International Journal of Multidisciplinary and Innovative Research

ISSN(print): 3050-6883, ISSN(online): 3050-6891

Volume 03 Issue 01 January 2026

DOI: 10.58806/ijmir.2026.v3i1n10

Page No: 78-87

Armchair Journeys to The Dark Side of Mexico: Reading Bolaño and Poniatowska As Virtual Dark Tourism

Dr Mark Speakman[1], Dr Alejandro Diaz Garay[2], Dr Irma Solano Diaz[3]

[1]Senior lecturer/research scholar, Department of Territory and Social Sustainability (CIPES), Autonomous University of Guerrero, Chilpancingo, Mexico

[2]Senior lecturer/research scholar, Department of Territory and Social Sustainability (CIPES), Autonomous University of Guerrero, Chilpancingo, Mexico

[3]Senior lecturer/research scholar, Department of Territory and Social Sustainability (CIPES), Autonomous University of Guerrero, Chilpancingo, Mexico

ABSTRACT

This study examines how literary reading may function as a form of virtual dark tourism through analysis of reader engagement with Roberto Bolaño's *2666* and Elena Poniatowska's *La Noche de Tlatelolco*. Using an interpretivist qualitative design, twelve readers were followed over sixteen weeks to explore anticipatory motivations, immersive emotional engagement, and post-reading reflection. Findings show that participants approached these texts as symbolic spaces in which national violence, memory, and suffering were encountered and interpreted. The study proposes the Virtual Dark Tourism Reading Model to conceptualise how reading can reproduce experiential patterns associated with dark-tourism visitation while remaining mediated and narrative-based. In this framework, literature becomes a site where imaginaries surrounding violence and historical trauma are formed, negotiated, and revisited. The research broadens conceptual boundaries of dark tourism by showing that meaningful emotional and ethical engagement can occur without physical travel, advancing dialogue between literary studies and tourism studies.

KEYWORDS: Dark Tourism; Virtual Dark Tourism; Literary Dark Tourism; Roberto Bolaño; Elena Poniatowska; Mexico

"No one pays attention to these killings, but the secret of the world is hidden in them." Roberto Bolaño, *2666* (2004, p. 348)

ARTICLE DETAILS

Published On:
27 January 2026

Available on:
https://ijmir.com

INTRODUCTION

Dark tourism research shows that people often travel to places associated with death, violence, and collective trauma, engaging with difficult pasts through memory, emotion, and interpretation (Farmaki, 2013; Lennon & Foley, 1996; Stone, 2006). These experiences are not only shaped by physical presence at a site, but also by how meaning is produced symbolically. Visitors engage with representations—such as narratives, displays, and commemorative practices—that influence how dark sites are understood, remembered, and morally interpreted (Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Robb, 2009; Seaton, 2002; Stone & Sharpley, 2008).

More recent research has widened the discussion of dark tourism to include mediated and virtual forms of engagement, in which people encounter stories of death and suffering without travelling to a physical site. These encounters can take place through film, digital environments, documentary media, or online memorial spaces (McDaniel, 2018). In this context, commentators have highlighted the importance of tourism imaginaries, as mediated representations influence how violence and trauma are imagined, understood, and felt.

While some studies link mediated experiences to forms of imaginative tourism that may later motivate physical travel (Reijnders, 2016), this study focuses on virtual dark tourism where no travel occurs. Here, emotional and ethical engagement is produced entirely through the mediated encounter itself.

Literature plays a relevant role in this context. Stories can move readers emotionally and intellectually, encouraging ethical reflection beyond the text itself. Fiction and documentary writing can offer readers a way to engage with collective trauma from a safe distance,

encouraging reflection on place, history, and responsibility. This study examines how literary experiences can mirror forms of dark tourism by analysing reader responses to Roberto Bolaño's novel *2666* and Elena Poniatowska's non-fiction documentary testimony *La Noche de Tlatelolco*, two works that address structural violence in modern Mexican history.

The main aim of this study is to determine how literary engagement with these 'dark' historical narratives can generate emotional and ethical experiences comparable to physical dark-tourism visitation, and to conceptualise this process through the development of the Virtual Dark Tourism Reading Model (VDTRM). Rather than proposing a new definition of dark tourism, this study offers an analytical model for examining how dark-tourism-like experiential processes can emerge through literary engagement.

Specifically, it seeks to:

1. Analyse how readers emotionally and cognitively engage with representations of violence, trauma, and memory in Roberto Bolaño's *2666* and Elena Poniatowska's *La Noche de Tlatelolco*.
2. Identify and characterise the temporal structure of these encounters — anticipatory expectations, immersive affective responses, and post-reading reflection.
3. Conceptualise how literature can function as a mediated dark-tourism site by developing the VDTRM, explaining how ideas, emotions, and ethical interpretations are created, negotiated, and sustained through reading.

Drawing on sixteen weeks of qualitative research, including reading journals, group discussions, and interviews, this study examines how readers interpret, discuss, and remember these two literary works. It explores how literature may act as a space where ideas related to dark tourism circulate, showing how readers engage with 'dark' through narrative rather than physical travel.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Foundations of Dark Tourism

Dark tourism refers to travel to places linked to death, disaster, conflict or atrocity (Sharpley, 2005). Research has emphasised that motivations extend beyond curiosity or spectacle and reflect processes of learning, moral reflection, and engagement with collective memory- meaning how people take part in shared understandings of past violence and how society chooses to remember it (Ashworth & Isaac, 2015; Biran, Poria & Oren, 2011; Chronis, 2005). Emotional responses such as grief, sadness, discomfort and empathy are central to these encounters (Best, 2007; Ivanova & Light, 2017; Nawijn, Isaac, Gridnevskiy & van Liempt, 2015) and shape how individuals interpret dark sites (Ashworth & Hartmann, 2005; Buda & McIntosh, 2013; Dunkley, Morgan & Westwood, 2011). Dark tourism experience is also understood as being temporally structured: that is, anticipation occurs before arrival, affective engagement occurs on-site, and reflective interpretation continues afterwards (Miles, 2014; Prentice & Andersen, 2007; Zheng, Zhang, Qiu, Guo & Zhang, 2019).

Mediated and Virtual Dark Tourism

Recent scholarship has expanded dark tourism to include mediated forms of engagement in which individuals encounter representations of past violence without physically travelling to the site (Hassapopoulou, 2018; McDaniel, 2018). Digital memorials, documentary film, online archives, and virtual environments have all been explored as ways in which individuals can encounter suffering and collective trauma remotely (Basaraba, 2023; Bolan & Simone-Charteris, 2018; Craig-Wight, 2020, Santoso, Quarshie, Ukpabi & Wang, 2024). These developments challenge the notion that authenticity in dark tourism relies on physically visiting sites- instead virtual dark tourism involves emotional and intellectual engagement with mediated representations of death, violence, and haunting. The experience is defined less by physical presence and more by the depth of reflection it produces. In this way, virtual dark tourism can be seen as part of a broader form of dark tourism that focuses on meaning, emotion, and symbolic connection, not physical movement.

Literature, Narrative Empathy and Ethical Witnessing

Literature provides a narrative space where readers can engage with traumatic history through symbolic storytelling. Its form encourages imagination, emotion, and reflection (Gerrig, 1998; Sturgis, 2018), prompting responses such as empathy, unease, comparison, and ethical reflection that relate closely to dark-tourism experiences (Moon, Jongsik, Chua & Han, 2022). Novels may thus act as "moral laboratories" (Podoshen, Venkatesh, Wallin, Andrzejewski & Jin, 2024), enabling thoughtful engagement with violent pasts from a mediated distance. While theoretical discussions have suggested that reading constitutes a form of "armchair dark tourism" (McDaniel, 2018), empirical research examining how readers experience such encounters remains underdeveloped.

Virtual Dark Tourism and Literary Engagement

With the growth of virtual and remote tourism (Goodson & Jarratt, 2025), literature offers a way for dark tourism ideas to be explored and shared (Brown, 2016). Through documentary testimony and fictional representation, texts can help readers understand historical moments, shape how places are imagined, and encourage moral reflection on violence (Busby & Devereux, 2015). Bolaño's *2666* and Poniatowska's *La Noche de Tlatelolco* illustrate this- both works portray structural violence in modern Mexican history and encourage readers to reflect on how these events are remembered and understood.

Taken together, the literature reviewed above establishes three distinct but related dimensions that inform the study. First, dark tourism is understood as an experiential engagement with death, violence, and collective memory that unfolds across anticipation, encounter, and reflection. Second, research on mediated and virtual dark tourism demonstrates that such engagement does not

require physical presence but can occur through symbolic and representational forms that prompt emotional and ethical response. Third, scholarship on literature and narrative empathy highlights how reading enables mediated witnessing, moral reflection, and interpretive labour. Rather than treating these strands as interchangeable, this study brings them into dialogue by examining how literary reading may activate dark-tourism-like experiential processes through narrative mediation.

Case Texts: Violence, Memory, and Mexican Modernity

Roberto Bolaño's *2666* (2004) and Elena Poniatowska's *La Noche de Tlatelolco* (1971) address pivotal moments of collective violence in modern Mexican history, making them well suited for examining how literary engagement may generate experiences analogous to virtual dark tourism. Both texts immerse readers in narratives shaped by death, disappearance, and structural harm, while directing attention beyond individual suffering to broader social and political conditions marked by impunity, erasure, and contested memory.

2666 centres on feminicides in the fictional border city of Santa Teresa, closely paralleling the systematic murders of women in Ciudad Juárez on the border with the United States (Volk & Schlotterbeck, 2007). Through its fragmented structure and shifting narrative perspectives, the novel explores how extreme violence becomes normalised, how perpetrators remain obscured or unaccountable, and how victims are rendered anonymous and forgotten (Mathew, 2016; Scott, 2017). Readers become witnesses to violence that remains unresolved, prompting discomfort and ethical reflection rather than clear narrative closure (Rodríguez, 2014).

In contrast, *La Noche de Tlatelolco* documents the 1968 massacre of student protesters in Mexico City using testimonies, official records, and media extracts (Harris, 2005). By focusing upon voices excluded from official accounts, the book positions readers as witnesses to state violence that was long denied. Its documentary style draws attention to the gap between public forgetting and ongoing personal loss, encouraging reflection on national memory, responsibility, and how violence is remembered.

Together, these texts do not simply recount historical violence but interrogate how such events are remembered, silenced, or distorted. As narrative environments, they invite sustained emotional and ethical engagement, making them particularly suitable for examining how reading can produce experiential processes associated with virtual dark tourism. Rather than relying on physical proximity to sites of trauma, both works generate mediated encounters that unfold through interpretation, affective response, and reflective meaning-making.

Towards a Reader Experience Model for Virtual Dark Tourism

Building on the preceding discussion, this study focuses on how literary reading may follow a process comparable to dark-tourism experience. Research on physical dark tourism commonly describes visitor engagement as unfolding across three broad phases: anticipatory framing before the visit, affective and cognitive immersion at the site, and reflective interpretation after departure (Miles, 2014; Prentice & Andersen, 2007). These phases highlight that dark-tourism experience is not confined to a single moment but develops over time through emotional and interpretive work.

Literary reading can be understood in similar temporal terms. Before beginning a text, readers often approach it with expectations, motivations, and ethical orientation shaped by prior knowledge, cultural context, or awareness of difficult subject matter. During reading, emotional and cognitive engagement deepens as readers encounter scenes of violence, loss, or injustice, prompting responses such as empathy, discomfort, shock, and critical reflection. After reading, interpretation frequently continues through reflection, discussion, comparison with historical events, and reconsideration of personal or social values (Aggarwal, Lim, Dandotiya & Kukreja, 2024).

This perspective underpins the development of the Virtual Dark Tourism Reading Model (VDTRM). Rather than equating reading with physical visitation, the model translates the visitor-experience framework into a reader-focused process in which narrative engagement replaces spatial movement. The VDTRM conceptualises literary dark-tourism experience as unfolding across three stages—anticipation, immersion, and reflection—through which emotions, ethical judgement, and meaning-making are generated and sustained over time.

Table 1. The Virtual Dark Tourism Reading Model

Phase	*Core Focus*	*Dominant Processes*	*Indicative Reader Behaviours*	*Dark-Tourism Analogue*
1. Anticipatory Imagination	Pre-reading expectations and orientation	Projecting meaning, preparing emotionally, ethically positioning the self	Selecting the text; anticipating thematic intensity; approaching reading with seriousness	Pre-visit anticipation and moral framing
2. Immersive Encounter	Emotional-cognitive involvement during reading	Empathy, shock, ethical evaluation, reflective monitoring	Pausing to process; rereading sections; feeling sadness, discomfort, or tension	On-site immersive affective experience

3. Reflective Re-engagement	Meaning-making after reading	Interpretation, ethical reasoning, comparative sense-making	Discussing the text; connecting fiction to real histories; writing posts or notes	Post-visit reflection and commemoration

The first stage, *Anticipatory Imagination*, refers to the expectations, motivations, and emotional orientation readers bring to a text prior to reading. The second stage, *Immersive Encounter*, occurs during reading and involves sustained emotional and cognitive engagement, including reactions such as discomfort, empathy, or moral reflection. The third stage, *Reflective Re-engagement*, takes place after reading, when interpretation continues through reflection, discussion, and the integration of the narrative into broader understandings of history and responsibility.

Together, these stages illustrate how literary texts can generate and sustain forms of emotional and ethical engagement commonly associated with dark tourism, even when the encounter is mediated entirely through narrative rather than physical presence at a site.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative interpretivist design to examine how readers engaged emotionally, cognitively, and ethically with literary representations of violence in Bolaño's *2666* and Poniatowska's *La Noche de Tlatelolco*. Interpretivism assumes that meaning is socially constructed and negotiated rather than individually isolated (Jennings, 2010; Saldaña, 2015). The study does not seek to measure literary impact, but to explore how readers interpret and make sense of traumatic historical narratives, focusing on their experiential similarities to dark tourism.

The methodology was guided by three questions:

1. What motivates readers to engage with literary representations of violence and memory in ways that resemble dark-tourism curiosity and anticipation?
2. What emotional and cognitive responses arise during the reading process and how do these reflect the immersive encounter associated with dark tourism?
3. How do readers reflect on and interpret these experiences after reading and to what extent do these reflections align with post-visit meaning-making in dark tourism?

Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected through purposive sampling from a long-running book club situated at *El Péndulo* bookstore and café in Mexico City. Book clubs operate as interpretive communities (Long, 2003), allowing readers to share, compare, and negotiate meaning collectively. This made them an appropriate setting for analysing responses to the two selected works.

Twelve adult members (seven women, five men) aged between 27–61 took part. All were fluent Spanish speakers and regular readers of contemporary Latin American literature. Participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained. While not statistically representative, the sample provided an information-rich context capable of generating variation in interpretive experience. Thematic sufficiency was reached after ten interviews, with the final two confirming saturation.

Procedure

Data collection took place over sixteen weeks, from 2 June to 21 September 2025, combining independent reading, group discussion, and individual reflection. The extended timeframe allowed responses to develop gradually rather than being shaped by immediate prompts or short-term exposure.

Phase 1: Orientation (Weeks 1–2)

Participants attended an orientation session, completed a brief questionnaire, and recorded initial expectations. The term 'dark tourism' was intentionally not mentioned to avoid conceptual priming. This phase established baseline interpretive orientation — capturing expectations, projected emotional stance, and anticipated difficulty before any engagement with the texts occurred.

Phase 2: Independent Reading (Weeks 3–8)

Participants read the texts at their own pace and kept brief reading journals to note emotional responses or moments they found important. A private WhatsApp group was used only to maintain contact and did not guide interpretation. This phase captured individual emotional reactions as they emerged naturally, recognising that early meaning-making in reading often takes place privately and on an individual level.

Phase 3: Collective Discussion (Weeks 9–12)

Four book-club–style sessions were held. The researcher took part as a participant-observer and recorded field notes on emerging themes, changes in tone, moments of agreement or disagreement, and the overall emotional atmosphere. This stage focused on shared meaning-making, observing how individual interpretations changed, came together, or differed through group interaction.

Phase 4: Individual Interviews (Weeks 13–15)

Twelve semi-structured interviews (60–90 minutes) were conducted at *El Péndulo* or via secure video call. The interviews focused on reading motivations, emotional reactions, ways of interpreting the texts, and reflections after finishing them. Again, the term

'dark tourism' was deliberately avoided to prevent influencing responses. This stage returned the focus to individual reflection, allowing participants to clarify and develop their interpretations after the group discussions.

Phase 5: Debriefing (Week 16)

A final member-checking session was held in which participants responded to the main themes that had emerged. Only at this stage was the concept of virtual dark tourism introduced, allowing participants to reflect on whether the idea matched their experience. This final phase supported retrospective evaluation of the framework and confirmed consent for the use of anonymised quotations.

Data Handling and Translation

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim in Spanish and anonymised. English translation followed the cross-linguistic protocol recommended by Lopez, Figueroa, Connor & Maliski (2008), using forward translation and selective back-translation to preserve semantic and cultural nuance. Field notes and journal extracts were catalogued using unique identifiers to ensure traceability, while data were stored on encrypted institutional servers.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This involved an iterative process of becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, grouping related codes, developing themes, and reviewing and refining those themes to build a coherent interpretation of the findings.

Research quality was supported in the following ways:
Credibility: themes were reviewed through peer discussion and repeated engagement with the data
Dependability and confirmability: analytic memos and reflexive notes were kept throughout the analysis process
Transferability: rich contextual description was provided to allow readers to assess the relevance of the findings to other settings

RESULTS

Analysis of the data revealed three interconnected stages of reader experience, each linked to a different moment in the reading process: anticipation before reading, immersion during reading, and reflection after reading. These stages unfolded gradually over time and align with the VDTRM. Rather than functioning as fixed or separate phases, participants described them as part of a continuous process in which emotional engagement, interpretation, and ethical reflection deepened as reading progressed.

Anticipation and Motivations (Pre-Reading)

Before beginning the texts, participants expressed clear expectations about emotional difficulty, moral seriousness, and the likelihood of encountering disturbing material. Although the texts were assigned, readers still framed their participation in personal terms, such as wanting to gain knowledge, better understand Mexican history, or confront uncomfortable realities.

This anticipatory orientation reflects forms of emotional preparation and moral positioning similar to those identified in pre-visit dark-tourism research. Participants approached the reading task with seriousness rather than casual or recreational expectations, suggesting that interpretive responsibility was assumed even before contact with the texts.

The numbers shown in parentheses in Table 2, 3 and 4 indicate how many participants expressed each theme. These figures represent participant prevalence rather than the frequency or intensity of responses.

Table 2. Participant Motivations and Expectations Prior to Reading

THEME	*ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTATION*
SEARCH FOR KNOWLEDGE (10)	"I wanted to know about the Tlatelolco massacre and what's been going on in Juárez." *(P5, 8 Jun 2025)*
INTELLECTUAL AND MORAL CHALLENGE (10)	"The idea of a complex narrative that tackles heavy themes was intriguing." *(P4, 6 Jun 2025)*
CULTURAL CONNECTION (8)	"These books felt important for me as a Mexican." *(P2, 10 Jun 2025)*
ANTICIPATION AND UNEASE (9)	"I knew it wouldn't be a light read." *(P4, 9 Jun 2025)*

These findings suggest that virtual dark-tourism processes can begin prior to reading itself, as expectations, cultural background, and ethical awareness already shape how meaning is approached and formed.

Immersive Engagement (During Reading)

During reading, participants reported a wide range of emotional and cognitive responses, and in some cases physical reactions. Engagement was active rather than passive, involving ongoing judgement, reflection, and comparison. Readers described pausing, re-reading sections, stopping to absorb difficult passages, or temporarily stepping away when the material felt overwhelming.

This indicates that reading required sustained interpretive effort rather than immediate emotional reaction alone. Although the experience was mediated through text rather than physical presence, immersion operated in similar ways: strong emotional response was accompanied by real-time reflection and meaning-making.

Table 3. Participant Responses During the Reading Process

THEME	*ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTATION*
SADNESS AND EMPATHY (7)	"The testimonies were heartbreaking." *(P1, 22 Jul 2025)*
HORROR AND FEAR (8)	"It scares me that something like that could happen in my country." *(P10, 30 Jul 2025)*
ANGER AND MORAL OUTRAGE (6)	"Nothing changes." *(P7, 15 Jul 2025)*
LEARNING AND UNDERSTANDING (8)	"I had never grasped this before." *(P9, 4 Aug 2025)*
CRITICAL REFLECTION (7)	"It made me think who gets to tell the story." *(P3, 18 Jul 2025)*
PHYSICAL REACTIONS (3)	"Some parts made me feel a little sick." *(P2, 4 Aug 2025)*

This immersive phase combined emotional activation with interpretive reasoning. Readers actively evaluated harm, power, voice, and representation as they read, consistent with the VDTRM's understanding of immersion as the mediated equivalent of an on-site dark-tourism encounter.

Reflection and Meaning-Making (Post-Reading)

After completing the texts, participants described continued reflection that extended beyond the act of reading. This occurred through private journaling, group discussion, sharing passages digitally, and drawing connections to contemporary social and political issues in Mexico.

Meaning-making became more relational and abstract at this stage, as participants linked textual violence to broader structures such as impunity, public memory, and ongoing social harm. This shift reflects a movement away from immediate emotional response toward slower, evaluative interpretation and ethical positioning.

Table 4. Themes of Reflective Meaning-Making in the Post-Reading Phase

THEME	*ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTATION*
PERSONAL GROWTH AND EMPATHY (7)	"It has made me more aware of the ongoing struggles for justice." *(P4, 25 Aug 2025)*
CRITICAL AWARENESS AND DESENSITISATION (10)	"I hope I am less desensitized to the horror we see every day." *(P6, 2 Sep 2025)*
MORTALITY AWARENESS (9)	"Most of the victims were young and not expecting to die." *(P11, 10 Sep 2025)*
SHARING AND COMMUNICATION (6)	"I couldn't stop talking about 2666." *(P3, 28 Aug 2025)*
PRIVATE REFLECTION (7)	"I keep revisiting passages; it's personal." *(P12, 15 Sep 2025)*

Post-reading engagement therefore involved not only emotional residue but continued interpretive integration, extending ethical reflection beyond the textual encounter itself.

Synthesis

Taken together, these findings reveal a clear temporal pattern that closely parallels stages identified in physical dark-tourism research. Participants did not approach reading as a detached or purely aesthetic activity. Instead, they anticipated emotional difficulty, experienced deep engagement during reading, and continued reflecting afterward.

The VDTRM captures this process by demonstrating how literary encounters can generate emotional involvement, ethical reflection, and sustained meaning-making over time. This supports the view that virtual dark tourism is not defined by physical presence at a site, but by the interpretive and affective processes through which individuals engage with representations of violence and loss.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that literary reading can generate experiences comparable to those described in dark-tourism research, even in the absence of physical presence at a site. Through reading alone, participants experienced emotional response, ethical reflection, and sustained meaning-making. This supports existing scholarship that understands dark tourism as a culturally mediated engagement with death and suffering, rather than an activity defined solely by location (White & Frew, 2013). The results also indicate that virtual dark tourism is not limited to technologically immersive formats such as virtual reality or online memorials, but can also emerge through literary narratives, where imagination, empathy, and interpretive effort create a sense of proximity to violence without physical travel.

These findings contribute to broader debates about what constitutes touristic engagement in contexts where encounters with place, history, and trauma increasingly occur through mediated and non-physical forms. Tourism research has long recognised that understandings of places and past events are shaped not only through direct visitation, but through the circulation of narratives,

images, and shared imaginaries that frame interpretation over time (Salazar, 2010). This study extends that perspective by showing that literature can function as a mediating space in which representations of violence and memory are not passively received but actively interpreted and negotiated by readers.

Rather than experiencing the texts as isolated moments, participants engaged in a process of sustained emotional processing and ethical reflection that unfolded over time. The VDTRM captures this temporal structure by illustrating how meaning develops across anticipation, immersive engagement, and post-reading reflection. This aligns with existing research suggesting that engagement with difficult heritage and traumatic histories tends to occur through recursive, interpretive processes rather than immediate or singular encounters (Light, 2017; Miles, 2002; Stone, 2012; Tumarkin, 2013).

The findings further suggest that the significance of dark tourism may lie less in physical presence at a site and more in the interpretive work individuals undertake when engaging with narratives of violence. If dark tourism is understood as a moral encounter with death, memory, and responsibility (Buda & McIntosh, 2013), then literature can also serve as a space where such ethical engagement takes place. From this perspective, tourism experience is shaped not by movement through space, but by how individuals engage with stories of harm, injustice, and loss. In this study, the texts enabled readers to reflect on structural violence, impunity, and national memory, demonstrating how symbolic narratives can support sustained and critical reflection.

Finally, the findings highlight the need for tourism theory to more fully incorporate narrative and representational media as meaningful sites of tourist-like engagement. As Tumarkin (2013) argues, narratives play an active role in producing and circulating memory rather than merely recording it. Literary reading therefore expands how dark tourism may be conceptualised, showing that emotional and ethical engagement with past violence can emerge even when the "site" exists through discourse rather than physical location. Future research could build on this work by comparing different narrative forms—such as literature, testimonial archives, or documentary film—to explore how each shapes emotional response, moral judgement, and the longer-term effects of dark-tourism engagement.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how literary reading can function as a form of virtual dark tourism by analysing how readers engaged emotionally, cognitively, and ethically with Bolaño's *2666* and Poniatowska's *La Noche de Tlatelolco*. The findings show that reading can generate experiential patterns similar to those discussed in dark-tourism research. Participants consistently moved through three interconnected phases—anticipation before reading, immersive engagement during reading, and reflection after completion—demonstrating that virtual dark tourism does not depend on physical presence at a site, but on the interpretive and emotional work involved in engaging with representations of past violence. The VDTRM offers a conceptual framework for understanding how this process unfolds over time.

While literature cannot reproduce the sensory materiality of on-site visitation, it provides a representational space in which readers encounter death, loss, and injustice through narrative. Within this space, emotional response, ethical questioning, and reflective meaning-making develop gradually rather than instantaneously. Readers did not approach the texts as detached observers; instead, they engaged as active interpreters who paused, revisited passages, and connected the narratives to broader social and historical contexts. This form of engagement suggests that experiences commonly associated with dark tourism can emerge through symbolic and mediated encounters, where meaning is constructed through imagination, empathy, and sustained reflection rather than spatial proximity.

More broadly, the findings contribute to ongoing debates about the scope of dark tourism by demonstrating how representational media such as literature can function as meaningful sites of engagement with difficult pasts. By shifting attention from location to interpretive practice, this study highlights the importance of narrative, ethical reflection, and emotional involvement in shaping how individuals relate to histories of violence. In doing so, it extends understandings of dark tourism beyond travel-based practices and positions literary reading as a context in which processes of remembrance, moral positioning, and longer-term meaning-making can occur.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study is limited by its cultural and sample specificity. Future research could examine how the VDTRM operates in different linguistic, cultural, or national contexts. Comparative studies across narrative media—such as film, testimonial archives, digital memory platforms, or virtual reconstructions—could further clarify how different forms shape the depth, character, and duration of emotional and ethical engagement. Longitudinal research would also be valuable in assessing whether these reflective processes persist over time or contribute to broader changes in understanding and attitude.

Closing Reflections

Taken together, the findings show that virtual dark tourism can develop through literary reading in ways that extend beyond immediate emotional response and lead to longer-term reflection. Literature offers a space in which readers can encounter traumatic histories symbolically, maintain a reflective distance, and gradually relate these experiences to wider questions of history, memory, and responsibility. Engagement with violence and loss is therefore not limited to physical memorial sites but continues through practices such as reading, discussion, and personal reflection.

Research on physical dark-tourism sites has shown that encounters with histories of violence often prompt ethical reflection that extends beyond the moment of visitation (Soulard, Stewart, Larson & Samson, 2022). This study suggests that similar processes can occur through literary engagement, even in the absence of physical travel. Participants continued to reflect on the texts after reading, revisited key themes, shared their responses with others, and connected the narratives to contemporary social concerns. Overall, the findings support the view that the significance of dark tourism lies less in physical presence at a site and more in the interpretive and emotional work involved in engaging with difficult histories. In this context, literature functions as a meaningful representational space that enables sustained reflection, ethical awareness, and the ongoing circulation of cultural memory.

REFERENCES

1) Aggarwal, A., Lim, W. M., Dandotiya, R., & Kukreja, V. (2024). Dark tourism through the lens of attachment theory and domestic tourists. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 26(1), e2609. https://doi.org/10.1002/jtr.2609
2) Ashworth, G.J., & Hartmann, R. (2005) *Horror and Human Tragedy Revisited: the Management of Sites of Atrocities for Tourism.* Cognizant.
3) Ashworth, G. J., & Isaac, R. K. (2015). Have we illuminated the dark? Shifting perspectives on 'dark' tourism. *Tourism Recreation Research*, *40*(3), 316–325. https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2015.1075726
4) Basaraba, N. (2023). The rise of paranormal investigations as virtual dark tourism on YouTube. *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, *19*(2), 287–309. https://doi.org/10.1080/1743873X.2023.2268746
5) Best, M. (2007). Norfolk Island: thanatourism, history and visitor emotions, *Shima*, 1(2), 30–48.
6) Biran, A., Poria, Y., & Oren. G. (2011). Sought experiences at (dark) heritage sites. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 38, 820–41. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2010.12.001
7) Bolan, P., Simone-Charteris, M. (2018). 'Shining a Digital Light on the Dark': Harnessing Online Media to Improve the Dark Tourism Experience. In: R. Stone, P., Hartmann, R., Seaton, T., Sharpley, R., White, L. (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Dark Tourism Studies.* Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-47566-4_30
8) Bolaño, R. (2004). *2666*. Picador.
9) Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport*, Exercise and Health, 11(4), 589–597. https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806
10) Brown, L. (2016). Tourism and pilgrimage: Paying homage to literary heroes. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 18(2),167–175. https://doi.org/10.1002/jtr.2043
11) Buda, D & McIntosh, A.J (2013). Dark tourism and voyeurism: Tourist arrested for 'spying' in Iran. *Special Issue: New Perspectives on Dark Tourism. International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 7(3), 214 - 226. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCTHR-07-2012-0059
12) Busby, G. and Devereux, H. (2015). Dark tourism in context: the diary of Anne Frank, *European Journal of Tourism, Hospitality and Recreation*, 6(1) 27-38. https://ejthr.citur.uma.pt/index.php/ejthr/issue/view/27
13) Chronis, A. (2005). Coconstructing heritage at the Gettysburg storyscape. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 32(2), 386-406. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2004.07.009
14) Collins-Kreiner, N. (2010) Researching Pilgrimage: Continuity and Transformations. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 37, 440-456. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2009.10.016
15) Craig-Wight, A. (2020). Visitor perceptions of European holocaust heritage: a social media analysis, *Tourism Management*, 81,10412, 2-12. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2020.104142
16) Dunkley, R., Morgan, N., & Westwood, S. (2011). Visiting the trenches: Exploring meanings and motivations in battlefield tourism. *Tourism Management*, 32(4), 860-868. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2010.07.011
17) Farmaki, A. (2013). Dark tourism revisited: a supply/demand conceptualisation. *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 7, (3), 281-292. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCTHR-05-2012-0030
18) Gerrig, R.J. (1998). *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading*. Routledge.
19) Goodson, J. & Jarratt, D. (2025). Lieux d'imagination and historical fiction: The lure and blur of the real in media tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 115, 104035. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2025.104035
20) Hassapopoulou, M. (2018). Playing with history: collective memory, national trauma, and dark tourism in virtual reality docugames. *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, *16*(4), 365–392. https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2018.1519207
21) Harris, C. (2005). Remembering 1968 in Mexico: Elena Poniatowska's La Noche de Tlatelolco as Documentary Narrative. *Bulletin of Latin American Research,* 24(4) 481-495.
22) Ivanova, P., & Light, D. (2017). 'It's not that we like death or anything': exploring the motivations and experiences of visitors to a lighter dark tourism attraction. *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, 13(4), 356-369. https://doi.org/10.1080/1743873X.2017.1371181
23) Jennings, G. (2010), *Tourism Research*, Wiley.
24) Lennon, J., & Foley, M. (1996) *Dark Tourism – The Attraction of Death and Disaster*, Continuum.

25) Light, D. (2017). Progress in dark tourism and thanatourism research: An uneasy relationship with heritage tourism. *Tourism Management*, 61, 275-301. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2017.01.011
26) Long, E. (2003). *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life.* University of Chicago Press.
27) Lopez, G.I., Figueroa, M., Connor, S.E. & Maliski, S.L. (2008). Translation barriers in conducting qualitative research with Spanish speakers, *Qualitative Health Research*, 18(12), 1729-1737. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732308325857
28) Mathew, S. (2016). Ciudad Juárez in Roberto Bolaño's 2666: Mexico's Violent Cradle of Modernity. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, *57*(4), 402-416. https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2015.1091287
29) McDaniel, K.N. (2018). *Virtual Dark Tourism: Ghost Roads*. Palgrave Macmillan.
30) Moon, H., Jongsik, Y., Chua, B. L. & Han, H. (2022). Armchair tourism: Exploring individuals' innovative travel experience in the with-corona era. *Tourism Management*, 93, 104582. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2022.104582.
31) Miles, W.F. (2002). Auschwitz: museum interpretation and darker tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research, 29*, 1175-1178. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383(02)00054-3.
32) Miles, S. (2014). Battlefield sites as dark tourism attractions: an analysis of experience. *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, *9*(2), 134–147. https://doi.org/10.1080/1743873X.2013.871017
33) Nawijn, J., Isaac, R. K., Gridnevskiy, K., & van Liempt, A. (2015). Holocaust concentration camp memorial sites: An exploratory study into expected emotional response. Current Issues in Tourism, 21(2), 175-190. https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2015.1058343
34) Podoshen, J. S., Venkatesh, V., Wallin, J., Andrzejewski, S. A., & Jin, Z. (2015). Dystopian dark tourism: An exploratory examination. *Tourism Management,* 51*,* 316-328. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2015.05.002
35) Poniatowska, E. (1971). *La Noche de Tlatelolco*. Ediciones Era.
36) Prentice, R., & Andersen, V. (2007). Interpreting heritage essentialisms: familiarity and felt history, Tourism Management, 28, 661–676. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2006.02.008
37) Reijnders, S. (2016) Stories that move: fiction, imagination, tourism. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 19, (6), 672-689. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549415597922
38) Robb E. (2009). Violence and recreation: vacationing in the realm of dark tourism. *Anthropology and Humanism*, 34 (1), 51-60. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1409.2009.01023.x
39) Rodríguez, F.A. (2014) Fear, subjectivity, and capital: Sergio Chejfec's The Dark and Roberto Bolaño's 2666, *Parallax*, 20 (4), 345-359. https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2014.957550
40) Salazar, N. B. (2010). *Envisioning Eden: Mobilizing Imaginaries in Tourism and Beyond*. Berghahn Books.
41) Saldaña, J. (2015). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers,* SAGE.
42) Santoso, H. B., Quarshie, B., Ukpabi, D., & Wang, J.-C. (2024). Body and mind in virtual dark tourism experiences and artwork creations: Embodied cognition reaction perspectives. In K. Berezina, L. Nixon, & A. Tuomi (Eds.), *Information and communication technologies in tourism 2024: ENTER 2024 International eTourism Conference, Izmir, Türkiye, January 17–19* (pp. 115–127). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-58839-6_8
43) Scott, B. (2017). Roberto Bolaño's 2666: serial murder and narrative necrosis. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 59(3), pp. 307-318. https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2017.1378614
44) Seaton, A. V. (2002). Thanatourism's final frontiers? Visits to cemeteries, churchyards and funerary sites as sacred and secular pilgrimage. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 27(2), 73-82. https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2002.11081223
45) Sharpley, R. (2005) Travels to the Edge of Darkness: Towards a Typology of Dark Tourism, in C. Ryan, et al (eds), *Taking Tourism to the Limits: Issues, Concepts and Managerial Perspectives*, Oxford: Elsevier, 217-228.
46) Soulard, J., Stewart, W., Larson, M. & Samson, E. (2022) Dark tourism and social mobilization: transforming travelers after visiting a holocaust museum, *Journal of Travel Research*, 62(4), 820-840. https://doi.org/10.1177/00472875221105871
47) Stone, P. R. (2006). A dark tourism spectrum: Towards a typology of death and macabre related tourist sites, attractions and exhibitions. *Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal, 54*(2), 145–160.
48) Stone, P. R. (2012). Dark tourism and significant other death: Towards a model of mortality mediation. *Annals of Tourism Research, 39*(3), 1565–1587. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2012.04.007
49) Stone, P., & Sharpley, R. (2008). Consuming dark tourism: a thanatological perspective, *Annals of Tourism Research*, 35(2), 574-595. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2008.02.003
50) Sturgis, A. H. (2018). "Some lingering influence in the shunned house": H. P. Lovecraft's three invitations to dark tourism. In K. N. McDaniel (Ed.), *Virtual Dark Tourism: Ghost Roads* (pp. 21-39). Palgrave Macmillan.
51) Tumarkin, M. (2013). *Traumascapes: The Power and Fate of Places Transformed by Tragedy*. Melbourne University Publishing.
52) Volk, S.S.. & Schlotterbeck. M.E. (2007). Gender, order, and femicide. Reading the popular culture of murder in Ciudad Juárez. *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies,* 32(1), 53-86. https://doi.org/10.1525/azt.2007.32.1.53

53) White, L., & Frew, E. A. (2013). *Dark tourism and place identity: Managing and interpreting dark places*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203134900

54) Zheng, C., Zhang, J., Qiu, M., Guo, Y., & Zhang, H. (2019). From mixed emotional experience to spiritual meaning: learning in dark tourism places. *Tourism Geographies*, *22*(1), 105–126. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2019.1618903