the marketing of dark tourism?

Lizzie: Jonathan and I are marketers – Jonathan with a focus on entrepreneurship, and me with consumer behaviour. While we have experience of tourism from a consumer perspective, and have carried out research in this area, Simon specializes and has the most expertise in tourism. So, it's been instructive for us to discuss our consumer experiences within the context of the academic literature relating to the marketing of dark tourism. The collaborative exercise of researching the consumer's response to the marketing of thanatourism has worked well. We've forged a relationship between our discrete scholarly specialisms and have been able to learn collectively from one another.

Marketing is a fundamental area of business and contributes significantly to the success of a tourist destination. The marketer in me recognizes the need to promote a tourist attraction, and to make it attractive to visitors, but the emotional part of me – the part of me that recoils from such tourist sites – thinks it's distasteful. It's entirely understandable that I'm able to separate out these discrete roles that I play; Lizzie the marketer would be able to detach herself from the horrors represented in order to carry out a professional, dispassionate job and effectively market the thanatouristic site; Lizzie the emotional person though, recoils from it because of the emotional overload that accompanies it and the introspective grief that would ensue. It's a contradiction for sure, but one which I would overcome in the interests of professionalism, and one which I master in order to examine and process research carried out by members of my profession in this field.

Alec: You and your colleagues suggest that complacency characterizes the interface between thanatourism, consumer behavior and marketing practices. This suggests research inertia, stuckness, and conformity with well-established custom and practice?

Lizzie: These three areas fall neatly under the category of "business research," which is currently dominated by positivist, qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. For me, slapping a number on something very often means its point has been missed. Getting to the heart of the consumer experience, understanding what the individual is thinking – in this case in response to the marketing of dark tourism, is of much more interest to us. Business research often makes the erroneous assumption that in understanding the collective, we understand the individual, but this is not true when you consider the complexity of emotional responses that emerge in situations such as the marketing of thanatourism.

Alec: I agree with you. You're talking about the nomothetic fallacy here: the assumption that a general understanding of the collective or general can adequately capture the

nuances and complexities of – idiographic – variations in individual experience. Now I want to turn to something said in your literature overview – that “greedy tour operators... milk the macabre” – can you say more about this, and give an example?

Lizzie: One example would be in the Jewish quarter of Prague, where there is a room where the walls appear pink at first glance. On close inspection, the walls are white, with minutely inscribed names of the Jews of Prague who died in the holocaust. In an upstairs room, are drawings created by the Jewish children who died, with their shoes, spectacles and other artefacts displayed to provoke an emotional response. This is not merely factual representation of what happened – it’s a theatrical and evocative representation of events.

Alec: This links to something else you also say in the literature overview: that visitors can be simultaneously supportive of tourist destinations while perceiving them as “inauthentic, tacky and sensationalist.” I suppose that would be true of the example you’ve just given, and I’m intrigued to know more about this?

Lizzie: Not all thanatouristic sites are original sites of human suffering. Some are created to somehow celebrate the misery that people have experienced, in a very commercial way. Madam Tussaud’s Chamber of Horrors in London is an example of this phenomenon, which Powell and Iankova (2015) describe as a dark tourism experience focused on entertainment.

Alec: Thinking back to the manufacture of feelings, in the overview you say that thanatouristic sites are able to elicit “strong, complex reactions from consumers.” Could you expand on this? What forms do these strong, complex reactions take?

Lizzie: Yan et al. (2016) categorise dark tourism in two ways. The first focuses on a psychological process of consumerism which offers visitors both desired and actual psychological outcomes to satisfy their emotional demands. The second “supplies emotional and cognitive experiences to tourists” (p. 110), who relate interactively with thanatouristic products. I feel that in visiting these sites consumers want to put themselves in touch with the misery or horrors that have occurred. We want to know, we want to remember, we want to *feel*. We may assume guilt, based not upon any personal connection we have with the perpetrators of the acts of horror, but merely because we are human and recognize the atrocities carried out by other humans. I think it’s this contradiction or tension between wanting to, and not wanting to look, perhaps indicating that as viewers we feel that we are implicated in the horrific crime. Jonathan likened this to looking at a crash on a motorway where a natural, ghoulish instinct makes us want to know what’s happened, even though we know it will upset us.

Alec: Okay, in this context Jonathan mentions that perceptions are fueled by a marketed version of reality, which differ from the realities of consumer experiences. He suggests that marketed versions play down voyeurism and big up the thanatourist experience as a human good, which sanitises exploitative marketing. Can you say more about this?

Lizzie: As marketers, we always try to bring out the positives of a product or service – they become the unique selling point, or “differentiator.” Jonathan commented during our chats that whilst the human condition is one of natural inquisitiveness about (in this case) the holocaust, and a knowledge of the inhumanity of it, there is an inner moral and ethical tension at play which suggests that to “look” implicates us in the act. Marketing such sites as an

experience based in history may well ease or share the moral burden, as to look is to bear witness and be simultaneously humane and inhumane.

Alec: In your story, Jonathan asks you the question: “Is it the emotion of history? Or is it the individual’s self-referencing, one that links a personal memory, an emotive, past experience to the immediate?” Could you explain what he means here?

Lizzie: Jonathan talked about the “Hollywoodisation” of history, as opposed to the raw, lived experience of the individual, and the self-referencing this may evoke. We discussed the fact that we have an emotional response to what we know about an historical event, the grim facts, and the external perspective – external from the perspectives of time, culture, geography and experience. Through visiting thanatourism sites, we are able at least partially to place ourselves in that historical setting, to explore the internal, meta-narrative of the situation, and experience the resultant emotions. The visitor may feel empathy with the situation, and then, as a final reaction, the utter sadness and grief of the experience may evoke individual memories of personal sadness. This allows us to empathise fully, all facilitated by the narrative of historical simulacrum.

Alec: Is thanatourism marketed as emotional tourism? If so, in what way(s)? If not, should it be?

Lizzie: Thanatourism is sometimes referred to as “grief tourism” and the marketing communications for these sites often use evocative language to produce an emotional response in visitors to the deaths or disasters that have occurred in these places. I’m conscious though, that individuals react to emotional stimuli in different ways. What triggers an intense emotional response in me may well be sobering but enjoyable entertainment for you.

Alec: Lizzie, you say in your story that you “cannot embrace dark tourism.” What exactly do you mean by that? Do you mean the concept? consuming it? Marketing it? All three in combination?

Lizzie: I mean the concept, and its consumption and marketing – I find it too upsetting. I’m saying I can’t embrace it, but I would still want to know what a particular visit involved though. In that way, maybe the marketers are doing me a favour in allowing me to find out more at a distance, where I can safely close the internet window if I find reading about it too emotional an experience.

Alec: Jonathan asked whether your thanatourist experience in Budapest was a manufactured tourist one, or a personal emotional one for you. This is a tension apparent all the way through both autoethnographic stories, and Simon’s responses. This has me wondering: are all tourist experiences, by definition, in large part manufactured? Is Jonathan proposing a questionable binary here?

Lizzie: For me, most tourist experiences *are* manufactured, but the degree to which they’re manipulated depends on the creator. The tourists themselves have a large part to play here; they can choose to engage with a commercial experience or seek the authentic. Of course, we may never know if an experience is truly authentic. We may live in blissful ignorance as to whether our presence in a particular situation has had an impact on what we have witnessed. As far as Budapest was concerned, I think my experience there constituted a very personal

response to a somewhat manufactured situation. How would you separate the two things out? It doesn't seem possible to me.

Alec: In the binary context, Simon suggested a tension: emotional responses are shaped by thanatouristic marketing of the “experience” a tourist is supposed to have, while also evoking responses from people’s personal emotional repertoires. He also asserted, and I think this is interesting, that perhaps emotional disturbance proceeds from denial; from a failure in all of us to “acknowledge our own voyeuristic nature.” I have two related questions here, related to the marketing and consumption of such experiences: First, is the emotional dimension of marketing made explicit? Second, what are the moral implications of emotional experiences being hijacked by the tackiness that goes with thanatouristic marketing?

Lizzie: The consumer experience at such sites is being marketed, and in some cases, the emotive element is conveyed. Take Jonathan’s coach trip to Auschwitz, for example: you could classify the coach journey with its educational, sobering DVD to be part of the experience, or you could consider it a piece of marketing material. Morally, I wonder if it is right to use marketing communications to encourage sightseers to stand alongside those who mourn family members. I feel that it’s the commodification or commercialization of death that is distasteful and potentially unethical, as it results in profiting from other people’s misery and, in some cases, oppression. In these times of user-generated content though, we must acknowledge that the sites or organisations themselves are not wholly responsible for their own marketing; TripAdvisor for Auschwitz or any other thanatouristic site will undoubtedly reach large numbers of potential visitors.

I think I struggle with the fact that authenticity of the commemorative locus can be lost with its commodification. Where user-generated marketing communications are prolific, we run the risk of seeing these sites through the eyes of people who have perhaps perceived them inaccurately, and then the sanctity, or gravitas, of the site is bastardised, or perhaps even in danger of being completely lost.

Alec: Yes, the first concept that struck me in Jonathan’s narrative was Tourism as “inhumanity-witnessing.”

Lizzie: Yes... maybe as a stark reminder that we should make sure it doesn’t happen again.

Alec: Another thing that springs out at me in Jonathan’s story, more so than yours, is that the sensationally tacky is sold as, and segues into, the factual, in what you capture well in the “Disneyfication” concept. This implicates tourism generally, and dark tourism in particular, and its marketing and consumption ethics. Its brave of you to call out your discipline or aspects of it. Since you’ve said you’ve no time for this now, what do you see as the threats to you in your career and for those picking up the baton with you as role model?

Lizzie: I don’t think I’m sufficiently important to be seen as somebody who could cause consternation within my subject area, but even if I were, this is *my* story, *my* reaction. People are free to comment and respond on what is essentially a subjective experience. This is about my reaction – and the reaction of my colleagues – to the marketing of thanatourism. I hope that, to use your phrase Alec, “trouble-nurturing” will be an important part of the journey where my students are concerned, as it is only when we challenge the status quo, that we find new insight.

Alec: To quote from you, “I struggle to understand how people can sleep easy having made money from this. Maybe I’m just too emotional about the whole thing.” Are you unfairly pathologizing yourself here in suggesting that you’re at fault, and your emotions just need to be held in check? This surely wouldn’t be advice given to thanatourists generally?

Lizzie: No, I wouldn’t give this advice to thanatourists in general – as human beings, we are all wonderfully and spectacularly diverse in our reactions to what we see. Maybe I’m pathologizing myself as far as my emotive responses are concerned. I’m a product of my life experiences and having worked in a heavily male-dominated area in a previous life. I’ve learned to consciously keep my emotions in check – which has often contradicted my instincts. Professional and private persona are different matters though, and tourists and consumers are normally off duty in situations such as these and would be free to engage with their natural emotional responses. Responding to the commercial side of thanatourism is a very personal matter; as consumers we have the potential to be taken advantage of every day, and it is up to the individual to decide how acceptable this is on a case-by-case basis. Maybe, being a marketer, I’m more aware than others of the potential for manipulating the thought-processes of the consumer and profiting from that manipulation. Being marketing-savvy is sometimes a blessing and a curse!

Alec: Simon’s comment about Auschwitz being “a memorial” rather than a folly of touristic imagination is interesting. Thinking poststructurally, of Auschwitz and the Budapest memorial as contested signs, begs for me several questions that I think have only been partially answered so far: what exactly is being marketed? How does this relate to what *should* happen in, perhaps more morally and ethically acceptable, touristic marketing? In your personal and academic professional experiences, how do go these questions relate to how Auschwitz is consumed?

Lizzie: That’s a difficult one to answer, Alec, because for me, I feel instinctively that these places should *not* be marketed as a place for entertainment. The need for remembrance and acknowledgement of the impact of such atrocities is implicit in the very existence of these visitor destinations though, and there has to be a way of generating awareness (which after all, is one of the main principles of marketing) within the boundaries of good taste and acceptability. I acknowledge that I may be atypical of the target market for such visitor experiences; while working on this research, and previously with groups of friends, my reactions seem somewhat extreme in terms of my sensitivity and emotional reactions. Surely, though, I am not unique here; there will be a certain group of tourists who will never want to “consume” visits to places like Auschwitz, no matter how sensitively they are marketed.

If we step back and consider the position of the curators of these loci, the difficulty is that they are constantly trying to make their sites all things to all people: a memorial, a museum *and* a tourist attraction. At any one time, depending on who one is, and what one makes of the marketing communications, the consumer also flits back and forth. Consumers do not collectively view a site as one thing. We view and interpret it according to our individual perceptions and values. A museum stores artefact, and a memorial keeps past events alive and current in our thinking. Once sites move beyond those two things, what they become is something greater than their individual parts.

It’s really about how the visitor constructs and interprets the experience. Simon talks about past experiences in the world of tourism and says how, for tourists of certain nationalities, it was about ticking a box on a list of locations to visit. For others, though, there appeared to be deeper meaning, depending on the background of the individual and the group. Maybe, as far as marketing goes, nothing should change, because it’s up to the individual how they react

and process the information received. These arguments are defunct, because once these places become memorials, they are frozen in time. The real memorial isn't the site or the locus, it's our awareness, understanding, interpretation and perception of these commemorated events, as a consumer.

Alec: Okay Lizzie, on to my final question: You say that research on the consumer's response to the marketing of dark tourism sites has been neglected, and that you and your colleagues have addressed this gap in your article. How well do you think you've all done in this regard? Specifically, what contribution do you think this autoethnography makes to thanatourism and thanatouristic marketing and what "value-added" do you think this article provides, given that it's written by scholar-consumers rather than just consumers?

Lizzie: Acknowledging that research into thanatourism is not necessarily new, we believe that the use of autoethnographic methodology enables a detailed and valuable insight for readers into the reactions of a group, the members of which comprise insiders to the contexts and activities of both marketing and tourism. Through this study, we are able to offer the reader a deeper understanding of the consumer reaction to the marketing of thanatouristic sites, with that reaction coming from people who are proponents of marketing itself. Whilst other studies have commented on dark tourism from a rather mechanistic, marketing perspective, the emotive and reflexive element of marketing is considerably under-researched and represented.

Our combination of autoethnography with thanatourism marketing brings forth a previously untapped depth of marketing insight. As consumers, we're able to relate our experiences and give insight to the reader. As scholars, we're also able to contextualise them within a theoretical framework and thus interpret our collective and individual experiences from an informed perspective. We hope that this will allow readers to understand our experiences and reflections and encourage them to experiment with their own autoethnographic stories.

Lizzie and Alec – Concluding Thoughts

Lizzie: Alec, for all of us, writing this article has been simultaneously enjoyable, emotionally provocative and challenging, which is perhaps typical of autoethnography; the multiple identity perspective has allowed us to delve reflexively into the deeper meaning of our experiences of, and reactions to, the marketing of thanatourism. As a marketer, I am aware of the necessity of promoting such sites; as a tourist, I try to avoid them because of my emotional reaction, and as a researcher-practitioner, I want to allow others insight into how consumers of thanatourism may react to the marketing of such sites. Understanding that it is normal to experience an emotional response (Martini & Buda, 2020) and that my personal background has impacted on this (Light, 2017) was to be expected, but the realization that sensation sites may have reaffirmed my identity (Rojek, 1993) by strengthening my distaste for the marketing of thanatourism was new. I have, through the process of writing this article, come to understand that thanatouristic sites need to be visited, and that marketing communications, whilst sometimes discomfiting, can emotionally prepare the visitor for their role in visiting the locus.

Alec: Yes, it was good for me too, Lizzie. I learned a lot about thanatourism and related issues, especially its affective dimension. Working with you all on this paper has also made it likely that I'll be very discriminating in the future regarding where and what I visit in the world, and I hope that readers of this article may feel similarly! I think there's probably also a broader message implicit in the article. This is that it's important to be skeptical about tourist marketing

in general, given the likely gap between advertising hype and punter experience. The allure of big bucks is always likely to win out over consumer aesthetic and emotional satisfaction, sadly.

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