

Moral Intensity and Tourist Perceptions at Holocaust Sites: Unpacking the Moral Dimensions of Dark Tourism

Robert Thomas

Cardiff University

Carmela Bosangit

Cardiff University

Shilpa Iyanna

Northumbria University

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Abstract

This paper seeks to unpack the dimensions of personal moral significance and moral recognition against the backdrop of moral decision-making at darkest tourism sites. We do so through the lens of moral intensity (MI). This multidimensional construct relates specifically to moral issues rather than the characteristics of the decision maker or the situational context. Drawing on ethnographic research, data were collected at major Holocaust tourism sites across Germany and Poland via 49 semi-structured interviews. The data reveal, for the first time, that tourist perceptions of MI are a bricolage comprising spatial intelligence, a priori judgments, marketing communication (realism), and ethnonationalism. Importantly, our research suggests that for some tourists, sites such as Auschwitz-Birkenau are not perceived as morally intense due to the sheer numbers, social disorganisation, perceptions of gatekeeping, and a lack of consequentialism for deviant behaviours.

Keywords: *Moral Intensity, Ethical Decision Making, Darkest Tourism*

Track: *Tourism Marketing*

1. Introduction

Dark tourism plays a significant role in the global tourism industry (Wyatt et al., 2024). The dark tourism market is valued at USD 32.7 billion in 2025 and is expected to reach USD 41.8 billion by 2035 (Future Marketing Insights, 2025). Tourists regularly visit places linked to death and suffering, such as graveyards and concentration camps, taking part in carefully constructed experiences (Lin et al., 2024). These sites fall under the category of darkest tourism (Stone, 2006), and the Holocaust and Genocide tourism segment was the leading segment recognised for its global recognition and strong cultural significance (Future Marketing Insights, 2025). The marketing of these 'deathscapes' allows visitors to fully engage with sites associated with mortality (Soulard & Russell, 2025). Yet, moral and ethical conduct at such destinations is not guaranteed (Pratt et al., 2019), and visitor actions can range from positive and acceptable to negative and inappropriate (Soulard & Russell, 2025). Tourist behaviour in these environments is varied, revealing a complex, often contradictory relationship among death, tourism, morality, and actions (Hosseini et al., 2022). Dark tourism sites often fail to provide clear guidance on behavioural expectations (Sun & Lv, 2024). Without such instruction, tourists may not follow socially appropriate norms, instead responding based on personal sensitivities (Sharma, 2020). Commercialisation has also shifted the meaning of these sites, making visits less profound and more about curiosity, paranormal interest, or fascination with the manner of death rather than its context (Lewis et al., 2022). Many visitors lack connection to these places and seek 'horror' as a spectacle. Thurnell-Read (2009) notes that this can lead to inappropriate behaviour, as seen at Auschwitz. The symbolic value of such sites diminishes, leading to complex, insensitive actions, with sites often unprepared to address these challenges (Commane & Potton, 2019). We seek to explore acts of insensitivity through the lens of Moral Intensity (MI). MI underpins how the moral characteristics of an issue (moral intensity) affect motivation in tasks intended to address the issue (task motivation) (Opoku-Dakwa, 2022). Recognition of MI impacts directly on ethical decision making and underpins moral intention (Fichtel et al., 2022). It is ostensibly personal mindfulness and a cognitive process that facilitates moral (and ethical) navigation (Stenmark & van Ittersum, 2025). Thus, we seek to explore perceptions of MI and a possible link to insensitive behaviours at the darkest tourist sites. Darkest tourist sites include sites of genocide, atrocity and catastrophe as the main thanatological them such as genocide camps in Rwanda, Cambodia and Kosovo (Stone, 2006).

A key theoretical contribution is the identification of morally intense and morally bound Holocaust sites as revealed by tourists themselves. Smaller, less commercialised environments encompass all six of Jones' (1991) MI dimensions while 'massive' sites such as Auschwitz-Birkenau fail to meet Jones's (1991) morally intense characteristics due to a priori judgment and intensive tourism. Consequently, this research positions MI as an organisational imperative rather than solely a unidirectional, visitor-based phenomenon. We argue for the importance of the above-identified knowledge gap and contend that it represents a theoretical and physical imperative for Holocaust tourism research.

1. Literature Review

2.1 Darkest Tourism And Challenges

Dark tourism refers to visiting places associated with death and tragedy, such as cemeteries and death camps (Bai & Chen, 2024). While these sites offer opportunities for reflection, ethical concerns persist about profiting from tragedy and the commodification of suffering (Soulard & Russell, 2025; Sun & Lv, 2024). In particular, the darkest tourism sites have symbolic meaning linked to stronger ideological and political influence, and these sites were preserved for the celebration of memory and for pedagogical purposes (Magano, et al., 2023). Examples like Holocaust sites highlight tensions between remembrance and tourism (Masa, 2020). Critics argue that dark tourism often serves capitalist interests, contributing to a "deathseeker" economy (Korstanje, 2018). Despite some visitors' awareness of their responsibilities, norm violations and indifference remain common (Wight & Stanley, 2022). Thus, it is critical to understand how MI can influence the intention to visit the darkest tourism sites.

2.2 Moral Intensity

Moral Intensity is the extent to which a moral agent believes a moral issue is present and their actions and decisions may harm or benefit others (Jones, 1991). Essentially, the given characteristic (s) of a specific situation influence the extent to which the individual perceives moral implications of their actions (Stenmark & van Ittersum, 2025). Moral intensity then, is predicted that individuals make moral decisions predicated on six factors as outlined below in table 1

Table 1: MI Characteristics

Moral Intensity Characteristic	Definition (Jones, 1991)
Magnitude of consequences (MC)	The harms (or benefits) done to victims (or beneficiaries) of the moral act in question (p. 374)
Probability of effect (PE)	A joint function of the probability that the act in question will actually take place and the act in question will actually cause the harm (benefit) predicted (p. 375)
Concentration of effect (CE)	An inverse function of the number of people affected by an act of given magnitude of harm (benefit) (p. 377)
Temporal immediacy (TI)	The length of time between the present and the onset of consequences of the harm (benefit) for the moral act in question (p. 376)
Social consensus (SC)	The degree of social agreement that a proposed act is evil (or good) (p. 375)
Proximity (PX)	The feeling of nearness (social, cultural, psychological, or physical) that the moral agent has for the victims (beneficiaries) of the evil (beneficial) act in question (p. 376)

Source: Kusyk and Schwartz (2024)

Jones (1991) hypothesised that his dimensions of moral intensity had a direct impact on moral/ethical decision-making. The perceived moral intensity of a situation influences each of the six elements and underpins ‘moral awareness’ in a particular situation (Jones, 1991). Moral issues that possess high intensity should be recognised, and behaviour should reflect that recognition (Yang & Wu, 2009).

2. Methodology

This study took a critical ethnographic approach to explore individual reality, moral decision-making, and ‘participant listening’ (Forsey, 2010), providing an immersive research framework for collecting accurate and representative data (Palladino, 2025). Ethnography has proven effective in studying moral negotiations, intent, and tourist experiences (Apchain, 2025). Fieldwork occurred at several of the darkest tourism sites in Germany and Poland. Participants were identified through field observation before entering, and of 240 tourists approached, 49 (20.42%) participated. Interviews focused on Jones’s (1991) six components and were mostly conducted in English, with some in Polish and German, processed using Trint. The content analysis used both deductive and inductive coding.

3. Findings

The themes presented highlight the major influences of MI prior to entering a given site. The themes are: (1) Spatial Intelligence, (2) Associations (shaping mental models), (3) Communication (semantic reality) and (4) Ethnonationalism.

3.1 Spatial intelligence

Data revealed a consensus that all six MI characteristics were manifest at smaller, more compact sites (Belzec, Sobibor, Ravensbrück, and Neuengamme). Spatial limitations were associated with an acknowledgement that deviant behaviour (rule breaking) would be wrong and, importantly, would be ‘captured’ in small, non-congested spaces in real time. MC was uppermost with real concerns expressed for victims and their legacy. The extract is taken from P41 Belzec, a 22-year-old, male Polish tourist:

“I know it’s small, it’s intense when you walk through the monument, it’s meant to be claustrophobic. I think I’ll feel I’m being watched. If anything bad happens I know it’ll be dealt with because of who’s here”.

3.2 Associations (shaping mental models)

Despite awareness of moral issues at Holocaust sites, there was an identification that larger sites (Auschwitz Birkenau, the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe) were already associated with reputational damage as a consequence of poor tourist behaviours. Situated distinctly in the notion of MI as a cognitive process, the data revealed that pre-existing associations of tourist behaviours impact moral judgement and potentially magnify the possibility of individuals engaging in negative behaviours themselves. The extracts are taken from male participants at the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe and Auschwitz Birkenau respectively:

“Colleagues who’ve been here said it’s huge. One said it potentially doesn’t matter what you do here as long as you don’t dress up like a Nazi, that’s the only way to stand out”(P40)

“Somebody said being here felt a bit like a Christmas sale. Just tourists and kids running around and, on their phones, just queuing everywhere. To answer the question then, yeah, I’m not sure I’d be overly worried if I took a selfie or two by the gates” (P12)

This knowledge, in turn, had seemingly diminished the necessity of navigating overt moral issues, rendering these sites potentially as low-intensity sites. This type of knowledge problematically impacted MC, CE, TI, PE, and SC and negated the chances of engaging in positive sense-making. This was then a form of judgment that facilitated pre-emptive absolution if a poor moral decision was made, such as taking selfies, photographing in banned zones, or failing to adhere to the outlined codes of behaviour.

3.3 Communication (semantic reality)

Another aspect that impacted MI was that of marketing communications. The architecture of the encounter again veered from the reality of the Nazi atrocities to an emphasis on the provision of service. This almost bipolar approach seemed to encourage moral reflection and enhance MI, but, conversely, at sites with more direct tourist competition, it diminished it. This is captured in the extracts below:

“When we booked this, the website landing page used terms like ‘murder,’ ‘extermination,’ ‘gassing’, and references to Nazis and numbers of dead. Heavy stuff. You know it’s meaningful. You know it’s going to be horrific. That focuses you.” (P6)

“It’s weird, but the emphasis is on hotel pickup, a comfortable van, and a friendly, professional guide. It’s a day out. I think the overview mention ‘death gate’ but only in the context of the kind of spooky things you could see. It just feels like a day out despite the fact you know you’re going to a death camp.” (P19)

Perhaps by not presenting reality, marketing and positioning broadly in this sphere have unintended negative moral consequences. The need to be competitive, engage in competitiveness, and category profitability shouldn’t minimise profundity. There are inescapable truths, truths and profundity indelibly linked to the Holocaust (Cox and Marlowe, 2025), and there is an inference in the data that those elements should be drawn upon by firms, as this could enhance an individual’s moral repertoire.

3.4 Ethnonationalism

The Polish data revealed that MI was enhanced by feelings of patriotism and a fear of impacting on ‘Polish History.’ The nationalistic rhetoric was inclusive and was linked to MC and PX and was a driver of moral decision-making.

“It’s Polish ground, Polish people and a Polish legacy. It’s a national pilgrimage and more than tourism. There’s no alternative to acting responsibly. It’s a Polish responsibility.”

Ethnonationalism illuminated MI for some, breaking down cognitive and social barriers and mitigating the interpretation observed in some participant extracts. This may be down to curriculum, political influence, or social discourse, but it represents a significant relationship. While the conceptualisation of the Holocaust is seen as a European issue, ethnonationalism clearly underpins MI in a visceral way.

4. Discussion

Data shows that moral intuition (MI) at dark tourist sites is not universal; it varies according to site size and perceived consequences. Moral sensitivity and judgment are interpretive, with smaller sites eliciting stronger MI and perceptions of moral leadership, partly due to proximity to victims. Larger sites tend to demonstrate moral elasticity (ME), meaning flexible moral practices contrary to expectations, often influenced by tourism intensity. MI appears linked to expectations and leadership at these locations, but its widespread adoption needs reinforcement, despite iconic sites like Auschwitz representing broader Holocaust significance. Ethnonationalism also emerges, mainly among Polish participants, highlighting challenges in engaging transnational tourists. Overall, the data may help predict future behavioral patterns.

5. Practical Implications

It is important to further highlight the nature of morality and its potential consequences to strengthen MC, CE and SC at popular sites. We propose implementing pre-visit transformative learning by developing moral scenarios based on themes identified in this data, such as dress code and phone use for online or virtual assessments prior to site visits. Although the concepts of moral games and gamification are established, their application within this context remains unexplored. With a focus on knowledge creation and behavioural modification, these scenarios would address moral choices, dilemmas, and impacts. Moreover, this would facilitate a learning community beyond site history and allow sites a pragmatic way of identifying gaps that might lessen perceptions of MI.

To assist with MC and PX, we argue that stronger, more visible guardianship is needed on-site. A guardian can be anyone who dissuades someone from poor behaviour through simple presence. Those committed to supporting the site might be best placed to take on this role. Volunteer guardians could provide physical presence, passive supervision and the ability for immediate reaction, which may enhance perceptions of MI.

Our research indicates that high levels of crowding negatively affect how people perceive MI. In practice, places like Auschwitz often lack the ability to implement urban planning. One effective approach is to determine a suitable social capacity and limit visitor numbers accordingly. Although this might seem to conflict with the site's primary goals of Remembrance and Awareness, it actually supports the third aspect of its mission—Responsibility—and would help create an environment better suited to fostering both remembrance and awareness.

Depending on the site, a visit is either morally anomalous with no equivalent (Belzec, Sobibor) or something with a ‘feel’ of an ordinary encounter. This seems to be down to marketing communications. Where there is stiff competition for the tourist trade, the data indicates that the focus is on service rather than site. There is an emphasis on the day rather than the reality of what is about to be encountered, and that impacts MI. We call for a reality check and for moral value to be incorporated into all communications so visitors can be steeped in and optimally configured for an intense moral experience. It seems some communication slack is a ‘real world’ proposition that can be manifest as a “so what” in terms of MI. This approach might also strengthen social contracts between the triad of sites, service provision and tourists.

6. Limitations, future research and conclusion

The small, predominantly male sample limits generalisation, especially since sites like Auschwitz Birkenau receive over 2.3 million visitors annually (<http://auschwitz.org/en/>). Broader data collection from other European Holocaust sites is needed. This study is the first to examine MI and tourist behaviour at Holocaust remembrance locations. Findings indicate a relationship between MI perceptions and site size, and show that individual socio-cultural, spatial, and temporal factors can lower MI during visits. Overall, this research advances understanding of MI, dark tourism, and Holocaust tourism.

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