Dark tourism: Exploring tourist's experience at the Cape Coast Castle, Ghana

Henry Boateng[a,*], Abednego Feehi Okoe[b], Robert Ebo Hinson[c,d]

[a] School of Communication, University of Technology, Sydney, Australia
[b] Marketing, University of Professional Studies, Accra, Ghana
[c] Marketing and Entrepreneurship, University of Ghana Business School, Legon, Ghana
[d] Free State Business School, Bloemfontein, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates tourists' experience of the Cape Coast Castle in Ghana. Using a phenomenological research design, we explored the experiences of the tourist who visited the Castle. We used data from the Tripadvisor website and analyzed it thematically. The findings show that dark tourism experience is conceptualized from cognitive and emotional perspectives. Furthermore, the results show that tourists' experiences are shaped and co-constructed with the tourist guards and the artefacts available at the sites. Additionally, our results show tourists who visit dark tourist sites do not experience only anxiety and sorrow but excitement as well. The results also show that tourists who are of African descent see the Cape Coast Castle as a symbol of their identity and these tourists adopt the Castle as part of their personal identity. The implications of the findings are discussed at the end of the paper.

1. Introduction

Tourists' interest in and visits to places with negative or melancholic historical events have increased in recent times. Visitors to the Cape Coast Castle in Ghana, for example, increased from 61,532 in 2015 to 70,326 in 2016(Ghana Tourism Authority, 2017). Similarly, tourist visits to the Ground Zero in New York amount to 3.5 million annually (Kang, Scott, Lee, & Ballantyne, 2012). Correspondingly, researchers' interest in this phenomenon which is termed as dark tourism has gained momentum (Podoshen, Yan, Andrzejewski, Wallin & Venkatesh 2018; Chen, Wang, & Xu, 2017; Collins-Kreiner, 2016; Yan, Zhang, Zhang, Lu & Guo, 2016; Podoshen, Venkatesh, Wallin, Andrzejewski & Jin, 2015; Podoshen, 2013; Sharpley & Stone, 2009). Dark tourism contributes to economic growth and creates an avenue to reflect on experiences of societies. However, research into the depth of consuming dark tourism experiences is scanty (Podoshen et al., 2018). Earlier, researchers like Stone (2011) and Yan et al. (2016) made a similar observation. These researchers thus, recommended the need for more research to be conducted on the tourist experience at the various dark tourist sites they visit. In response to this call, we investigated tourists' experiences with the Cape Coast Castle in Ghana.

The Cape Coast Castle was originally built by the Swedes in 1653 but was later acquired by the British in 1663. The British used the Cape Coast Castle as a center of slave trade in Africa during the transatlantic slave trade. The Cape Coast castle is a place of torment, and sorrow. It reminds Ghanaians and many Africans in the diaspora of the atrocities their ancestors went through during the transatlantic slave trade. As William (2007) noted, the Cape Coast Castle was "the grand emporium of the British slave trade" from 1664 to 1807. The Cape Coast Castle is one of the preferred destinations for many tourists who visit Ghana. It was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1991. Prominent people like former President Barack Obama have visited the Cape Coast Castle. As noted by Abaka, "the flood of emotions one encounters, especially from some diaspora Africans who come face to face with these stark reminders of the inhuman slave trade, keeps the collective memory of the diaspora alive in the Castle" (Abaka, 2012, p.36).

The main objective of this study is to ascertain tourists' experience of the Cape Coast Castle by employing a phenomenological research design and using data from the Tripadvisor website. Addressing this research objective is essential since tourist experience with regard to dark enriches and makes dark tourism research complete (Podoshen et al., 2018). This research also helps us to understand tourists' experience of the slave trade phenomenon and how tourists' reflection on this melancholic event affects their lives and what they already know about slavery. From a marketing perspective, this study provides evidence that can be used to develop marketing strategies to attract tourists to the dark tourist sites. It also provides insights into how dark tourism products can be designed. The rest of the paper is divided as follows: theoretical background and literature review, methodology, findings, discussions and conclusions, implications and

recommendations.

2. Theoretical background and literature review

2.1. Dark tourism

Dark tourism is defined as tourists' visits "to sites, attractions or events that are somehow linked to negative historical events where death, violence, suffering or disaster played a major role" (Sharpley & Stone, 2009). Lennon and Foley (2000) theorized dark tourism as a phenomenon situated in heritage tourism with meanings derived from media and encounter with rational behaviour. It explores the connection between tourism and death (Foley and Lennon 1996; Lennon & Foley 2000). It is a means through which people connect to the dead and it allows death to be strongly incorporated into societal discourse (Stone & Sharpley, 2008). Dark tourism products are multifarious in design and characteristically varied (Yan et al., 2016). Stone (2006) classified dark tourism products into six categories: darkest, darker, dark, light, lighter, and lightest. These categories of products have a varying degree of political and ideological influences. For example, while products in the darkest category have higher political and ideological influences, the products in the lightest category have lower political and ideological influences. Again, the products in each of these categories have dominant features. For instance, the products in the darkest category are education oriented and history-centric while those in the lightest category are entertainment-oriented and heritage centric. In this case, a visit to each of these places may offer a different kind of experience. Dark tourism relates to tourist's visits to the place of tragedy or death where they interpret the site via the tragedies and raises awareness of the realities of the tragedies (Stone, 2013). Podoshen et al. (2015, p.325) state " dark tourism should not be viewed simply as a homogenous system of collective meanings and experiences, but rather as a praxis contingent on diversity in lived experiences and in conjunction with cultural affective and cognitive work". Dark tourism generates emotions and these emotions are steeped in dark tourism (Buda, d'Hauteserre & Johnston, 2014). In their study, Podoshen et al. (2015) noted that visitors engage in pleasurable activities that recreate emotions.

2.2. Previous empirical works on Tourist's experience of dark tourism

According to Ruzzier and De Chernatony (2013), places of attraction make use of visual identity and uniqueness to attract tourists. These features are present at the Cape Coast Castle where many Africans were sold into slavery. The architecture of the building and the artefacts therein bring back memories to many who visit the place. Pearce (1982; p.36) posits that 'the tourist environment, has high transient populations, and structure to control visitor accessibility'. Robinson (2015) provides example of a dark tourist site like the Somme (France) where signage and self-guided trails are used to control tourists access to some areas of the site. In such sites, visitors may have different experiences. Some of these experiences may be co-created and shared. For example, Bødker and Browning (2012) note that during experience of a site, a tourist may seek to establish relationships with others he or she meets. However, this co-creation and sharing of experiences might not be overt in dark tourist sites as observed by Pearce (2011). In this case, dark tourism is perceived as a phenomenon. Stone (2012) for example studied dark tourism from phenomenological perspectives. Stone posits that dark sites offer an avenue for mediation, provides opportunity for tourists to experience and create meaning of afterlife. The desire to experience a dark moment, for example death, drives people to visit places associated with death. Dale and Robinson (2011; p.9) states that "for one to pass over and experience the afterlife and return must itself be the ultimate in travel and with the absence of the authentic/here and now, a visit to a dark site, with all its manifestations of previous dark activities, arguably comes a close second to

experiencing the afterlife". Caton and Santos (2007) explore the experiences of some tourists who travel along the Route 66 National Historic Corridor (USA), using phenomenology. The participants had different experiences. For example, they experienced historical education, personal growth, interactions with different landscape and people. They recommended the need to consider meanings tourist make from their experiences with tourist sites when theorizing tourism phenomena.

Aho (2001) categorized tourism experience into four groups: emotional experience, informative experience, practice experience, and transformative experience. Emotional experience pertains to the strong feelings deriving from the site. The strength of this feeling may vary and it may results in applause, excitement, and/or laughter. Informative experience deals with intellectual impression or knowledge acquired by the tourist. Practice experience involves skills that acquire from visiting a tourist site. This experience enhances tourists' capabilities. Transformative experience involves changes that occurs in the life of a tourist after visiting a site. This can be a permanent change in lifestyle or worldview. Earlier, Mannell and Iso-Ahola (1987) treated leisure and tourism experience from cognitive psychology and phenomenological approach. Cognitive psychology deals with how a tourist's perceptions influence their tourism experience. For example, they noted that a tourist's depth of experiential engagement and emotional state can affect his or her tourism experience. The phenomenological aspect deals with the immediate personal experience of the tourist. From these studies, it can be observed that tourists' experiences vary, but emotional and learning are common experiences of tourists who visit a site. Although these studies suggest that tourists experience different kinds of emotions and learning when they visit a site, the studies are limited in providing detailed information regarding the four categories of tourists' experiences. Podoshen et al. (2018) observed that many dark tourism studies occur in Western cities and thus recommend that similar studies should be conducted in other parts of the world. In response to this call and an attempt to provide a detailed analysis of the various forms tourists experience at dark tourists site, we investigated tourists' experience of the Cape Coast Castle, Ghana.

2.3. Methods used study tourist's experience in dark tourism research

Although different methods have been used to explore tourist's experience, a cursory look at the literature shows that phenomenology method dominates. Santos and Yan (2009) for example used a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of tourists who visit the Fort Wayne Genealogy Library. They noted that the tourists were interested in finding their families' genealogy and used verbal discussions and observations to identify values related to genealogy search. Ziakas and Boukas (2013) have also used a phenomenological approach to study tourists' lived experience of Limassol carnival. They collected data using interviews where participants detailed their personal experiences of the Limassol carnival. Similarly, Podoshen et al. (2015) employed phenomenology to investigate tourist's experience of three destinations where tourists explore death and dystopia. They noted that many of the tourists engage in dystopian dark tourism as a result of an increased insecurity about death. The findings also suggest that the tourists' dystopian dark tourism experience reflects a society and its association with violence. They employed data from field notes, digital images and video recordings of tourists' activities at the three destinations. They also used non-recorded interviews and conversations with the tourists at one out of the three destinations. Podoshen et al. (2018) also used a phenomenology approach to study sixteen black metal concerts, tours, and festivals in Canada; United States; and Norway. They collected data using observation, structured, and unstructured interviews. Additionally, they used field notes to record the personal experience of the tourists. Unlike the researchers that have used phenomenology to explore tourist experience in dark tourism, Yan, Zhang, Zhang, Lu and Guo (2016) employed a survey