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Explaining the Indigenous Dimensions of Dark Tourism in Iran: An Interpretive Narrative of Experts' Experiences and Perceptions

ABSTRACT

Dark tourism, as an emerging branch of the tourism industry, encompasses visiting sites associated with death, disasters, and human suffering, and has been developed in many countries for purposes such as education, historical remembrance, and even revenue generation. Despite Iran's rich historical, cultural, and natural capacities in this domain, the country lacks a comprehensive indigenous framework for guiding and managing this type of tourism. The present study, adopting a qualitative approach and employing thematic analysis, identified the indigenous dimensions and components of dark tourism in Iran and provided strategies for mitigating its negative consequences. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with tourism experts, managers, and researchers, and subsequently organized into main and sub-themes through open, axial, and selective coding. Findings revealed five main dimensions: infrastructural and developmental factors, marketing and information dissemination, economic and investment aspects, cultural-social and religious considerations, and managerial and policy requirements, which play the most significant role in shaping and guiding dark tourism. In addition, strategies such as improving physical and digital infrastructures, designing ethics-oriented marketing models, training and empowering human resources, and utilizing modern technologies (such as augmented reality) to provide a controlled and meaningful experience were proposed. By addressing the existing research gap, the results of this study offer an indigenous framework for policymakers, managers, and tourism industry practitioners to purposefully and sustainably harness the potential of dark tourism in promoting the cultural, social, and economic development of the country.

Keywords: Dark Tourism, Thematic Analysis, Iran, Indigenous Framework, Tourism Policy-Making

Introduction

Dark tourism, commonly defined as the visitation of sites associated with death, suffering, or disaster, has emerged as one of the most debated niches in tourism studies over the past three decades. The concept, first systematically articulated in the 1990s, has been linked to places of tragedy, genocide, war, and natural disasters, where visitors seek not only leisure but also confrontation with mortality and collective memory [1-3]. Scholars have debated whether dark tourism represents a form of commodification of death or whether it plays an important role in cultural remembrance and education [4, 5]. While global literature is rich with theoretical and empirical insights, the conceptualization of dark tourism in diverse cultural contexts remains underdeveloped, particularly in countries like Iran, which possess a complex historical and cultural landscape of tragedies, wars, and religious events [6, 7].

The academic evolution of dark tourism research has highlighted tensions between ethical dilemmas, market-driven motives, and cultural needs. Early foundational works positioned dark tourism as a phenomenon both intriguing and

controversial, presenting challenges for researchers and practitioners [1, 2]. Subsequent theoretical contributions explored thanatourism, heritage dissonance, and the commodification of trauma [8-10]. These perspectives underline the duality of dark tourism as both a commercial enterprise and a vehicle for collective memory, moral reflection, and socio-political expression [11, 12].

The expansion of research in recent years has been driven by the need to better understand the motivations of visitors and the experiences that dark sites generate. For example, studies have shown that individuals may visit dark sites for educational, reflective, or entertainment purposes [13-15]. Other research has pointed to the role of emotional and cognitive engagement, emphasizing how fear, empathy, and imagination contribute to meaning-making at such destinations [16, 17]. At the same time, researchers have increasingly turned to cultural and national contexts to highlight the unique socio-political and historical elements that shape the phenomenon [18-20].

Dark tourism has often been criticized as voyeuristic, particularly when tragedies are packaged as entertainment for visitors [21, 22]. This criticism aligns with broader debates on the ethics of commodifying suffering and the role of tourism operators in shaping the narratives presented to visitors [23, 24]. Nonetheless, proponents argue that when responsibly managed, dark tourism serves as a vital tool for remembrance, education, and fostering empathy [25, 26]. The balance between these perspectives—commercialization versus commemoration—remains central to academic discourse.

In global contexts, scholars have identified different typologies and gradations of dark tourism. Sharpley [8] and Stone [5] developed frameworks distinguishing between “lighter” and “darker” forms, depending on the proximity to death, authenticity of sites, and intensity of visitor experiences. These distinctions are crucial, as they highlight the diversity of dark tourism experiences, ranging from disaster museums and war memorials to sites of mass atrocities. Similarly, Muzaini [27] emphasized how dark tourism interacts with postmodern heritage discourses, where history is reconstructed, mediated, and sometimes contested for tourist consumption.

Motivational studies have revealed further complexities. Yan [13] demonstrated that visitors’ motivations intertwine with their actual experiences in ways that shape personal reflections and collective identities. Similarly, research on youth motivations in Malaysia identified curiosity, education, and cultural affiliation as critical factors [15]. Titta [28] also explored motivational aspects in the context of the “House of Terror” museum, demonstrating how individuals engage with sites as both learners and consumers. These findings resonate with observations that dark tourism offers a blend of emotional engagement, cognitive reflection, and, at times, hedonic pleasure [9, 17].

Cultural and identity dimensions of dark tourism have received significant scholarly attention. For example, African American engagement with slavery heritage sites reveals how diasporic identities are constructed through visits to “places of darkness” [29]. Similarly, research in Iran has begun to highlight how dark tourism intersects with religious and cultural narratives, particularly at sites associated with martyrdom, war, and natural disasters [6, 7]. These culturally specific elements reinforce the necessity of developing indigenous frameworks that can accommodate the local socio-political, religious, and historical contexts within which dark tourism unfolds.

Media has also played a powerful role in shaping public perceptions of dark sites. Harbsmeier [24] emphasized how media representation can amplify certain narratives while silencing others, thereby influencing the attractiveness and interpretive strategies of dark destinations. This observation aligns with broader critiques of how dark tourism sites are commodified and

packaged within global tourism industries [4, 23]. The commercialization of tragedy raises pressing questions about authenticity, representation, and the ethical responsibilities of managers and policymakers [10, 26].

Recent scholarship has increasingly framed dark tourism as a lens through which to study broader societal issues. For example, Jordan [14] highlighted how residents living near dark sites experience complex emotions and coping strategies, suggesting that dark tourism is not just about visitors but also about host communities. Similarly, Assylkhanova [20] and Bugrova [19] demonstrated that dark tourism plays a role in cultural and historical memory, particularly in societies grappling with collective trauma. Miletic [18], in a Serbian case study, emphasized how memorial parks serve as both sites of remembrance and political symbolism. These studies reinforce the argument that dark tourism research must adopt multidisciplinary perspectives to fully grasp its implications.

Despite these advances, the field remains contested. Light [12] noted the uneasy relationship between dark tourism and heritage tourism, raising concerns about how dissonant heritage is managed. Korstanje [10] argued for deeper philosophical reflection on the meaning of visiting sites of death and suffering, urging scholars to move beyond surface-level consumer analyses. In parallel, Muzaini [27] illustrated how postmodern heritage practices may erode authentic historical narratives, creating “fabricated pasts” for tourist consumption. These critiques underscore the necessity of careful methodological and ethical frameworks in studying dark tourism.

In the Iranian context, the academic literature on dark tourism remains nascent but increasingly relevant. Mohammadi [6] conducted qualitative content analyses to examine dark tourism discourse, highlighting gaps in policy and management. Yadi [7] investigated the economic potential of dark tourism, demonstrating how this sector could be leveraged for development while acknowledging the cultural sensitivities involved. These studies suggest that while Iran has abundant potential sites—ranging from cemeteries and prisons to war memorials and disaster locations—there is still no comprehensive indigenous framework for managing dark tourism. This gap reflects broader challenges in adapting global theories to local contexts.

The future of dark tourism scholarship lies in reconciling its interdisciplinary nature with practical applications. Scholars have increasingly advocated for integrating visitor motivation studies, heritage management strategies, and ethical considerations into unified models [11, 25, 26]. Similarly, calls for innovative interpretive methods such as edutainment approaches [17], embodied mind-body frameworks [16], and digital technologies point toward the evolving character of dark tourism in the 21st century. These innovations may help strike a balance between education, remembrance, and responsible tourism development.

Overall, the literature highlights that dark tourism is not merely about visiting sites of tragedy but involves deep questions about memory, identity, ethics, and commodification. It is a field characterized by tension—between education and entertainment, authenticity and commodification, commemoration and commercialization. The Iranian case offers an important opportunity to test and expand existing frameworks, contributing to global discussions while addressing local cultural and religious contexts. Thus, this study aims to identify and explain the indigenous dimensions of dark tourism in Iran through a thematic analysis approach, filling a critical gap in both theory and practice.

Methods and Materials

In the qualitative stage of the present study, the Thematic Analysis approach was employed to identify and explain the indigenous dimensions of dark tourism in Iran. Participants included eight experts and specialists in the fields of tourism,

cultural heritage, sociology, and tourism management, who were selected through purposive sampling and the snowball technique. The criteria for selecting participants included having at least 10 years of professional or research experience in related fields, familiarity with modern tourism concepts, and practical experience in designing or managing tourism destinations associated with historical events or natural disasters. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured and face-to-face format, with each interview lasting between 45 and 75 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and then fully transcribed. In some cases, field notes were also taken to document non-verbal cues and complementary observations.

The data analysis process followed the six steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts, (2) generating initial codes (open coding), (3) searching for themes (axial coding), (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming main themes (selective coding), and (6) producing the final report. To ensure the validity of the data, member checking, peer review, and triangulation of sources were employed.

At this stage, a total of 267 open codes were identified across different sections of the interviews. Based on a reductive and integrative approach, these codes formed 72 main themes with a frequency of 179. Subsequently, in line with the next stages of thematic analysis, these codes were reduced, and codes with similar characteristics were grouped into organizing themes. The reduction process continued until overarching themes emerged as the final dimensions of factors influencing dark tourism. In the following tables, the results derived from each interview are presented in the form of extracted open codes. It should be noted that these tables are provided separately for each of the eight experts.

For this purpose, the required data were gathered based on an expert panel consisting of tourism management specialists as well as tourism industry practitioners with prior experience in the field of dark tourism. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Considering the specialized nature of dark tourism and the limited scope of related initiatives in the country—and consequently the restricted domestic knowledge, particularly with regard to lived and authentic experiences—repetition of prior themes was observed from the eighth interview onward. Therefore, eight interviews were used as the source of qualitative data. It should also be noted that the extracted open codes belong to all three domains considered in the study.

Findings and Results

Table 1 presents the main themes and their categorization for the purpose of forming organizing themes (components) in order to identify the elements shaping the first overarching theme of the study, namely the elements constituting the phenomenon of dark tourism. As can be seen, the main themes were derived and refined based on open codes, and then, through the categorization of these themes, the organizing themes (components) were extracted:

Table 1.

Indicators and Components Identified for the Dimension of Elements Constituting the Phenomenon of Dark Tourism

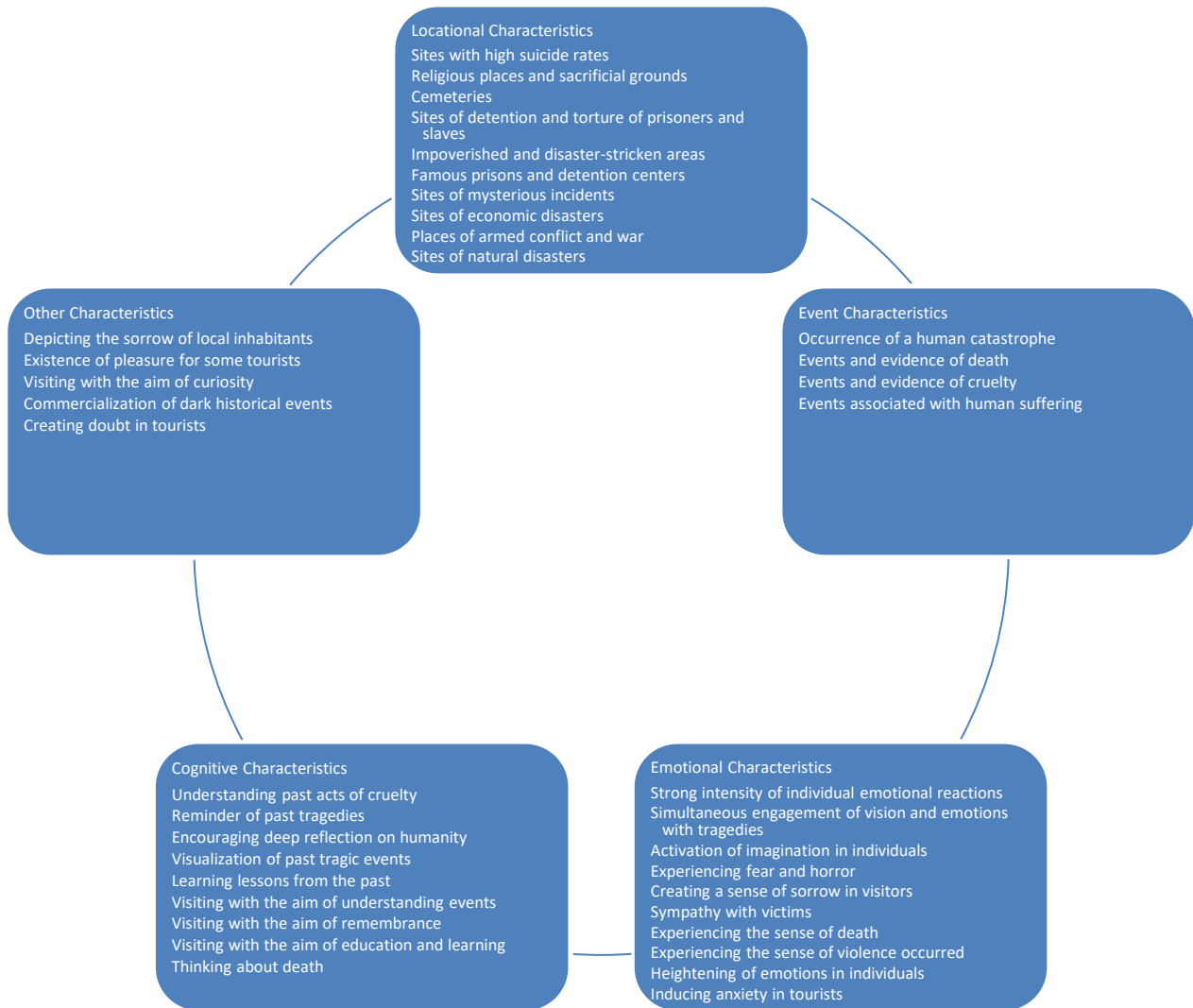
Organizing Themes (Components)	Main Themes (Indicators)
Locational Characteristics	Sites with high suicide rates
	Religious places and sacrificial grounds
	Cemeteries
	Sites of detention and torture of prisoners and slaves

	Impoverished and disaster-stricken areas
	Famous prisons and detention centers
	Sites of mysterious incidents
	Sites of economic disasters
	Places of armed conflict and war
	Sites of natural disasters
Event Characteristics	Occurrence of a human catastrophe
	Events and evidence of death
	Events and evidence of cruelty
	Events associated with human suffering
Emotional Characteristics	Strong intensity of individual emotional reactions
	Simultaneous engagement of vision and emotions with tragedies
	Activation of imagination in individuals
	Experiencing fear and horror
	Creating a sense of sorrow in visitors
	Sympathy with victims
	Experiencing the sense of death
	Experiencing the sense of violence occurred
	Heightening of emotions in individuals
	Inducing anxiety in tourists
Cognitive Characteristics	Understanding past acts of cruelty
	Reminder of past tragedies
	Encouraging deep reflection on humanity
	Visualization of past tragic events
	Learning lessons from the past
	Visiting with the aim of understanding events
	Visiting with the aim of remembrance
	Visiting with the aim of education and learning
	Thinking about death
Other Characteristics	Depicting the sorrow of local inhabitants
	Existence of pleasure for some tourists
	Visiting with the aim of curiosity
	Commercialization of dark historical events
	Creating doubt in tourists

Ultimately, based on the identified indicators and components, the thematic network of elements constituting the phenomenon of dark tourism can be illustrated in the form of the following figure.

Figure 1.

Final Model of the Study



Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study identified five major dimensions shaping the phenomenon of dark tourism in Iran: infrastructural and developmental factors, marketing and information dissemination, economic and investment aspects, cultural–social and religious considerations, and managerial and policy requirements. Each of these dimensions is interrelated and reflects the unique cultural, historical, and socio-political conditions of the Iranian context. This section discusses the results by linking them to existing scholarship, thereby situating the findings within the broader theoretical and empirical literature on dark tourism.

The first set of findings emphasized the importance of infrastructure, both physical and digital, as a prerequisite for the sustainable development of dark tourism in Iran. Sites associated with death, tragedy, and collective memory require careful

preservation, accessibility, and interpretive frameworks to ensure meaningful visitor experiences. Similar concerns have been identified in other contexts where infrastructural inadequacies have impeded dark tourism development. For instance, research in Serbia on the Kragujevački Oktobar Memorial Park highlighted that the lack of adequate visitor facilities and interpretive media limited the educational potential of the site [18]. In the Iranian case, where war cemeteries, disaster-stricken areas, and sites of imprisonment or martyrdom carry deep historical resonance, infrastructural deficits risk undermining both authenticity and visitor engagement.

Previous literature has consistently underlined the need for infrastructure not only as a technical requirement but also as a cultural mediator. Muzaini's study of Fort Siloso in Singapore, for example, demonstrated how the neglect or alteration of physical environments may distort historical narratives and lead to postmodern "fabrications" of the past [27]. Our findings align with such arguments, suggesting that infrastructural investment must go hand-in-hand with careful curatorial practices to prevent commodification that erodes historical authenticity. Moreover, the integration of digital tools such as augmented reality or immersive interpretation may enhance experiential dimensions, a trend increasingly noted in contemporary dark tourism literature [16, 17].

Another central dimension revealed by the study is the role of marketing and information dissemination. Findings indicated that dark tourism in Iran suffers from fragmented communication strategies, where many potential sites remain unknown or are interpreted primarily through informal or religious discourses rather than structured heritage frameworks. International research confirms that interpretive and marketing strategies profoundly shape visitors' expectations and experiences. Jordan and Prayag, for instance, highlighted how residents' emotional responses to dark sites are influenced not only by lived experiences but also by how such sites are communicated in the public domain [14]. Similarly, White and Frew demonstrated that place identity and narrative construction are mediated through interpretive strategies that managers deploy [23].

In Iran, where cultural sensitivities around martyrdom, war, and religious tragedies are strong, ethical marketing becomes particularly critical. Studies have warned against sensationalist approaches that exploit death or disaster for profit. Buda and McIntosh illustrated the risks of voyeurism, noting how insensitive representation of sites may alienate both visitors and host communities [21]. Our findings therefore suggest that developing "ethics-oriented marketing models" is essential for Iran. Such strategies should highlight educational, commemorative, and reflective aspects rather than sensationalizing death. This aligns with calls from Hartmann, who emphasized the need for heritage management approaches that confront dissonant pasts responsibly [25].

The third major theme relates to the economic and investment potential of dark tourism. Findings showed that Iranian stakeholders view dark tourism as a potential contributor to cultural and economic development, but structural barriers and insufficient investment have limited progress. This mirrors findings in other national contexts where dark tourism has been positioned as both an economic opportunity and a moral challenge. Yadi's work in Iran already emphasized that dark tourism could foster economic growth if supported by investment in infrastructure and human capital [7].

Globally, the commodification of dark sites remains contested. Stone and Sharpley's seminal work argued that dark tourism is consumed through thanatological frameworks, where visitors seek to negotiate mortality and meaning rather than purely economic exchanges [5]. Nonetheless, economic motivations often dominate policymaking. Research on motivational factors among Malaysian youth showed that curiosity and leisure also influence visitation patterns, suggesting a hybridization

of commercial and educational motives [15]. Our results indicate that a similar tension exists in Iran, where policymakers must balance the need for revenue generation with ethical and cultural responsibilities.

The investment dimension also connects with broader debates about sustainability. Scholars such as Sharpley have long noted that political ideologies and governance models shape how dark tourism is funded and institutionalized [11]. Without stable governance frameworks and incentives for private investment, the potential for dark tourism to contribute economically will remain underutilized. The Iranian case highlights the urgent need for policy reforms that provide financial incentives, training opportunities, and partnerships between public and private actors.

Perhaps the most distinctive contribution of this study lies in its exploration of cultural–social and religious factors. Unlike some Western contexts where dark tourism is primarily associated with war sites or disasters, Iran’s cultural and religious traditions add layers of meaning. Sites of martyrdom, shrines, and cemeteries are often visited for spiritual as well as commemorative reasons, blurring the line between pilgrimage and dark tourism. Previous studies have emphasized that cultural and religious contexts significantly influence how dark tourism is practiced and interpreted. For example, Lelo and Jamal explored how African American experiences at slavery sites are deeply intertwined with diasporic identities and cultural memory [29]. Similarly, Mowatt and Chancellor highlighted the emotional resonance of slave castles in Ghana, where local and global narratives intersect [22].

In Iran, religious symbolism plays a central role in shaping visitor experiences. This aligns with Korstanje’s philosophical reflections on how death and suffering are socially mediated, rather than merely consumed as attractions [10]. Our findings suggest that any framework for Iranian dark tourism must integrate religious narratives while avoiding political instrumentalization. Harbsmeier’s work on media influence reminds us that narratives can easily be manipulated, risking the reduction of sacred experiences into mere tourist spectacles [24]. Thus, cultural sensitivity and respect for local traditions are paramount.

The final dimension identified concerns managerial and policy imperatives. Findings demonstrated that Iran lacks a coherent framework for managing dark tourism, leading to fragmentation across sites and stakeholders. This echoes broader critiques in the literature about the absence of integrated governance models for dark tourism. Sharpley called for policy frameworks that balance political ideology with ethical remembrance [4]. Similarly, Stone argued for a new post-disciplinary research agenda that integrates sociology, anthropology, and heritage studies into policymaking [26].

Our findings align with these calls, underscoring that without clear governance structures, dark tourism risks either being ignored or exploited without adequate safeguards. International evidence shows that successful management of dark sites requires collaboration between governments, communities, and tourism operators [19, 20]. In Iran, where sensitivities are heightened by political and religious contexts, managerial frameworks must prioritize participatory approaches, transparency, and ethical responsibility.

Overall, the results of this study resonate strongly with international literature while also highlighting Iran’s unique contextual features. The emphasis on infrastructure parallels findings in Serbia [18] and Singapore [27]. The importance of ethical marketing aligns with calls by Buda [21] and White [23]. The economic dimension reflects debates raised by Yadi [7], Stone [5], and Sharpley [8]. The cultural–religious factors contribute to global conversations about identity, heritage, and memory [22, 29]. Finally, the managerial dimension reflects ongoing discussions about governance and interdisciplinary approaches [11, 26].

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that while dark tourism in Iran shares many global characteristics, its cultural and religious distinctiveness necessitates an indigenous framework. This study therefore contributes to bridging global theory with local practice, offering insights for both Iranian policymakers and international scholars of dark tourism.

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to several limitations. First, the research was qualitative in nature and relied on semi-structured interviews with a relatively small group of experts. Although theoretical saturation was achieved, the perspectives of broader stakeholder groups, such as ordinary tourists, local communities, and international visitors, were not included. Second, the scope of the study was limited to identifying dimensions of dark tourism in Iran, without conducting empirical assessments of visitor behaviors or economic outcomes. This restricts the ability to generalize findings beyond conceptual and thematic levels. Third, cultural and political sensitivities in Iran may have influenced both participants' willingness to share certain views and the researcher's ability to access sites or data. As such, the study's findings should be interpreted with caution and seen as an exploratory rather than exhaustive framework.

Future studies should expand upon this research by employing mixed-methods approaches that combine qualitative insights with quantitative data on visitor experiences, motivations, and economic impacts. Longitudinal studies could examine how dark tourism in Iran evolves over time, particularly in response to infrastructural developments or policy changes. Comparative studies with other countries that share religious or cultural contexts—such as Turkey, Iraq, or other parts of the Middle East—could provide valuable insights into regional patterns of dark tourism. Additionally, more research is needed on the role of digital technologies, such as virtual reality or augmented reality, in shaping dark tourism experiences in culturally sensitive contexts. Finally, studies focusing on host community perceptions would enrich understanding of the social sustainability of dark tourism.

From a practical perspective, several implications emerge. Policymakers should prioritize infrastructural investments in dark tourism sites, ensuring accessibility and authenticity while leveraging digital technologies for interpretation. Tourism managers should adopt ethical marketing strategies that emphasize education, remembrance, and empathy rather than sensationalism. Economic incentives and partnerships should be created to attract private investment, while ensuring that commercialization does not undermine cultural and religious sensitivities. Finally, participatory governance frameworks should be developed, engaging local communities, religious authorities, and heritage experts in decision-making. By adopting these practices, Iran can responsibly harness the potential of dark tourism to contribute to cultural preservation, social education, and sustainable economic development.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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