

Dark tourism consumption in Mexico City: a new perspective of the thanatological experience

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Abstract

Purpose – The Euro-centric nature of dark tourism research is limiting the perspective and restricting the scope of contemporary theory. Hence, this paper aims to explore how dark tourism consumption differs in a society apart from the Anglo/Eurosphere. This is done by testing Stone and Sharpley's (2008) thanatological framework in Mexico, a country whose residents are renowned for having a unique perspective on death, to assess whether Mexican dark tourism consumers undergo a similar, or different, thanatological experience to that proposed in the framework.

Design/methodology/approach – The study adopts a qualitative approach in the form of a case study. The opinions of Mexican dark tourism consumers were gained by using the technique of semi-structured interviewing in four separate dark tourism sites within Mexico City, with coding serving as the form of analysis.

Findings – The findings show that due to the non-existence of an absent/present death paradox in Mexican society, the research participants experienced a thanatological process that contrasts with those from Western societies, which indicates that the thanatological framework is unsuitable in the context of Mexican dark tourism. At the same time, the study contests the common perception that Mexicans have a jovial familiarity with death, and demonstrates that in this case the thanatological process confirmed an acceptance of death, rather than any kind of intimacy.

Originality/value – The research is valuable in that it is a response to recent calls for research in geographical locations not previously considered in a dark tourism/thanatology context.

Keywords Mexico, Dark tourism

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Dark tourism, a term coined by Lennon and Foley (1996), refers to the act of travel to actual or recreated places that can be connected to death, dying, or the macabre (Stone, 2006). Auschwitz-Birkenau, the concentration camp that was the scene of horrific suffering during the Holocaust, has been referred to by scholars as the “epitome of dark tourism” (Biran *et al.*, 2011, p. 820), while other, less emotive attractions, such as the London Dungeon, exemplify those places that provide a form of connection with death and suffering but are commodified so that entertainment, rather than remembrance and serious reflection, is the intended experiential outcome (Powell and Iankova, 2016). The common feature throughout is the



presentation and consumption of *suffering*, which is often related to death (although “death” is not an essential requirement of dark tourism), presented on the actual sites where the incident occurred (or in some cases, such as slum tourism, is currently taking place) or off-site memorials that have been developed to commemorate past events and atrocities.

It is an activity that has generated a large amount of scholarly interest over the previous twenty years, predominantly in the areas of production and consumption, yet something of an impasse appears to have been reached, common agreement being that dark tourism’s complex, contested and multi-faceted nature is deterring attempts to reach a consensus regarding its definition and conceptualization, and in some cases disillusionment has led to calls to abandon research (Ashworth and Isaac, 2015).

As noted by various commentators (Biran and Hyde, 2013; Yoshida *et al.*, 2016; Cohen, 2018) one of the problems affecting conceptual and theoretical concordance is that dark tourism research to date has been mostly Anglo, or Eurocentric, which has limited its perspective and affected the potential of research to follow unfamiliar, yet potentially enlightening paths. So not only has the majority of research focused on dark tourism in Britain, the USA and Europe, but emerging concepts have been grounded by Western viewpoints of mortality (Light, 2017). Accordingly, this paper, which is appropriate and timely in view of the criticism concerning the topic’s conceptual fragility and limited geographical scope, will seek to expand the parameters of dark tourism research. It will do so by examining the consumption of dark tourism in Mexico, a country which falls outside of the Anglosphere, is classified as “emerging”, rather than Western (Cohen and Cohen, 2015), and whose inhabitants are renowned for a distinct relationship with death, evident, for example, in the writings of Octavio Paz (1950) and Juan Rulfo (1955), in Frida Kahlo’s “Self-portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States” (1932), and recently portrayed in the internationally successful Disney Pixar movie “Coco” (2017). The basic aim of the paper is to explore, by means of a case study of four dark tourism sites in Mexico City, whether a widely accepted conceptual framework developed by Stone and Sharpley (2008), which considers dark tourism consumption from a thanatological perspective, is applicable within this setting, or if distinct socio-cultural differences diminish its suitability.

More specifically, the objectives of this research are to:

- consider the theoretical foundations of Stone and Sharpley’s (2008) thanatological framework;
- explore perspectives of death and mortality within Mexican society;
- empirically test the thanatological framework by conducting qualitative research in several dark tourism locations in Mexico City; and
- discuss the results and consider the implications of the research.

2. Dark tourism consumption from a thanatological perspective

Over the previous two decades, an increasing number of scholars have investigated the production and consumption of dark tourism using a variety of theoretical approaches. Some have sought to investigate the representation of the dead at dark sites, and how this is affected by discord, politics and history, while others have addressed the sociological implications of dark tourism (Stone, 2018). It is not within the scope of this paper to conduct a full literature review regarding the theoretical and conceptual development of the topic, as this has been done recently by Stone (2013), Hartmann (2014) and Light (2017); instead, this paper will focus upon the consumption of dark tourism through the lens of Stone and Sharpley’s (2008) thanatological framework, a seminal contribution that focused

academic attention on visitor experience at a time when supply side issues dominated the field.

The framework draws upon literature related to the sociology of death (Berger, 1967; Giddens, 1991) and expresses the authors' understanding that the conceptual origins of dark tourism lie within the domains of thanatology, which is the study of how humans perceive and cope with the inescapable reality of their own eventual demise. It proposes that death has now become sequestered, or, in other words, kept at a safe distance, by the medicalisation of the dying process, in which "the dying man's bedroom has passed from the home to the hospital [. . .]" (Aries, 1983, p. 571), and the professionalisation of the death industry which refers to the practice of commercial services taking custody of the recently deceased, as explained by Berridge (2001, p. 21): "Where once bodies of our loved ones stayed at home, laid out on trestles in open coffins, visible and visited, now they are spirited away to the fake domesticity of the funeral home". Meanwhile, the decline of religious institutions (Berger, 1999) has added to the situation by removing, for many, the spiritual comfort provided by a belief in a higher guiding power and the promise of an afterlife.

The authors note that these societal changes have led to a state of ontological insecurity for many, manifested in the sensation of dread that is commonly experienced when individuals pause to confront their own limited existence. At the same time, however, death is constantly present in media output, such as in the glut of coverage which occurs when disaster strikes; yet this is a rather de-personalised death of "others", often rendered somewhat innocuous by over-saturation. Hence, a situation has arisen which is referred to as the absent/present death paradox, in which "real" death is increasingly hidden from view, while "present" death is continually visible on our screens and pages.

Consequently, Stone and Sharpley (2008) propose that dark tourism, at various levels of intensity and depending on the characteristics of the site, offers the opportunity to provide consumers with a culturally acceptable means of confronting the concept of mortality, thus making the "real" death that is absent from their lives become present. This is due to the interactive processes that occur during an encounter with dark tourism allowing individuals to undergo thanatopsis – that is, the opportunity to contemplate death of the self -and re-conceptualise their ideas of death, dying and mortality. Ultimately, this serves to ease ontological concerns, acting, in the words of Seaton (2018, p. 11), as: "a surrogate form of *memento mori* ritual."

Nonetheless, the authors accept that "[. . .] an awareness of mortality and the anticipation of death will differ among various social and cultural groups." (Stone and Sharpley, 2008, p. 589), and admit that the framework was constructed with "secularised death sequestered societies" (Stone, 2010, p. 252) as the context. As discussed in the introduction, Mexico is a society in which the perspective of death, according to numerous scholars, writers, artists, musicians and film-makers, is of a humorous, playful, even jovial nature. As such it appears an appropriate location from which to test the concepts included in the thanatological framework. However, before doing so, it is first necessary to consider the Mexican attitude towards death in more detail.

3. The Mexican perspective of death

Care must be taken when exploring the concept of death in Mexico. While death can be seen, heard and read about frequently in art, music and literature, one must question whether this does indeed reflect the perspective referred to above, or if it is more so a manifestation of cultural tradition within what Hamnett (2019, p. 15) refers to as a "rapidly changing and dynamic North American society".

According to [Brodman \(2011\)](#), religious beliefs led to ancient Mexicans adopting a fatalistic attitude towards life, and for many the manner of death was more important than life's events. Following the Spanish conquest (1521), Catholic assumptions of heaven, hell and purgatory were added to the concoction, resulting in a fusion of notions that resulted in a process of trans-acculturation ([Báez-Jorge, 2012](#)) that has morphed into what [Brodman \(2011\)](#) labels the modern "Mexican death cult".

Over the years, a number of scholars have commented on the fearless attitude displayed by Mexicans towards death. For example, [Paz's \(1950\) *Labyrinth of Solitude*](#) explored issues related to Mexican identity including their perception of death and mortality, which he described in this oft-cited passage: "The word death is not pronounced in New York, in Paris, in London because it burns the lips. The Mexican, in contrast, is familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it ([Paz, 1985](#), p. 57). Meanwhile, other commentators adopt a similar perspective: [Lomnitz \(2005](#), p. 20) suggests that in Mexico death "gets a very different rap"; [Strupp Green \(1969](#), p. 1) states that the Mexican is "familiar, accepting, even in humorous terms with death", while [Toor \(1947](#), p. 236) reveals that: "The Mexicans, fatalists that they are, accept death uncomplainingly but also bravely", an attitude, according to [Brenner \(1970](#), p. 25) which can be "shocking to the European".

For [Sanchez \(2013\)](#), it reflects a widely held opinion in Mexico that it is perhaps wiser to co-exist with death in the present, in contrast with the "Western" notion that death is an event that will take place far into the future, so best ignored for now.

Yet Paz has since been accused of essentialising the Mexican character ([Garciagodoy, 1998](#)), whilst [Brandes \(2006\)](#) and [Alvarado Sizzo and Romero Gallardo \(2018\)](#) argue that the notion of bravado is exaggerated, and a Mexican's reaction to death, evident, for example, when grief is displayed at funerals, is very similar to that which occurs in Anglo-European societies. Indeed, Brandes believes, as does [Hellier-Tinoco \(2010\)](#), that these famed acts of defiance are mostly confined to the Day of the Dead celebrations, and it is the extensive commercial promotion of this tradition, which began with President Lazaro Cardenas's tourism marketing strategy in the 1930s, that has culminated in the widespread assumption that Mexicans accept death and their own mortality with such boldness.

[Brandes \(2006](#), p. 9) explains that in Mexico: "Ideas regarding cosmology and spirituality vary enormously not only by region, class, and ethnicity, but even more dramatically from one individual to another", further emphasising that caution is necessary when forming opinions based on an agenda adopted by the media, affectionately endorsed in artistic circles and commented upon by scholars who adapt a similar, idealized vision of "Mexican-ness".

4. Dark tourism in Mexico

Research concerning dark tourism issues from a Mexican context has been limited ([Guerrero Rodriguez et al., 2018](#)); nonetheless, a number of Mexican scholars have recently initiated attempts to resolve this situation by publishing a special issue of the *Teoria y Praxis* journal which focuses specifically on the topic of dark tourism in Mexico. The first chapter, by [López and Van Broeck \(2018\)](#), provides an extensive sample of dark tourism locations and activities throughout Mexico, some of which are featured as case studies in the collection, which include The Day of the Dead festivities at Janitzio ([Alvarado Sizzo and Romero Gallardo, 2018](#)) and Huaquechula in Puebla ([Mysyk and Morales Cano, 2018](#)); the Museum of Mummies in Guanajuato ([Guerrero Rodriguez et al., 2018](#)); EcoAlberto park in Hidalgo in which a night walking tour involving local actors demonstrates the dangers encountered by illegal immigrants attempting to enter the USA ([López et al., 2018](#)); bullfighting at Mexico City's Plaza de Torres ([Quintero and López](#)); and "disaster tourism" in the city of Chetumal,

which suffered the adverse consequences of Hurricane Janet in 1955 (Frausto Martinez, 2018).

The articles that explored the Day of the Dead festivities are particularly relevant to this study, as they provide specific information regarding the Mexican perspective of death in a dark tourism context. Firstly, Alvarado Sizzo and Romero Gallardo (2018) note that though the Day of the Dead is a solemn occasion for the residents of Janitzio, the occasion merely provided the domestic tourists with an opportunity to observe an authentic ritual, that is the symbolic reunion of the Janitzians with their deceased relatives. Importantly, there was no evidence of thanatological contemplation on the part of the visitors.

However, the domestic tourists visiting Day of the Dead activities at Huaquechula stated that they intended to contemplate matters of death and dying, but only considered this after viewing the decorated altars, signifying that this was a consequence of their visit and not something deliberated beforehand. Interestingly, while the foreign participants of the study would not elaborate on interview questions relating to human mortality, the Mexican participants responded enthusiastically and spoke of the inevitability and natural nature of death, which for Mysyk and Morales Cano (2018, p. 113) “suggest if not a fascination with, then, at least, an interest in the ‘meaning’ of death”.

These two papers support the claim of Brandes (2006) that the Mexican “obsession” with death is more a reflection of cultural tradition than a common perspective shared by the country’s inhabitants. This matter will be considered in more detail shortly, when the following four sites, which together form the case study of this research, provide the basis for discussion:

- The Plaza of the Three Cultures can be found in the Tlatelolco district of Mexico City and is notorious for being the scene at which three separate tragedies have occurred: it is associated with the fall of the Aztec Empire in 1521 (Valesco Fuentes, 2010); it is the setting of the 1968 student massacre, in which a multitude of protesting students were shot and killed by the Mexican army just months before the Olympic games took place in the city (Ruisanchez Serra, 2011); and it was also the scene of tragedy in 1985 as an earthquake caused a nearby building to collapse leaving many dead. A commemorative museum is present, but it has been closed since the earthquake of September 19th, 2007, during which it suffered considerable damage. Despite its authentic nature, the site is not a particularly popular tourism attraction, yet a small number of visitors attend throughout the day.
- The Trotsky Museum is in the Coyoacán district of Mexico City, at the actual house in which Trotsky lived for a short time from 1939 until his death in 1940. The interior of the house has apparently not been changed, and visitors are able to enter the study in which Spanish communist Ramón Mercader delivered the fatal blow with an ice pick which led to Trotsky’s death the following day. The museum, created in 1990, is a popular attraction, particularly with foreign tourists.
- The Museum of Memory and Tolerance was established at the historical centre of Mexico City in 2010. The central theme of the museum is genocide provoked by racial discrimination, with exhibits on display which focus on examples of genocide in the form of the holocaust, along with events in Armenia, Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Guatemala, Cambodia and Darfur, while the theme of the final section relates to the disappearance of thousands of Mexicans since 2006. It is a popular attraction, education centric and is visited by many Mexican students and tourists.
- The Island of the Dolls is a small island which appears in the extensive network of canals that characterise the Xochimilco part of Mexico City. A large number of

mutilated dolls can be seen hanging from the branches of the trees, placed there by a hermit named Don Julian Santa who supposedly lived on the island for 50 years. The story has it that one day Don Santa discovered the body of a small girl who had drowned near the lake: floating next to her body was a doll, apparently belonging to the girl. Shortly after, the girl's ghost began to appear at night, so Don Santa decided to hang her doll from the branch of a tree, being of the opinion that this would appease the ghost. Nonetheless, the nocturnal visits continued and, thereafter, he formed a collection of hundreds of dolls which are viewable dangling from the trees. Don Santa has since died, yet the dolls remain and the island has become a popular tourism attraction, enticing many visitors who travel two hours by canal boat to survey the macabre scene (Fonseca *et al.*, 2015).

As is evident, Mexico is home to a number of dark tourism sites, although the “darkness” aspect of each site differs considerably. This will be discussed further in the methodology section below.

5. Methodology

This paper is based upon research conducted in Mexico City in May and June 2018 and was funded by the Mexican Secretary of Education (SEP). It adopts a qualitative research strategy to permit an accurate interpretation of tourists' thanatological viewpoints and uses the case study as the research method, as this is particularly suited to the descriptive, heuristic requirements of the study. Data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews with 15 Mexicans that were visiting the four sites previously mentioned. The participant identification process will be discussed in more detail below.

As discussed in the previous section, there exist a number of dark tourism sites throughout Mexico, each occupying a different location on Stone's (2006) dark tourism spectrum. A range of specific factors influence the “darkness” of the site. The darkest sites tend to be sites of death and suffering and demonstrate the following characteristics: high political influence and ideology, education oriented, history centric, authenticity in terms of product and location, a shorter time scale from the event, a non-purposeful supply and a lower tourism infrastructure. Those that are situated on the lightest scale of the spectrum are *associated* with death and suffering and tend to have less political influence and ideology, are oriented to entertain, are heritage centric, are inauthentic in terms of product and location, have a longer time scale from the event, show a purposeful supply and display a higher tourism infrastructure. Dark tourism sites thus range on a scale from “darkest-darker-dark-light-lighter- lightest”.

It was considered important to use a diverse range of dark tourism sites, rather than just one, and consequently they were chosen by their level of “darkness”, the aim being to provide a contrast between “light” and “dark” sites as demonstrated in Table I:

Dark tourism site	Location	Spectrum	Date of visit
Plaza of the Three Cultures	Tlatelolco, Mexico City	Darker	May 2018
Trotsky Museum	Coyoacan, Mexico City	Dark	May 2018
Museum of Memory and Tolerance	Historical Centre, Mexico City	Light	June 2018
Island of the Dolls	Xochimilco, Mexico City	Lighter	May 2018

Table I.
The chosen sites and
their place on the
dark tourism
spectrum

- The Plaza of the Three Cultures occupies the “darker” space of the spectrum, being an actual site of suffering that is education oriented, history centric, authentic and has a low surrounding tourism infrastructure.
- The Trotsky Museum is located on the “dark” space of the tourism spectrum, as it is the authentic location in which Trotsky was attacked, is education oriented, history centric and has a low tourism infrastructure.
- The Museum of Memory and Tolerance just fails to reach the “dark” side of the spectrum, because, in spite of its somber nature and it being an education oriented, politically ideological history-centric attraction, it is not located at the site at which the museum’s themes occurred (unless one takes into account the final section based on atrocities committed in Mexico) and displays a high tourism infrastructure.
- The Island of the Dolls is on the “lighter” part of the spectrum as even though it is located at the supposed location of the girl’s death (according to the tale) and is where Don Santa chose to live and hang the dolls, it has low political influence or ideology, is oriented for entertainment, is heritage centric and exhibits a high surrounding tourism infrastructure.

It was also considered important to confine the research to Mexico City, the reasoning being that as the city attracts a substantial number of domestic tourists from throughout the country, each of these four locations would consist of participants who would represent a cross-section of Mexican society, not just of Mexico City residents, so that the results would be indicative of a general Mexican society view on aspects of thanatology and dark tourism. It was likewise, imperative to seek a variation of participants so that the answers to the interview questions would capture the beliefs, opinions and experience of respondents with differing demographic profiles. Thus, as well as targeting participants from different areas of Mexico, their age, gender and socio-economic level were also vital factors. In all, fifteen semi-structured interviews were undertaken (3 at the Island of the Dolls and 4 at the other sites) with participants coming from Mexico City, the State of Mexico, Puebla, Hidalgo, Queretaro and Sonora. The participants consisted of 21 women and 16 men with an average age of 37, ranging from 18 to 59.

The interview questions were focused on obtaining information regarding the elements of the thanatological framework and gaining further information relating to the Mexican perspective of death and mortality, as demonstrated in [Table II](#).

As the researcher is British, yet proficient in Spanish, the interviews were undertaken in Spanish, but care was taken so that language issues and cultural traits would not affect the quality of the research by adopting the method of cross-language interviewing proposed by [Lopez et al. \(2008\)](#). All of the data were analysed using the coding methods proposed in the literature ([Strauss and Corbin, 1998](#); [Jennings, 2010](#); [Saldaña, 2015](#)).

6. Results

The thanatological framework from a Mexican perspective:

The following section is based on the participant responses to the questions that were posed in [Table II](#), among others.

6.1 Mexican perception of death, dying and mortality

The participants were asked some general questions regarding their own, and that of other Mexicans, opinion on death, dying and mortality. Two participants displayed the nonchalant attitude prevalent in much of the literature:

Table II.
Examples of
interview questions
according to the
particular theme

Theme	Example of questions
<i>Mexican perspective of death and dying:</i>	How do you perceive death and mortality? Do you think that your opinion is different from others? Mexicans supposedly have a 'playful attitude' towards death. Would you agree?
<i>Absent/present death paradox:</i> Institutional sequestration of death	Do you think that a medicalisation of the dying process has occurred in Mexico? Do you think that professional industry has taken over the post death process in Mexico? Have you noticed a decline in religion practices and belief in the afterlife? Is death pervasive in Mexican popular culture and media output? Does the thought of your death make you feel uneasy?
Ontological insecurity <i>Consumption of dark tourism:</i>	What motivated you to come here today? Has being here today made you think about your own death, and if so, has it helped to allay any concerns that you have over your own mortality?

Death will come to us all. I don't fear it, in fact who cares? In Mexico, we all think this way. (Participant 4)

Yet this view was not held by the other participants. Indeed, what became apparent during the interviews and subsequent analysis was a commonly held perception that Mexicans live in co-existence with death, not in a negative sense but in a manner which accepts death as being natural.

Several participants related stories of how they had experienced viewing the bodies of the recently deceased in numerous homes the night before burial and were comfortable with this and the idea that one day it would be their turn. Nonetheless, most participants stressed that they do not want to die in the near future, in fact that they wished to live long and happy lives. For many, the spectre of death served to encourage them to pursue a fulfilling life:

Death, like birth, is totally natural. Babies are born, people die. It's a cycle. I don't want to die, I want to live my life and do things, but it will be my turn one day. All my friends and family have this opinion, it's not playful; it is respecting and accepting. (Participant 15)

As death is around the corner-hopefully a long corner- then I must live well while I am here. (Participant 14)

The responses indicate that [Brandes \(2006\)](#) is accurate in his analysis of the Mexican perception of death, dying and mortality, in that the view of the vast majority of participants rejects any hint of bravado or morbid fascination.

6.2 *Absent/present death paradox*

The following section will reveal the participants' views on the absent/present death paradox captured by the thanatological framework, beginning with the institutional sequestration of death.

Institutional sequestration of death

6.2.1 *Medicalization of the dying process.* When questioned whether it appears that more Mexicans are dying in hospitals than previously, the majority of participants expressed the opinion that although hospital deaths appeared to be increasing slightly, families tend to prefer that loved ones die at home when possible and this is what happens on most

occasions. They also explained that much depends on the financial resources of the individual and the family, as in some cases people are kept at home to avoid high medical expenses, but, in most cases, the home is the favoured option regardless of financial issues:

Put it this way, my grand-parents all died at home, and in two cases I was at their home with the rest of the family. It is better to die at home in familiar surroundings, with the family around, than in some strange hospital room. (Participant 3)

6.2.2 Professionalization of the death industry. A number of participants referred to how the immediate hours following death continue to take part within the community gaze, as friends, relatives and colleagues visit the home of the deceased to offer condolences and help and to “view” the dead body for one last time before burial, which is usually the next day. In some cases, the body is transferred to a funeral home which then takes the place of the house, with the body being on display and many people turning up to pay respects:

When people die where I come from the street is often closed as too many people arrive to fit in the house. Food and drink is offered to all who come. We do it to show our respect, and so that the family do not feel alone in their grief. (Participant 7)

6.2.3 Decline in religious institutions. Many participants stressed that religion remains a strong force throughout the country, with Catholicism being by far the most supported faith:

Yes, a lot of people are religious. Look at how everybody hangs rosaries or crucifixes in their cars and a lot of people attend my local church every Sunday. (Participant 13)

Several participants did stress that other Christian religions, such as Protestantism, were becoming more popular while many commented and expressed concern about the growth surrounding the cult of *Santa Muerte*, a practice which takes death as its Patron Saint.

6.2.4 Death in Mexican popular culture. As regards the presence of death in popular culture and media output, all of the participants agreed that manifestations of death are common in Mexico. The majority mentioned the Day of the Dead activities and claimed that they tended to enjoy preparing for the event and taking part in festivities, which they took seriously as a time to remember departed relatives and friends. Only two of the participants claimed to believe that the spirits of the dead made an annual appearance, but the others agreed that it was a special time in which one could pause for reflection:

My father died five years ago and while I don't believe, although I would like to, that he is actually there with us, I think about him and feel a connection. It helps me. (Participant 5)

Some of the participants also stated that the occasion made them ponder their own mortality:

Each year on Day of the Dead I think about the fact that one day I will die and my family will remember me in this way. (Participant 5)

Day of the Dead occurs once a year, yet many participants claimed that “death” is palpable in Mexican daily life through art, music and literature and is visible in households, churches, vehicles, restaurants and cafes:

Look at the work of Frida Kahlo, she frequently made use of death imagery, or Jose Posada's skulls. Many cafes, restaurants and bars display pictures of skeletons and skulls; it's normal here, we are accustomed to it. (Participant 8)

Finally, several participants mentioned the preponderance of graphic images and descriptions of death in the media, with newspapers, tabloid crime magazines and websites frequently publishing photographs of murdered bodies lying in the street.

To summarise the response to the absent/present death paradox, it was evident that many participants were at variance with the “absent death” concept present in Western secularized societies. While concern was voiced that sequestration might occur in the future, as a result of globalization, the participants made it evident that it is not a feature of contemporary Mexican society:

I would disagree that death has been kidnapped in Mexico. In fact, that couldn't be further from the truth. (Participant 2)

This hasn't happened yet, but maybe in the future with all the changes happening in the world. (Participant 10)

Meanwhile, although there are reminders of death's presence in many aspects of daily life and popular culture, such as the Day of the Dead which provides an opportunity for individuals to contemplate mortality, these do not clash with a “hidden, sequestered” death, and so the combination of factors that produce the absent/present death paradox that is paramount to the thanatological model, are not present, and consequently ontological security levels are unaffected by any absent/present death paradox.

6.2.5 Ontological insecurity. The majority of the participants expressed a belief in life after death, some believing in a Christian heaven, while others were unsure how to explain their belief, apart from that it involved some form of co-existence between the dead and the living:

I am sure that when we die we continue to exist in some way, be it in heaven or whatever, but I don't think death means that's it. (Participant 8)

When asked whether the thought of their own death made them feel uneasy, again most of the participants remarked that they while they certainly do not wish death upon themselves, they understand that dying is a fact of life. That is, most participants insisted that they want to live a long and happy life, yet there was a general acceptance that death is continually present and may thus interrupt one's plans:

Do I fear death? I would not say that I fear it as such, but I do not want to die yet of course. But I know that one day it will come and that is the path we take from the day we are born. (Participant 9)

Consequently, the notion of “dreading and avoiding death”, present in Western secular societies, was not apparent among the participants. Rather, they recognised that life and death co-exist, both complementing each other and, accordingly, feelings of ontological insecurity did not appear to be a significant factor among the participants.

6.3 Consumption of dark tourism

Having sought the participants' reaction to the concepts presented in the thanatological model, it was necessary to complement this by searching for the factors that motivated their trip to the dark tourism sites, and to reveal any instances of thanatopsis during their visit.

6.3.1 Motivation. The participants were motivated to visit the dark tourism sites for several reasons that depended on the nature of the site. For example, those visiting the Plaza of the Three Cultures expressed their interest in the historical and blighted nature of the site and what these past events signify for Mexican society. They also sought the opportunity to pay respects to the victims (particularly the students) and make a moral stance against political oppression. These motivations reflect the fact that the site is commemorative, history-centric and with an educational focus (although the temporary closing of the museum had affected the educational aspect of the site at the time of the interviews):

Tlatelolco is very well known here in Mexico. It is famous for the time when the authorities killed the students. I wanted to come here and “feel” the place. (Participant 1)

This place has a fascinating history, it seems to be cursed. War, massacre and earthquake [. . .] I felt I should come and somehow show solidarity with the students. The way the World is right now, something like this could happen again. (Participant 2)

Similarly, the participants at the Trotsky museum were particularly interested in the historical nature of the site and revealed a sense of fulfilment to be present at a location in which such a notorious event had occurred:

This house, particularly the study, provides such a feeling of history. I wanted to come here to somehow get a sense of what happened here. (Participant 10)

As with the Plaza of the Three Cultures, the motivations of the visitors can be linked with the history centric, educational nature of its presentation. Historical interest was also present as a motivation factor for those visiting the Museum of the Memory and Tolerance, and, as with the Plaza of the Three Cultures, there was a desire to pay respects and show support for the genocide victims. The participants were visibly upset by the exhibitions and particularly adamant with their view that future atrocities should be prevented:

I have always been shocked with Genocide. I did not want to come at first because I knew that it would upset me, but I was motivated to come here to try to understand what happened. I worry about the way that the world is going; we must make sure these atrocities do not happen again (Participant 13)

Again, the motivations to visit can be related to the Museum being a history-centric, education oriented attraction, that focuses on large-scale global atrocities. Meanwhile, those visiting the Island of the Dolls were attracted by the “macabre” nature of the site and anticipated a scary thrill in surveying the island and its inhabitants:

I think it's quite weird how this island is full of dolls. I'm here with friends, and we thought it would be fun, in a bit of a dark way, to go and see it. (Participant 6)

None of the participants expressed the notion that their visit was motivated by thoughts related to their own mortality, unless, as three participants commented upon, there existed a subconscious need that they were unaware of. Instead, the principal motivation factors were:

- the desire to educate themselves by evaluating the events from a historical, societal and political perspective;
- empathy and support for the victims;
- to demonstrate a moral stance against political oppression; and
- in the case of the Island of the Dolls, to experience the thrill of the macabre.

In fact, the findings corresponded with those of [Alvarado Sizzo and Romero Gallardo \(2018\)](#), mentioned earlier, who concluded that Mexican tourists visiting Day of the Dead celebrations at Janitzio were predominantly motivated by the desire to observe a traditional, authentic ritual that is part of their cultural heritage, more so than an opportunity to reflect on issues of mortality.

6.3.2 Thanatological experiences. When the participants were asked whether the visit had made them contemplate their own mortality, there was a mixture of responses depending on the particular site. The participants at the Plaza of the Three Cultures agreed that as well as evoking feelings of empathy for the victims and anger towards the government and the military for their part in the 1968 massacre, the experience had made

them consider the co-existence of life with death, and that the violent history of the site illustrates how own mortality is a constant presence throughout our lives:

Look around, this place just proves that us Mexicans live alongside death. I always know this, but coming here helps to re-inforce this. (Participant 2)

When asked if the experience has helped to alleviate any fears concerning their own mortality, the general reply was that it had re-confirmed the view that life co-exists with death and that one should accept this as being the natural cycle:

Being here strengthens the feeling that I have that there is a thin line between us and them [the living and the dead] (Participant 3)

The Island of the Dolls, however, did not evoke the same depth of thought regarding matters of mortality. That is, when asked whether the site had provoked thoughts of death, dying and mortality, the participants' responses were generally negative; that is, despite them being aware of the story regarding the little girl's death, they remarked that it was the scary experience provided by the aura of the island and multitudes of disfigured dolls that gained their attention above all else. Asked if the trip had helped soothe any anxiety concerning their own mortality, the participants stated that it had not occurred to them to consider such thoughts:

I feel creeped out by these dolls, but it does not really make me think about my death. It's not like that. (Participant 5)

The Trotsky museum, likewise, did not inspire the participants to deliberate their own personal mortality. For them, it was more so an opportunity to experience a part of Mexico's cultural heritage, along with viewing Frida Kahlo's former home which is situated next to the museum:

Trotsky was such an important figure in history, and here am I in the place in which he was killed. But it makes me think about Trotsky and his death, not mine, or my family. (Participant 11)

Nevertheless, the Museum of Memory and Tolerance did provoke ample contemplation of personal death, while at the same time the participants displayed a palpable empathy towards the victims. The common consensus was that the museum reminded them of the frailty of life and of how situations can suddenly change, thus encouraging them to feel grateful that such adversity has not befallen themselves or their family. Once again, as with the participants at the Plaza of Three Cultures, feelings of anger and disgust were expressed towards the perpetrators of genocide:

My experience here is one of sadness for these poor people who suffered. Of course, it made me think-what if that had been me? (Participant 15)

When posed with the question as to whether the visit had helped to assuage ontological concerns, several referred to the co-existence of life and death in a similar manner to those participants from the Plaza of the Three Cultures, and how the visit had reaffirmed the notion that one must accept death and be aware of its presence:

I have been very moved by this museum. What shocked me was at the end when the subject turns to Mexico and you see the faces of thousands of people who have disappeared here. You spend all the time before thinking thank God these horrible things haven't happened to us, and then you realise [pause] yes, death is here too. I think most of us as Mexicans sort of have this in our heads, but coming here today proves it to me. (Participant 13)

It is, therefore, evident that thanatopsis occurred in two of the four dark tourism sites in question, as many of those participants interviewed at the Plaza of the Three Cultures and the Museum of Memory and Tolerance remarked that they felt the urge and a necessity to reflect upon their own mortality.

7. Discussion and conclusion

The Eurocentric nature of dark tourism research is limiting its perspective (Light, 2017). This study was an attempt to address this situation by testing Stone and Sharpley's (2008) thanatological framework in the context of Mexico. The framework is based on the notion that in Western society death is paradoxically both absent, as a result of "death denying" social changes such as the medicalization of the dying process, the professionalism of post-death services and the decline in religion, and present, due to the prominence of death in mediated popular culture. This situation has led to many individuals suffering death anxiety, thus resulting in widespread ontological insecurity throughout society. Dark tourism reintroduces absent death and provides the means for individual reflection and the subsequent "purchase" of ontological security.

Mexicans, however, are renowned for having a distinct, intimate relationship with death which suggests that the thanatological framework might not be appropriate in this setting.

All the same, a review of the literature raises doubts as to the accuracy of this impression, with some arguing that in reality Mexicans share the same apprehensions as those in Anglo European societies, and that it is the publicity surrounding the day of the dead activities that has shaped this exaggerated opinion of the "death-defying" Mexican. With this in mind, the principal aim of the research was to explore the Mexican perspective of death in the context of dark tourism consumption so as to determine whether particular concepts related to the consumption of dark tourism by those from Western society, as presented in the thanatological model, still applied when Mexicans visited dark tourism sites.

The conclusion to be made regarding the Mexican perspective of death is that the truth lies somewhere in-between. That is, the research participants were not death-mocking fatalists, yet, generally speaking, they did demonstrate a distinct attitude towards death that appears to be markedly different than their Anglo-European counterparts. They declared that they did not celebrate death, as such, apart from during the day of the dead festivities; however, they acknowledged its existence and were aware that death can occur unexpectedly.

The participants also revealed that death is not sequestered in Mexico, although some expressed concerns that it could happen in the future. Most stated that in their experience people generally died at home, usually surrounded by family, while immediately following death the deceased is displayed in the house (or occasionally the funeral parlour), covered by a simple blanket and visited by relatives, friends and colleagues. Meanwhile, according to the majority of the participants, religion remains an important influence in Mexican life, in particular Catholicism, although the increasing worship of Santa Muerte (Saint of Death) represents an intriguing development that merits further research.

Invariably, taking into account the participants' perspective towards death and their testimony that an absent/present death paradox does not exist in Mexico, the conclusion to be had regarding the viability of the thanatological framework in a Mexican context is that it is not suitable, because, to put it simply, ontological security is already present. This is because Mexicans, despite being part of the rapidly changing world, still persist with religious tradition and prefer that family members die at home and remain there under the gaze of friends and family until the day of the funeral.

Nonetheless, ontological security does not rule out the possibility that Mexican dark tourism consumers will experience thanatopsis to varying degrees, so it was necessary to explore the motivations and experiences of the participants at the dark tourism sites. Subsequently, it became apparent that thanatopsis did not occur prior to or during the visit to the Trotsky Museum, nor at the Island of the Dolls, both very different types of dark tourism attractions, the museum motivating those with a historical interest, and the island serving to entice those with a desire to encounter a “scary thrill”; however, the Plaza of the Three Cultures, viewed as part of Mexico’s cultural heritage and attracting participants wanting to pay respects and express their dislike of political oppression, did arouse substantial thanatological thought among various participants. Likewise, a comparable thanatological experience took place among the participants at the Museum of Memory and Tolerance, an attraction which held similar appeal to the Plaza of Three Cultures as a site that represents large-scale atrocity, albeit on “lighter” scale of the spectrum. While not expecting to be contemplating death, the majority of participants at these two dark tourism sites did indeed undergo thanatological self-discourse, that served to re-confirm their own socially constructed perspective on death.

Consequently, the research leads to the principal conclusion that as the participants’ responses indicated that the thanatological framework was unsuitable for Mexican society, then research on other societies throughout the world would surely expose other variations, different to both Anglo-European and Mexican interpretations, thus confirming [Cohen’s \(2018, p. 157\)](#) observation that “Western thanotourism would be just one particular case”. This illustrates that thanatology, in the context of dark tourism consumption, is a fluid concept, in that the nature of thanatological contemplation varies according to the geographical background of the visitor, thus highlighting the necessity to emerge from the confines of Eurocentric academic assumptions by adopting alternative perspectives, such as a shift to a mobilities paradigm as suggested by [Cohen and Cohen \(2015\)](#).

While this research contributes to the dark tourism debate, particularly as regards the relevance of Western-based theoretical and conceptual notions in emerging societies, there are, as always, limitations to a study and it is important to acknowledge this. The main limitation to this study is that a sample of 15 participants was used to represent the opinions of Mexicans in general. A larger sample would have reflected the diversity of motivations, emotions and experiences of Mexicans to a more accurate degree, yet given the time and resources this was not possible. The researcher was aware of this limitation when choosing the participants, and made an effort to obtain the opinions of a broad range of individuals.

More research is necessary to further explore dark tourism’s supply and consumption in those geographical areas in which opinions of death, dying and mortality differ from those held in Western societies. In particular, four dimensions of research was identified by [Cohen \(2018\)](#), which includes: the types of site, death theologies and soteriological teaching, relationships with the dead and the motivations and experiences of domestic visitors to these sites. All of these should be included in future research.

An interesting avenue for research would be to construct a thanatological framework specifically related to the consumption of dark tourism in Mexico, exploring more profoundly issues related to death, dying and mortality and its role in Mexican society. Likewise, it would be fascinating to investigate the Museum of Mummies in Guanajuato from a supply perspective, as the Museum displays numerous death and mortality related quotations from the likes of Octavio Paz throughout the exhibition, reflecting the awareness by the site administrators of the unique domestic market that they are dealing with.

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