

The Psychological Consequences of Attachment to Dark Places: A Scoping Review



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Background

- Place attachment (Low & Altman, 1992) – the emotional bond with meaningful places – has been conceptualised in numerous ways (see Manzo & Devine-Wright, 2013).
- Scannell and Gifford (2010) developed the tripartite model, comprised of three dimensions: **the person** (who is forming the attachment?), **the place** (what is the attachment to?), and **the process** (how is this attachment manifested and expressed?).
- The heightened well-being associated with strong, positive attachments is a key part of this process.
 - Improvements in well-being are informed by a number of psychological benefits, including enhanced memories, strengthened sense of identity, and the experience of positive emotions (e.g. Scannell & Gifford, 2017).
 - These bonds can also help to alleviate death anxiety (Chen et al., 2024).
- Yet research typically focuses on positive places, with negative places – including those associated with death and disaster (i.e. dark tourism; Foley & Lennon, 1996) - often overlooked (Gibbeson, 2020; Manzo, 2014).
 - Dark Tourism covers camps of genocide (e.g. Auschwitz) at the darkest end of the spectrum, and ‘fun factories’ (e.g. The Dungeons™) at the lighter end – with battlegrounds, burial sites, and former prisons in between (Stone, 2006)
 - How do people form bonds with these places? Are these bonds expressed in different ways from the more standard, positive places?
- To ensure a complete understanding of place attachment and the impact that these bonds can have upon us, the tripartite model should be extended to all places that make up our world

Methodology

A scoping review was conducted to map out our current understanding of dark tourism and place attachment. This review set out to:

Explore the psychological benefits and repercussions that arise from visiting dark places (RQ1)

Understand how place attachment (or other person-place concepts) may mediate such consequences (RQ2)

Guides: Arksey and O’Malley’s (2005) five stages for conducting review, the SPIDER framework for extracting data, and PRISMA-ScR guidelines for reporting

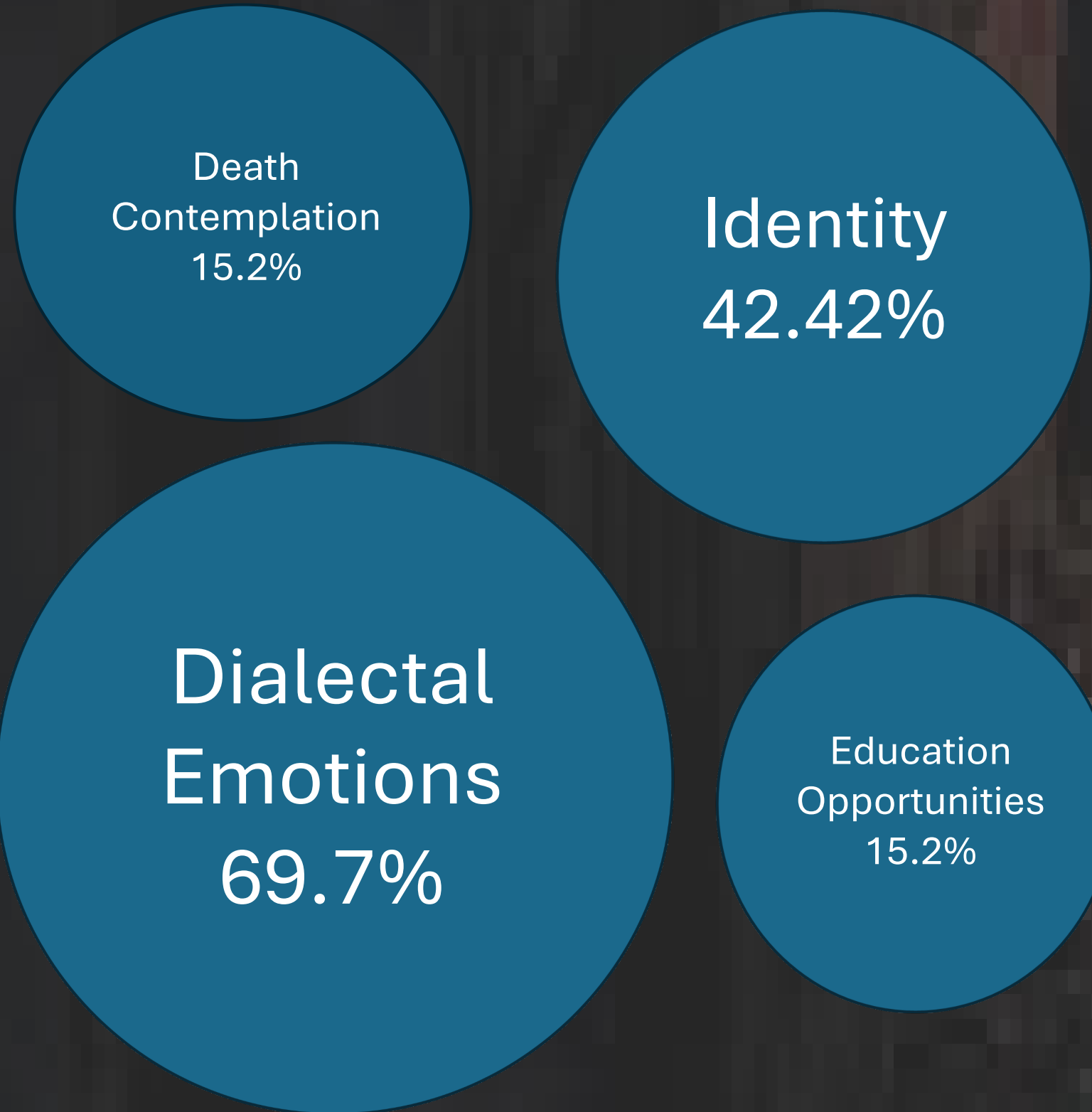
Databases: EBSCOHost, Science Direct

Indicative Search Terms: Dark Tourism (e.g. thanatourism, abandoned places), Place Attachment (e.g. place attachment, sense of place), Psychological Consequences (e.g. subjective well-being, death anxiety)

Inclusion Criteria: Peer-reviewed primary research (with access to full text), written in (or translated into) English, with an adult sample and at least one psychological consequence being studied, published from 2015

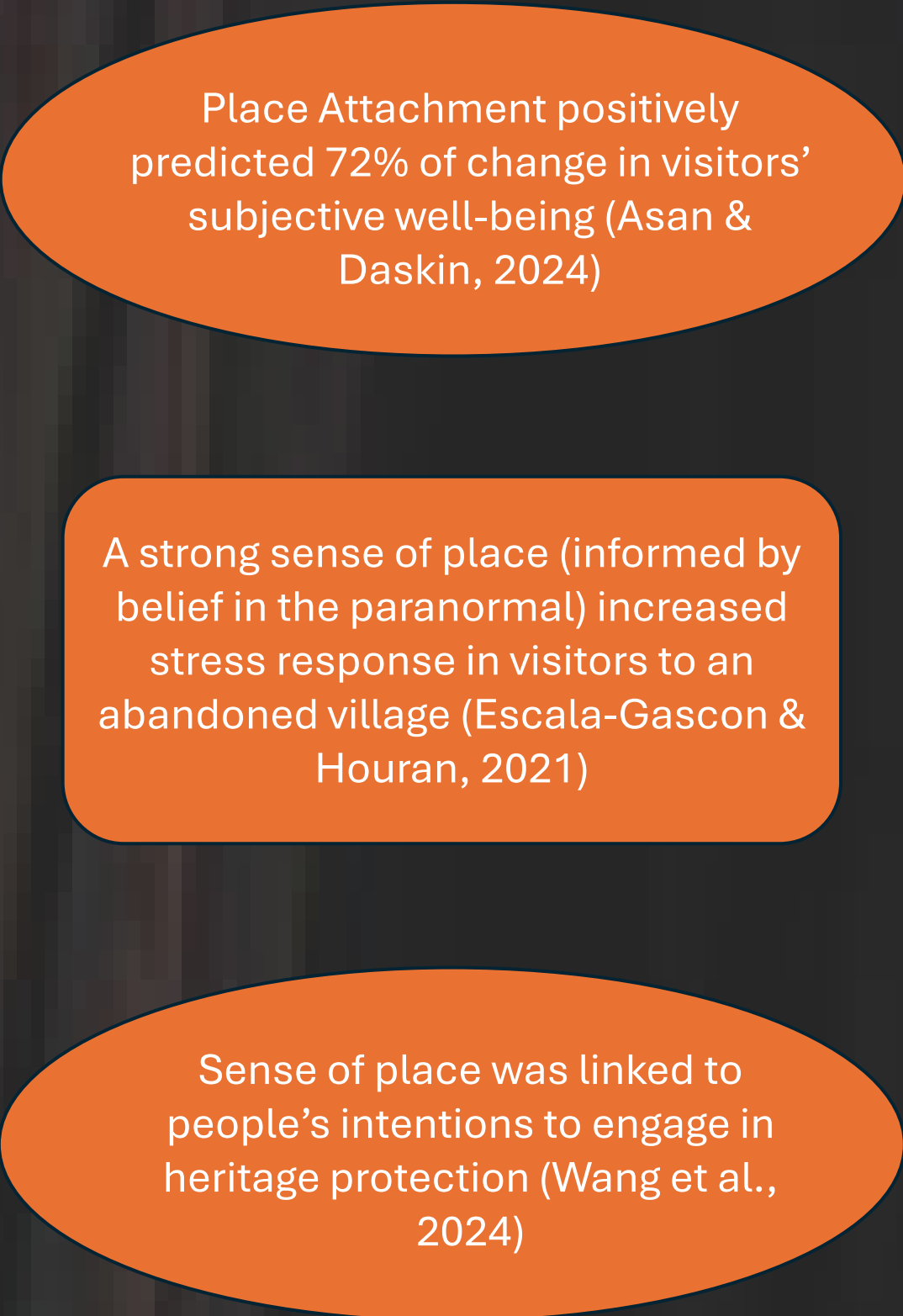


Findings – RQ1



- Emotional experiences were the most common psychological consequences (23/33 studies) – with participants reporting negative (e.g. anger, sadness) emotions early in their visits, and more positive emotions (e.g. hopefulness) as they engaged with exhibits and narratives (e.g. Sun & Lv, 2025)
- Strengthening one’s sense of identity was second most common (14/33) - be that their religious, national, or even human identity
- With five studies each, participants reflected on opportunities to learn as well as reflecting on existential issues such as life and death
- Other consequences included strengthening memories (N=3), improved quality of life (N=3), and changes in stress/resilience (N=2)

Findings – RQ2



Concluding Remarks

- The psychological consequences here are similar to those identified in relation to attachment to positive places – though there was more of a focus on death contemplation than alleviating death anxiety specifically.
- The experience of both positive and negative emotions helped to facilitate overall experiences and reflections post-visit, creating a sense of togetherness and solidarity
- While person-place concepts were not applied consistently (7/33 studies), there is justification for using such frameworks more explicitly in future research to better understand engagement with dark places, which should in turn expand our understanding of place attachment itself

Further Info

