

Review

Mapping Epistemological Orientations in Research on Dark Tourism: Qualitative Content Analysis of a Scopus-Based Corpus

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Abstract

In the literature on dark tourism, conceptual diversity has often been addressed as a definitional or thematic problem. This study was conducted to identify the dominant epistemological orientations in a focused corpus of 172 English-language, open access articles indexed in Scopus that explicitly use the term dark tourism. An additional aim was to describe the temporal and methodological distributions of these articles. The articles were analysed using qualitative content analysis on a systematically constructed corpus. They were coded in terms of representational/heritage-centred, functional/social practice, motivational/audience-typology, experiential/affective, and activity-based/performative visitor orientations. Thirty-five randomly selected articles were re-coded by a second researcher, who was blind to the initial coding decisions. The percentage agreement for the dominant orientation was 71.4%, with Cohen's $\kappa = 0.641$, and the percentage agreement for method classification was 94.3%, with $\kappa = 0.888$. In the post-consensus distribution, the representation/heritage orientation was the largest category, with 54 articles. Motivation, experience, and performative visitor orientations together constituted 52.3% of the corpus. These findings do not indicate a linear paradigm shift but rather a descriptive pattern in which different forms of knowledge production coexist within the corpus examined. This study extends beyond thematic classification by providing evidence for and explaining how dark tourism is constructed as an object of inquiry. The results should be interpreted only with respect to the defined Scopus-based open access corpus.

Keywords: dark tourism; epistemological orientations; qualitative content analysis; knowledge production; inter-coder reliability

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1. Introduction

Dark tourism is a heterogeneous concept encompassing the visitation of sites associated with death, disaster, violence, and trauma for purposes of commemoration, education, identity, experience, or entertainment (Foley & Lennon, 1996; Seaton, 1996; Stone, 2006). As the scope of research on dark tourism has expanded, the boundaries of the concept, its relationship to neighbouring research traditions, and the ethical implications of its commercial

representation have become more visible (Sharpley, 2009; Light, 2017). This study addresses this diversity not only in terms of the topics examined but also how dark tourism is constructed as a definable and explicable subject. The aim is to map the dominant epistemological orientations in a defined, Scopus-based open access corpus and examine their descriptive distribution across periods and methods.

1.1. Dark Tourism

Dark tourism was conceptualised as an academic term in the 1990s. Foley and Lennon (1996) highlighted it in the context of modern media, representation, and consumption, while Seaton (1996) emphasised the historical and anthropological dimensions of death-oriented travel behaviour in the form of thanatourism. Stone's (2006) dark tourism spectrum approach demonstrated that sites do not share the same intensity in terms of authenticity, commercialisation, time distance, and purpose.

Subsequent research has examined visitor motivations and profiles (Magano et al., 2022), collective memory and commemorative functions (González, 2018), affective and bodily encounters (Martini & Buda, 2020), and the ethical and political dimensions of representation (Chen & Xu, 2021). This accumulation of knowledge shows that dark tourism cannot be explained in terms of a single site type or visitor motivation.

Thanatourism, memorial tourism, disaster tourism, and difficult heritage are conceptual traditions that intersect with, but are not entirely synonymous with, dark tourism (Light, 2017; González, 2018). This study does not unify all these traditions; it only examines the epistemological structure of a defined, Scopus-based open access corpus that explicitly uses the term dark tourism.

1.2. Dark Tourism Research

Examples of recent literature reviews conducted in the context of the dark tourism phenomenon and the thematic areas identified as a result of these studies are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Dark tourism literature reviews and identified emergent themes.

Author(s) (Year)	Review Themes
Rasool et al. (2025)	(1) Dark tourism insights; (2) dynamics of dark tourism; (3) dark tourism review; (4) dark tourism experiences
Saha and Husain (2025)	(1) War memorials and battle-related dark tourism; (2) experiential dark tourism; (3) natural disaster-related dark tourism; (4) dark exhibition
Hernandez-Garrido et al. (2026)	(1) Emotions in dark tourism research; (2) motivation for the death of dark tourism; (3) authenticity in dark heritage; (4) disaster tourism; (5) battlefield tourism
Kumar et al. (2024)	(1) Echoes of sorrow: lure and legacy of dark tourism; (2) experiential odyssey of dark tourism; (3) dark tourism: motivations and perspectives; (4) dark tourism dynamics shaped by death and disaster; (5) ethical dynamics in dark tourism; (6) methodology, emotion, and trends in dark tourism; (7) historical reflections to adventures of dark tourism
Kiralova and Sperkova (2024)	(1) Dark tourism as a product; (2) the subject of dark tourism; (3) motivations in dark tourism; (4) emotions in dark tourism
Mora Forero et al. (2023)	(1) Dark tourism conceptual (2) management and development; (3) emerging themes; (4) dark tourism categorisation
Fauzi (2023)	(1) Niche area of dark tourism; (2) motivation and drivers of dark tourism visitation; (3) progress in dark tourism
Valeri (2022)	(1) Genesis, theories, and dark tourism motivation; (2) dark tourist behaviour and economics; (3) marketing of dark tourism; (4) man-made destinations and dark tourism; (5) colonisation and dark tourism; (6) methodology

Source: Authors.

The recent reviews summarised in Table 1 highlight themes such as motivation, experience, ethics, management, disaster, battlefield, and site types. However, these studies primarily categorise what has been published in the literature and do not systematically compare which types of evidence, analytical objects, or explanatory levels make dark tourism explicable. Therefore, the primary objective of this research was to address this gap in the literature, as the epistemological orientations underlying the existing thematic diversity have not yet been mapped within a clear coding framework.

In this study, theme is considered to describe the subject matter of a research project. For example, it can refer to motivation, commemoration, disaster, ethics, or authenticity. The epistemological orientation, on the other hand, refers to which analytical object dark tourism is established as, which evidence is accepted as valid, and at what level the explanation is provided (Crotty, 1998). Therefore, the same theme can be examined with different epistemological orientations. A monument may be considered in different ways in terms of how representation and heritage are established, how they serve social memory, what emotions they evoke in the visitor, or how they are co-produced through visitor practices.

1.3. Epistemological Orientation as an Analytical Framework

In this study, the concept of epistemological orientation is used to move beyond thematic classification and to examine how dark tourism is constructed as an object of knowledge. While existing reviews often categorise the literature according to topics such as motivation, experience, ethics, or site type, such classifications primarily describe what is studied; they do not systematically address how knowledge about dark tourism is produced, what counts as valid evidence, or at which level explanation is formulated.

Following Crotty (1998), epistemology refers to assumptions about the nature of knowledge and the ways in which knowledge about a phenomenon can be generated and justified. Building on this perspective, in this study, epistemological orientation is defined through three interrelated dimensions:

- (1) The analytical object through which the phenomenon is made visible,
- (2) The type of evidence accepted as valid;
- (3) The level of explanation at which claims are constructed.

This distinction allows for a separation between theme and orientation. A theme refers to the substantive focus of a study (e.g., disaster tourism, memorialisation, visitor motivation), whereas epistemological orientation refers to the logic through which the phenomenon is explained. The same theme can, therefore, be examined through epistemological orientations. For instance, a study of a memorial site may analyse representation and authenticity (representational/heritage), collective memory and social identity (functional/social practice), visitor motivations (motivational/audience typology), emotional responses (experiential/affective), or on-site interactions and practices (activity-based/performative visitation).

In this sense, categories such as motivation or experience are not treated merely as topics but as epistemological orientations when they constitute the primary explanatory framework of a study. A motivation-oriented study establishes dark tourism as a demand-side phenomenon explained through measurable preferences, intentions, and profiles. An experiential study, by contrast, constructs the phenomenon through affect, embodiment, and emotional intensity. Thus, the distinction lies not in the vocabulary used but in the dominant evidentiary logic and explanatory level of the research.

Adopting an epistemological lens enables a more nuanced understanding of conceptual diversity in dark tourism research. Rather than interpreting diversity as a problem of definitional inconsistency, it becomes possible to view the field as a set of coexisting knowledge-production strategies. These strategies differ not only in what they examine but also in how

they render dark tourism intelligible. Therefore, mapping epistemological orientations provides a complementary analytical layer to thematic reviews and helps clarify why studies addressing similar topics may offer fundamentally different forms of explanation.

This framework also informs the coding procedure used in the present study. Articles are classified according to their dominant epistemological orientation based on their research question, object of analysis, type of evidence, and explanatory claims rather than keywords or declared themes. In this way, the analysis captures not only the content of dark tourism research but also the underlying structures through which knowledge is produced.

2. Materials and Methods

The main objective of this study is to map the dominant epistemological orientations in dark tourism research through a focused analysis of a corpus of open access articles that use the term dark tourism, were published between 2009 and 2026, and are indexed in Scopus. This study does not produce an exhaustive bibliography covering all related concepts in the field; instead, it shows how studies explicitly using the term dark tourism differ in terms of their research objectives, theoretical frameworks, methodological choices, and evidence-producing logic.

RQ1. Which dominant epistemological orientations can be distinguished in dark tourism research?

RQ2. How are these epistemological orientations distributed across the 2009–2026 period?

RQ3. What descriptive patterns are observed within the corpus examined regarding the relationship between epistemological orientations and research methods?

2.1. Research Design

A systematic, literature-based qualitative content analysis approach was adopted in this study. Analytical coding was applied to a focused corpus of articles created with pre-determined selection criteria. This study was not a comprehensive systematic review or bibliometric content analysis in the classical sense; therefore, the findings should be interpreted as the results of systematic mapping that define the epistemological structure of the defined corpus and not as universal results representing all concepts and databases related to dark tourism.

Qualitative content analysis, which is well-suited to systematically identifying, classifying, and interpreting conceptual patterns (Schreier, 2012; Krippendorff, 2018), was employed. Each article was evaluated considering its research objective, theoretical framework, methodological approach, fundamental concepts, and the analytical level at which it addresses the phenomenon of dark tourism. The coding framework was created utilising both theoretical discussions and conceptual indicators observed in the articles. In this respect, the study is based on a theory-sensitive and interpretive qualitative content analysis logic (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

In this study, epistemological orientation is considered the operationalised form of the conceptual distinction. Coding was based not on keyword matching but on the research question, primary object of analysis, type of evidence used, and level of explanation. Category boundaries, decision rules, and the distribution of dominant epistemological orientations are presented in Section 3.2.

2.2. Data Collection and Corpus

Data collection was conducted through the Scopus database. The search term used was dark tourism. The search strategy was deliberately kept narrow as the aim of this study was not to merge related but distinct conceptual traditions such as thanatourism, disaster tourism, grief tourism, memorial tourism, trauma tourism, and difficult heritage into the same

corpus but rather to examine the epistemological orientations of the core defined, Scopus-based open access corpus that explicitly uses the term dark tourism. Therefore, studies published on related concepts were included in the corpus only to the extent that they were explicitly associated with dark tourism and met the search inclusion criteria.

The initial search covered the period 1990–2026 and yielded 1199 records. Subsequently, the records were filtered according to document type, publication status, language, access type, and full-text suitability. The document type was filtered to article, publication status to final, language to English, and access type to open access. The open access filter was used not to broaden the corpus's representativeness but to enable transparent and re-verifiable qualitative coding at the full-text level.

The determination of epistemological orientation was not based solely on title, abstract, or keyword. Since the research objective was based on the evidence statements in the theoretical framework, methodology description, findings, and discussion sections, full-text access was deemed mandatory. This choice may have led to the exclusion of some high-impact studies that are not open access. Therefore, the authors of this study do not claim that it definitively represents epistemological weights in the entire field of dark tourism but rather highlights trends in the open access Scopus core corpus.

As a result of filtering, as illustrated in Figure 1, 198 open access articles were identified. Full-text access was obtained for 189 of these articles, and 9 articles for which full-text access was not available were excluded. The 189 articles whose full texts were examined were evaluated for suitability by four researchers, and 17 studies that were determined to not be directly related to dark tourism were excluded. Consequently, the final analytical corpus consisted of 172 articles. The initial search covered the period 1990–2026. After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, no suitable articles in the period before 2009 were included in the final analytical corpus. Therefore, the findings are reported for studies conducted between 2009 and 2026.

Importantly, 2026 was considered a partial year because it included publications accessible at the time of data collection. This was taken into account, particularly in the interpretation of temporal distribution analyses. Percentage changes were presented along with absolute article numbers, and strong temporal results were avoided for early periods with low *n* values. The articles included in this study were peer-reviewed, written in English, had final publication status, were open access, had full text access, and addressed the phenomenon of dark tourism directly as a research subject, theoretical framework, case context, or analytical category.

Studies that only superficially mentioned the concept of dark tourism and did not establish a clear theoretical or empirical relationship with the concept were excluded from the corpus. The corpus was limited to represent the core of and coding-level knowledge production in dark tourism research rather than broadly encompass the concept.

The selection process was structured by taking into account the transparent reporting principles recommended in systematic review studies (Page et al., 2021). However, this study is not a systematic review in the classical sense but rather a qualitative content analysis conducted on a systematically constructed corpus of literature. Therefore, the results should be interpreted not as a weighted representation of all studies in the broad literature but rather as an analytical map of a corpus constructed within a defined database with specific keywords and access criteria.

The motivation to limit the search strategy to the term dark tourism stems not from an assumption of conceptual equivalence but from the need for a clear definition of the object of study. Thanatourism, memorial tourism, disaster tourism, grief tourism, trauma tourism, and difficult heritage intersect with dark tourism but have different disciplinary origins, research questions, and publication areas. Combining these terms in a single search could blur conceptual boundaries and obscure what the coded corpus represents.

Therefore, the findings of this study map only the English-language, open access Scopus corpus addressing dark tourism and not the entire body of research on death- and trauma-related tourism. This choice may have led to underrepresentation of related memory and heritage studies, and the observed orientation rates may have been partly influenced by the decision to establish the corpus.

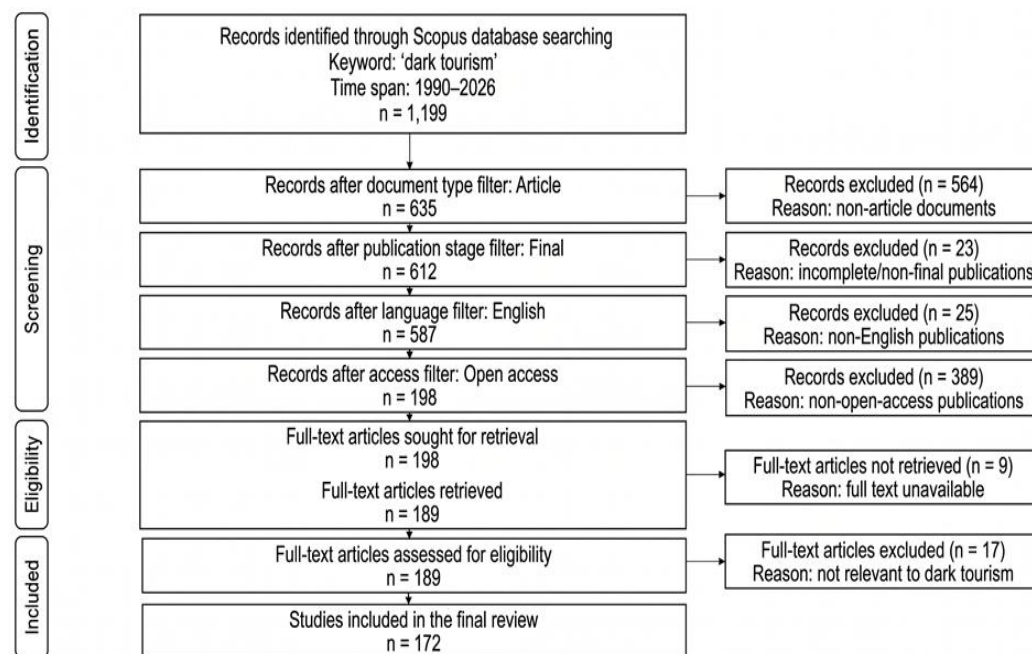


Figure 1. Flow diagram of article identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion process.

2.3. Coding and Analysis

The coding framework was developed by researchers considering fundamental theoretical debates in the dark tourism literature and studies addressing the observed temporal patterns in dark tourism research, ranging from heritage-centred to visitor-centred approaches. This situation is interpreted not as a linear paradigm shift but as a multiplication of epistemological orientations coexisting within the same body of literature and working with different types of evidence. Therefore, the coding scheme was developed to be both theoretically sensitive and open to the indicators observed at the article level within the corpus. Table 2 shows epistemological orientations in dark tourism research, definitions, research questions, evidence, and examples.

The coding process was carried out in five stages. In the first stage, an initial coding scheme was created based on theoretical discussions in the literature, and the definition, distinguishing indicators, inclusion/exclusion logic, and boundary conditions were determined for each epistemological orientation. In the second stage, the applicability of the codes to each article was verified through a limited pilot reading. In particular, the potential overlaps between the representational/heritage-centred and functional/social practice and experiential/affective and activity-based/performative visitor codes were discussed. In the third stage, the purpose, research questions, theoretical framework, methodological description, object of analysis, and basic method of generating findings of each article were examined. In the fourth stage, articles were coded, first in terms of research methodology and then in terms of dominant epistemological orientation. In the fifth stage, articles classified as having more than one orientation were re-evaluated, and the dominant orientation was determined according to the article's main research question, central type of evidence, and level of explanation.

Table 2. Epistemological orientations in dark tourism research: definitions, research questions, evidence, and examples.

Epistemological Orientation	Definition (Analytical Object and Explanatory Logic)	Typical Research Questions	Typical Forms of Evidence	Representative Article Examples
Representational/Heritage-centred	Constructs dark tourism through representation, curation, and heritage interpretation. Focuses on how death, trauma, and difficult histories are made visible, authenticated, and communicated.	How is death/disaster represented at the site? How is authenticity constructed? How are heritage narratives curated and interpreted?	Exhibition analysis; site interpretation texts; visual/material culture; discourse analysis of displays and narratives	Stone and Morton (2022); Stone (2006)
Functional/Social Practice	Treats dark tourism as a social and cultural practice embedded in collective memory, identity, education, and reconciliation processes.	How does dark tourism contribute to collective memory? What role does it play in identity formation or reconciliation? What are its educational or political functions?	Policy documents; commemorative practices; interviews on memory/identity; discourse on nation, reconciliation, pedagogy	Zhang et al. (2023); González (2018)
Motivational/Audience Typology	Explains dark tourism as a demand-side phenomenon, focusing on visitor motivations, segmentation, and behavioural intentions.	Why do people visit dark tourism sites? What are the motivational clusters? How do visitor types differ socio-demographically?	Surveys; questionnaires; statistical modelling; segmentation analysis; behavioural intention measures	Magano et al. (2022); Isaac and Çakmak (2014)
Experiential/Affective	Constructs dark tourism through affect, emotion, and embodied experience, emphasising how visitors feel and are transformed.	What emotions do visitors experience? How does the encounter affect them? How are empathy, discomfort, or trauma produced?	In-depth interviews; phenomenological accounts; emotional narratives; sensory/embodied descriptions	Martini and Sharma (2022); Martini and Buda (2020); Buda (2015)
Activity-based/Performative Visitor	Views dark tourism as co-produced through visitor practices, interactions, and performances in situ. Focuses on what visitors do rather than what they feel or think.	How do visitors behave and interact on site? How is meaning co-produced through practice? What roles do gesture, gaze, and movement play?	Ethnography; video/interaction analysis; observation of behaviour; conversation and gesture analysis	Ironside et al. (2026)

Five dominant epistemological orientations were identified in the coding scheme. The representational/heritage-centred approach refers to studies that address dark tourism spaces from perspectives of representation, authenticity, curation, and heritage interpretation. The functional/social practice approach encompasses studies that evaluate the phenomenon of dark tourism in the context of collective memory, education, identity, reconciliation, and social function. The motivational/audience-typology approach focuses on visitor motivations, tourist profiles, sociodemographic differentiation, and behavioural intentions. The experiential/affective approach centres on experiential categories such as emotion, affect, bodily experience, empathy, discomfort, trauma, and transformation. The activity-based/performative visitor approach focuses on visitors' practices, interactions, performances, and ways of co-producing the experience within the space.

If more than one epistemological orientation is evident in an article, the secondary orientation was also noted. However, in comparative analyses, each article was evaluated under only one dominant orientation. This decision was made to preserve the analytical distinctiveness of the categories and to enable comparisons between orientations (Krippendorff, 2018; Schreier, 2012).

Four decision rules were used when determining the dominant orientation. First, the paper was coded as representational/heritage-centred if it primarily asked how death, disaster, or a traumatic past is represented, curated, or inherited. It was coded as functional/social practice if it explained the same space through collective memory, identity, education, reconciliation, or social consequences. Second, when visitors were centred, the article was coded under motivational/audience typology if the primary evidence was motivation, profiling, segmentation, or behavioural intention and as experiential/affective if the primary evidence comprised emotion, empathy, discomfort, bodily intensity, or transformation. Third, if the study focused on what the visitor does, how they interact, and how they speak, look, move, or co-create the experience, rather than what they feel in the space, the code activity-based/performative visitor was assigned. Fourth, in mixed cases, the research question and the type of evidence on which the findings were based were considered decisive, rather than the title or keywords.

Data analysis was conducted on two levels. At the descriptive level, the publication year, method type, and dominant epistemological orientation of each article were coded. At the interpretive level, the analysis focused on how epistemological orientations correspond to a knowledge production logic applied to dark tourism. For temporal comparison, the publication years were divided into four periods: 2009–2014, 2015–2019, 2020–2023, and 2024–2026. This periodisation was used to reduce the impact of annual fluctuations and to compare broader temporal patterns in epistemological orientations. However, due to the low total number of articles published during the 2009–2014 period, percentages for this period are used only as a supporting indicator. Numbers and limitation notes are considered together in the comments.

2.4. Coding Reliability, Category Boundaries, and Limitations

To assess inter-coder reliability, 35 articles (20.3%) were randomly selected from the 172-article analysis corpus and independently recoded using the same codebook by a second researcher blind to the initial coding decisions. Agreement on dominant epistemological orientation was determined to be 71.4%, with Cohen's kappa $\kappa = 0.641$; and agreement on research method classification was 94.3%, with $\kappa = 0.888$ (J. Cohen, 1960; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Ten disagreements regarding dominant orientation and two regarding research method were resolved by re-evaluating the research objective, primary object of analysis, evidence statements, and category boundaries. All disagreements were resolved through coder consensus.

Percentage agreement and kappa values were calculated from the independent pre-consensus codes. After agreement, the codes were transferred to the final tables and figures. This audit was based on a subsample of 35 articles. The authors do not claim that the entire corpus is doubly coded or that a separate coefficient was calculated for secondary orientations. This limitation should be considered in conjunction with the interpretive and systematic mapping nature of the results.

The study has some limitations. First, the data source is limited to Scopus. Web of Science, Dimensions, Google Scholar, or interdisciplinary databases were not included. Second, the search strategy was based solely on the term dark tourism. This choice is suitable for examining the core literature using the term dark tourism. Nevertheless, this led to the exclusion of some studies published in related fields, such as thanatourism, disaster tourism, memorial tourism, grief tourism, trauma tourism, and difficult heritage, which did not use the term dark tourism. Third, only English-language and open access articles were included. This choice provided full-text coding transparency but may have led to the exclusion of some related studies that are not open access or were published in different languages. Fourth, the encoding of epistemological orientations involves interpretive decisions. Therefore, inter-coder reliability analysis was limited to a randomly selected subsample of 35 articles. A separate agreement coefficient was not calculated for secondary orientations.

While the restriction of the corpus to English-language, open access, Scopus-indexed articles ensured transparency and full-text coding reliability, it may also have influenced the observed distribution of epistemological orientations. First, the exclusion of non-English-language studies may lead to an underrepresentation of locally grounded research traditions, particularly those focusing on collective memory, heritage politics, and site-specific commemorative practices. Such studies, which are often published in regional journals or national languages, are likely to be associated with the functional/social practice and representational/heritage-centred orientations.

Second, the restriction to open access publications may have introduced a structural bias toward journals that favour empirically accessible, methodologically standardised, and internationally generalisable research designs. This may partially explain the relatively high visibility of motivational/audience-typology and experiential/affective orientations, which are frequently represented in survey-based or qualitative interview studies that align well with open access publication models.

Third, the reliance on Scopus-indexed journals may privilege globally visible and citation-oriented research streams, potentially underrepresenting practice-based, ethnographic, or critically oriented studies that are more likely to appear in books, edited volumes, or non-indexed outlets. This limitation is particularly relevant for the activity-based/performative visitor orientation, which often relies on fine-grained observational or interactional data and may be published in open access journal formats less frequently.

Consequently, the observed distribution of epistemological orientations should not be interpreted as a direct reflection of the entire dark tourism field but rather as a structured representation of how knowledge is produced and circulated within the specific boundaries of the English-language, open access Scopus corpus examined in this study.

3. Results

3.1. Analytical Corpus

The final analytical corpus consisted of 172 articles that directly address the phenomenon of dark tourism as a research object, theoretical framework, case context, or analytical category, following the inclusion and exclusion criteria. While the initial search range was defined as 1990–2026, no suitable publications prior to 2009 were found in the final corpus after applying the inclusion criteria. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as not based on the entire body of dark tourism literature but on the core output of Eng-

lish-language, open access articles using the term dark tourism that became available after 2009 and are indexed in Scopus.

The methodological profile of the analytical corpus, provided in Table 3, shows that qualitative research designs comprise a significant portion of dark tourism research. The methodological profile of the final corpus includes 92 qualitative studies (53.5%), 38 quantitative studies (22.1%), 18 conceptual studies (10.5%), 13 mixed methods studies (7.6%), 7 narrative/integrative reviews (4.1%), 3 bibliometric reviews (1.7%), and 1 systematic review (0.6%). This distribution shows that qualitative designs constitute the largest methodological group in the corpus examined, followed by quantitative visitor research. It indicates that dark tourism is strongly empirically grounded in a qualitative research tradition, though quantitative visitor studies and conceptual discussions also occupy a significant position in knowledge production.

Table 3. Descriptive profile of the analytical corpus.

Research Method	<i>n</i>	%
Qualitative	92	53.5
Quantitative	38	22.17
Conceptual	18	10.5
Mixed	13	7.6
Review	7	4.1
Bibliometric review	3	1.7
Systematic review	1	0.6
Total	172	100.0

Note: Percentages were calculated over the final analytical corpus of 172 articles and may not sum to exactly 100 due to rounding.

When the publication distribution by year was examined, it is apparent that dark tourism research in the analysed open access Scopus corpus has increased significantly, especially after 2017. While the number of articles included in the corpus remained relatively limited during the 2009–2016 period, the annual output stabilised in the 11–12 article range during the 2017–2021 period. This increase can be seen in Figure 2, which shows that 22 articles were included in the corpus in 2022, 19 in 2023, 24 in 2024, and 25 in 2025. The eight articles for 2026 represent only publications accessible at the time of data collection and not the entire year. Therefore, the 2026 data should be considered to reflect a partial-year effect rather than a declining trend.

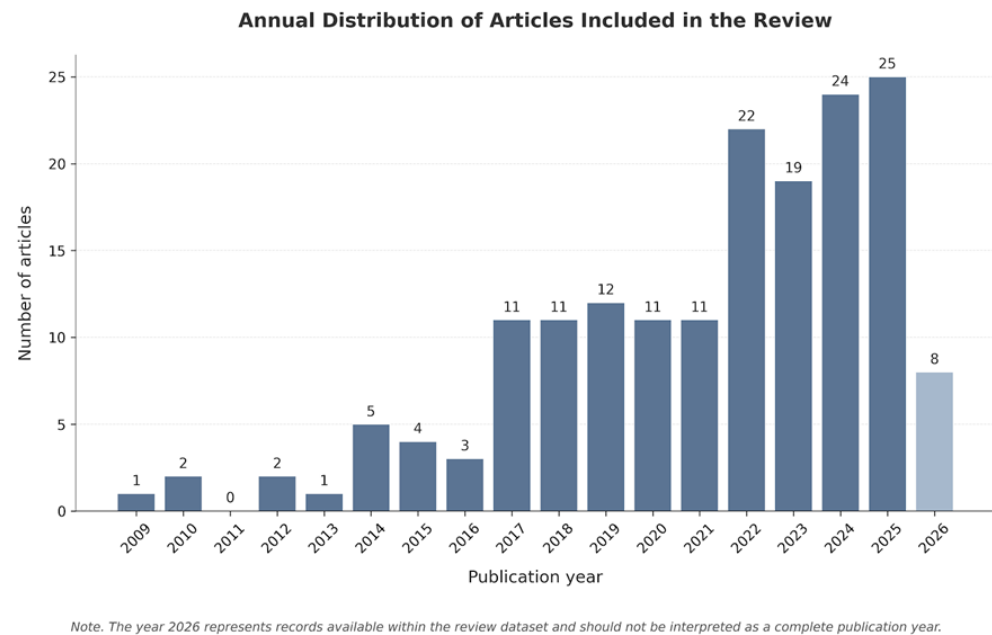


Figure 2. Annual distribution of articles included in the analytical corpus.

3.2. Epistemological Orientations

The first research question focuses on identifying the dominant epistemological orientations within the examined Scopus-based open access dark tourism corpus. After applying the decision rules shown in Table 4, the distribution results show that the representational/heritage-centred approach is the most prevalent orientation in the corpus.

Table 4. Epistemological orientations, coding indicators, and illustrative evidence.

Epistemological Orientation	Coding Indicators and Boundary Decision Rule	Illustrative Coding Evidence
Representational/heritage-centred Approach	Representation; portrayal; curation; authenticity; memorialisation; heritage interpretation; difficult heritage. Decision rule: code here when the central question is how death, disaster, trauma, or difficult heritage is represented, curated, authenticated, displayed, interpreted, or made visible. If the main claim concerns social reconciliation, identity, or education rather than representational form, code as functional/social practice.	Stone and Morton's study was coded here because it foregrounds how death is made visible and interpreted in dark tourism. The analytical object is the portrayal of the dead and the heritage framing of death rather than visitor segmentation or embodied practice (Stone & Morton, 2022).
Functional/social practice approach	Social identity; reconciliation; education; collective memory; national narrative; social function; commemorative practice. Decision rule: code here when the site or practice is analysed primarily through collective memory, identity formation, education, reconciliation, public pedagogy, or social/political consequences. Representation may be present, but it is not the final explanatory level.	Zhang et al.'s study was coded here because it treats dark tourism as a social and geopolitical practice. Its social identity approach links visitation to reconciliation, intergroup relations, memory work, and the broader social consequences of dark tourism encounters (Zhang et al., 2023).
Motivational/audience-typology approach	Visitor motivations; tourist profile; typology; sociodemographic differentiation; behavioural intention; demand-side segmentation. Decision rule: code here when visitors are primarily known through measurable motivations, profiles, atti-	Magano et al.'s study was coded here because it aims to identify the sociodemographic, motivational, and tourist-practice profile of dark tourists. The evidence logic is visi-

	tudes, intentions, or segmentation variables. If the visitor is primarily known through felt intensity or embodied response, code as experiential/affective.	tor segmentation and motivational structure (Magano et al., 2022).
Experiential/affective approach	Affect; emotion; embodied experience; discomfort; empathy; trauma; intensity of feeling; transformation. Decision rule: code here when the key claim concerns what dark tourism does affectively, emotionally, bodily, or transformatively to visitors. If the focus shifts from what visitors feel to what they actively do in situated interactions, code as activity-based/performative visitor.	Martini and Sharma's study was coded here because it conceptualises dark tourism through affective and embodied experience. Its use of sublime as affect foregrounds dark tourism as an intensity of feeling circulating between bodies, death/disaster landscapes, and transformative encounters (Martini & Sharma, 2022).
Activity-based/performative visitor approach	Practice; performance; interaction; gestures; talk; gaze; bodily position; co-production; situated action. Decision rule: code here when visitors are primarily analysed as actors who produce the dark tourism experience through observable practices, interactional work, embodied movement, talk, gaze, silence, or co-production. This category requires more than general visitor experience; it requires attention to situated doing.	Ironside et al.'s study was coded here because it focuses on what visitors actively do within dark tourism spaces. Its emphasis on gestures, talk, gaze, and bodily position shows how visitors co-produce dark tourism experiences through embodied interaction and performative negotiation of site darkness (Ironside et al., 2026).

Note: The evidence statements are illustrative examples selected from the coded article-level dataset. Decision rules were used to assign a single dominant orientation. Secondary orientations were recorded analytically but are not tabulated here.

In the post-consensus distribution, the representational/heritage-centred approach constitutes 31.4% of the corpus, with 54 articles. The motivational/audience-typology approach is represented by 41 articles (23.8%), the experiential/affective approach by 32 articles (18.6%), the functional/social practice approach by 28 articles (16.3%), and the activity-based/performative visitor approach by 17 articles (9.9%). Representational/heritage orientation alone does not constitute a majority. The motivational, experience, and performative visitor orientations together comprise 90 articles and 52.3% of the corpus. This percentage is not evidence of a linear paradigm shift but rather a descriptive pattern showing that visitor-centred forms of evidence have become increasingly significant in the corpus examined. This distribution is significant for two reasons. Firstly, while the representational/heritage-centred approach is the largest category, it does not constitute the dominant majority on its own. Secondly, when the motivational/audience-typology, experiential/affective, and activity-based/performative visitor approaches are considered together, they comprise 90 articles, constituting 52.3% of the total corpus. This finding indicates that heritage and representation-focused studies maintain a strong position in the dark tourism literature, but knowledge production based on visitor motivation, experience, and practice has also gained significance.

Table 5 shows the quantitative distribution of epistemological orientations within the corpus. This distribution only indicates the relative frequency of each orientation and does not illustrate the conceptual proximity of these orientations to each other, their levels of visitor-centrism, or the analytical axes along which they construct the phenomenon of dark tourism. Therefore, a map that visualises the conceptual positioning of these epistemological orientations is presented to complement the distribution findings.

Table 5. Distribution of dominant epistemological orientations.

Dominant Epistemological Orientation	n	%
Representational/Heritage-Centred Approach	54	31.4
Functional/Social Practice Approach	28	16.3
Motivational/Audience-Typology Approach	41	23.8
Experiential/Affective Approach	32	18.6
Activity-Based/Performative Visitor Approach	17	9.9
Total	172	100.0

Note: Orientations are presented in conceptual order rather than descending frequency. Each article was coded according to its dominant epistemological orientation. Some articles were analytically associated with secondary orientations. However, only dominant codes are used in this frequency table.

Figure 3 shows the epistemological orientations more holistically, extending from representation and heritage-centred approaches to visitor motivation, experience, and performative practice-focused approaches.

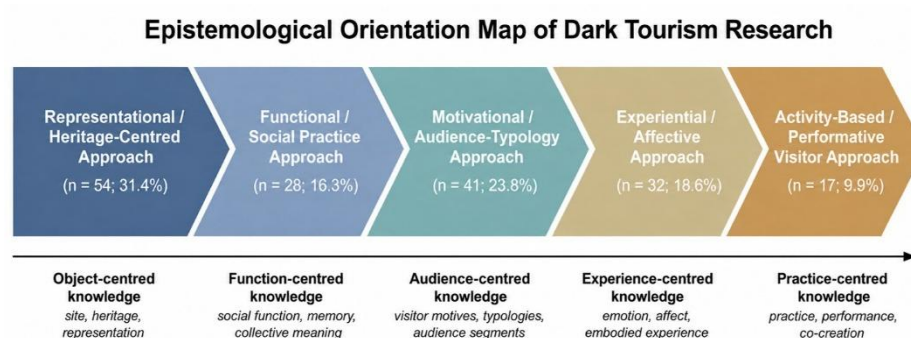


Figure 3. Epistemological orientation map of dark tourism research. Note: The orientations are analytical positions rather than sequential stages of development.

3.3. Dominant Epistemological Orientations

The second research question focuses on the temporal distribution of epistemological orientations during the 2009–2026 period. The findings show that dark tourism research within the examined corpus does not follow a unidirectional and linear paradigm shift. Instead, different epistemological orientations coexist with varying weights over time. However, the percentages for the 2009–2014 period should be considered limited and descriptive indicators, rather than strong evidence of trends, given that the total number of articles is only 11. During the 2009–2014 period, the representational/heritage-centred approach stands out among the limited number of articles. Of the 11 articles published in this period, 5 are coded under this category, and the representational/heritage-centred approach represents 45.5% of articles. During the same period, the motivational/audience-typology approach represents 27.3%, the experiential/affective approach 18.2%, and the functional/social practice approach 9.1%. No papers from this period were classified as activity-based/performative visitor research; however, since the total n value is low, these percentages should be read not as a definitive composition of the early literature but as an indication of a limited distribution within the open access Scopus corpus examined.

The periodic comparison in Table 6 shows that the orientations do not follow a unidirectional developmental trajectory. In the 2015–2019 period, the representational/heritage-centred orientation was represented by 16 articles at 39.0%, and the social function orientation by 9 articles at 22.0%. In the 2020–2023 period, the proportion of papers addressing motivation/audience typology reached 36.5%, with 23 articles, forming the largest category of the period. Experiential/affective orientation and activity-based/performative

visitor orientation were each represented by 13 articles (20.6%). In the 2024–2026 period, the representational/heritage-centred orientation was considered in 35.1% of articles (20), and the activity-based/performative visitor orientation was 17.5% with 10 articles. These changes should only be interpreted as periodic weighting differences within the corpus examined. The low *n* value in the early period and the partial year of 2026 do not allow for strong claims of development.

Table 6. Temporal distribution of dominant epistemological orientations.

Publication Period	Representational/Heritage-Centred	Functional/Social Practice	Motivational/Audience Typology	Experiential/Affective	Activity-Based/Performative Visitor	Total
2009–2014	5 (45.5%)	1 (9.1%)	3 (27.3%)	2 (18.2%)	0 (0.0%)	11
2015–2019	16 (41.5%)	9 (19.5%)	6 (14.6%)	8 (19.5%)	2 (4.9%)	41
2020–2023	13 (20.6%)	9 (17.5%)	23 (34.9%)	13 (19.0%)	5 (7.9%)	63
2024–2026	20 (33.3%)	9 (15.8%)	9 (15.8%)	9 (15.8%)	10 (19.3%)	57
Total	54	29	40	31	18	172

Note: Percentages are calculated within each publication period. Periods are analytically defined to reduce annual volatility and to compare broader shifts in epistemological composition. Percentages for 2009–2014 should be interpreted cautiously because the period includes only 11 articles. The 2024–2026 period includes partial coverage of 2026.

Table 6 numerically shows the distribution of epistemological orientations across periods. However, it is important to present this distribution visually to more clearly observe the changes between periods. In particular, the relative weight of the representational/heritage-centred approach in the early periods, the increasing visibility of the motivational/audience-typology approach in the 2020–2023 period, and the increased visibility of the activity-based/performative visitor approach in the 2024–2026 period are clearer in Figure 4.

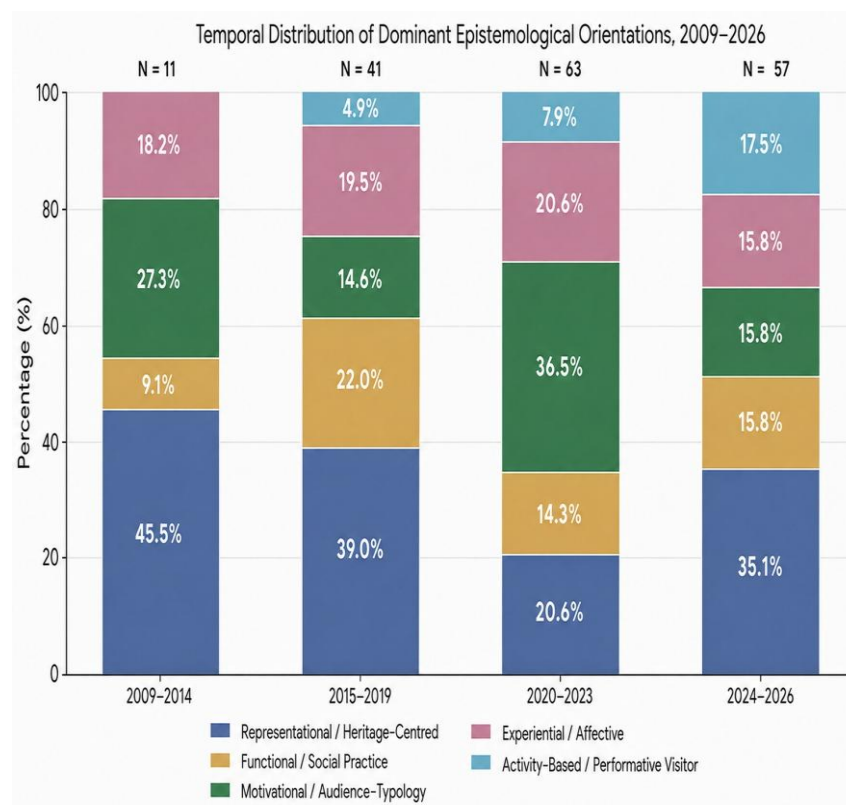


Figure 4. Temporal distribution of dominant epistemological orientations, 2009–2026. Note: Values for 2015–2019 and 2020–2023 do not sum to 100% due to rounding (100.1% and 99.9% respectively).

3.4. Relationships Between Epistemological Orientations and Research Methods

The third research question examines the methodological patterns linking epistemological orientations and research methods. The findings presented in this section should not be considered the results of a statistical relationship test but of a descriptive and interpretive comparison of distributions within the corpus. The findings indicate that some epistemological orientations are more frequently associated with certain methodological preferences. This suggests that method is not merely a technical procedure but also an epistemological choice that influences how the phenomenon of dark tourism is constructed as an object of knowledge.

Post-consensus cross-distribution shows in Table 7 that, while not statistically tested, there are clear descriptive patterns relating methodological preferences and epistemological orientations. There are 20 qualitative studies categorised as having a functional/social practice orientation, 11 with a motivational/audience-typology orientation, and 26 quantitative studies. There are 18 qualitative studies with an experiential/affective orientation and 16 with an activity-based/performative visitor orientation. There are 2 mixed-methods studies categorised as motivational/audience-typology-oriented. These results do not indicate a causal methodological–orientation relationship; rather, they present an intracorporal pattern suggesting that certain research objects are more frequently established with specific forms of evidence.

Table 7. Dominant epistemological orientation by research method.

Dominant Epistemological Orientation	Qualitative	Quantitative	Conceptual	Mixed	Review	Bibliometric Review	Systematic Review	Total
Representational/Heritage-Centred	27	5	9	6	6	1	0	54
Functional/Social Practice	20	2	3	2	1	0	0	28
Motivational/Audience Typology	11	26	0	2	0	2	0	41
Experiential/Affective	18	5	6	2	0	0	1	32
Activity-Based/Performative Visitor	16	0	0	1	0	0	0	17
Total	92	38	18	13	7	3	1	172

Note: Values indicate number of articles. Table 7 shows descriptive methodological patterns across dominant epistemological orientations. No statistical association test was conducted.

Overall, the findings indicate that representation and heritage-centred research maintains its historical weight within the open access Scopus corpus investigated. Motivational and experiential studies have gained importance recently, and research based on performative visitor practice constitutes a smaller but increasingly visible epistemological spectrum. These results show that dark tourism has become a pluralistic area of knowledge production that cannot be encompassed by a single definition, method, or theory. However, this plurality must be evaluated within the boundaries of the corpus studied.

Table 8 shows the frequency of secondary epistemological orientations. An experiential orientation (22.1%) emerges as the most frequent secondary layer. It supports the claim that emotional/affective dimensions cut across multiple approaches. A motivational orientation (19.8%) appears frequently as secondary, especially in mixed-methods or survey-based studies that include attitudinal/emotional variables. Only 14% of studies have a single orientation.

Table 8. Frequency of secondary epistemological orientations ($n = 172$).

Secondary Orientation	<i>n</i>	%
Representational/Heritage-Centred	30	17.4
Functional/Social Practice	26	15.1
Motivational/Audience Typology	34	19.8
Experiential/Affective	38	22.1

Activity-Based/Performative Visitor	20	11.6
No secondary orientation identified	24	14.0
Total	172	100.0

The analysis of secondary orientations in Table 9 indicates that a significant proportion of studies incorporate multiple epistemological logics. Only 14.0% of the articles were coded with no identifiable secondary orientation, suggesting that most studies are analytically multidimensional.

Table 9. Co-occurrence of primary and secondary orientations.

Primary ↓/Secondary →	Rep/Heritage	Functional	Motivational	Experiential	Performative
Representational (n = 54)	—	12	6	14	4
Functional (n = 28)	8	—	3	10	3
Motivational (n = 41)	4	3	—	18	6
Experiential (n = 32)	6	5	7	—	11
Performative (n = 17)	2	3	4	8	—

The most frequent overlaps occur between motivational and experiential orientations, indicating that visitor segmentation studies often incorporate affective components. Similarly, the strong overlap between experiential and activity-based/performative orientations suggests that emotional and embodied dimensions of dark tourism are frequently intertwined with situated practices and interaction.

At the site level, representational and functional orientations frequently co-occur, showing that heritage representation is often analysed in relation to collective memory, identity, and social function.

These findings support the interpretation that epistemological orientations are not mutually exclusive categories but rather coexisting analytical tendencies. The use of a single dominant orientation in this study therefore serves a comparative purpose, and the secondary orientation analysis reveals the underlying multidimensionality of knowledge production within the corpus.

4. Discussion

The main argument made in this study is that the current conceptual stagnation in dark tourism research stems not only from definitional ambiguity but also from the production of knowledge through different epistemological orientations. The findings show that dark tourism research in the examined Scopus-based open access corpus exhibits a plural epistemological structure encompassing representation, social function, visitor motivation, affective experience, and performative visitor practice. This result indicates that the long-debated issue of conceptual diversity in the dark tourism and thanatourism literature is not limited to terminology; it is also related to the level at which researchers make the dark tourism phenomenon visible (Foley & Lennon, 1996; Light, 2017; Seaton, 1996). However, this interpretation should not be generalised to all studies on death and trauma tourism. It should be considered an analytical outcome of the focused corpus that explicitly uses the term dark tourism.

Early discussions of dark tourism largely focused on the relationship between death, disaster, and traumatic histories and the processes of tourist representation and consumption. Foley and Lennon's (1996) conceptualisation of dark tourism established a representation-centred starting point, discussing how spaces associated with death and disaster become visible within modern media, representation, and consumer culture. Stone's (2006) dark tourism spectrum model, on the other hand, strengthened the typological and rep-

representational framework by arguing that dark tourism spaces are not homogeneous and should be considered through different intensities and degrees of darkness.

The findings of this study show that the representational/heritage-centred approach is still the most prevalent approach. However, the fact that this approach constitutes only 31.4% of the total corpus also shows that dark tourism can no longer be explained solely through representational and heritage interpretations. These findings are consistent with a shift from dark tourism research focused on specific locations to dark tourism research focused on social practices. However, there is an important nuance here; although the findings show an increase in visitor-centred approaches, they confirm that the representational/heritage-centred approach has not disappeared. Therefore, in the dark tourism literature, there is no simple transition from an old representation paradigm to a new visitor paradigm.

A more accurate interpretation is that the analysed corpus displays coexisting epistemological orientations in which representation, function, motivation, experience, and practice-oriented approaches coexist. This plurality relates to the defined corpus of this study, not the entire body of literature, due to the limitations of the search strategy and restriction to open access articles. Temporal findings make this plurality more visible. Nevertheless, the changes between periods should be interpreted as descriptive patterns instead of strong causal trends.

The relatively high share of the representational/heritage-centred approach in the periods 2009–2014 and 2015–2019 may reflect the impact of discussions on representation, authenticity, curation, and heritage interpretation during the establishment phase. In contrast, the motivational/audience-typology approach reaching 34.9% of the studies during the 2020–2023 period indicates a strengthening of demand-side explanations, visitor profiling, and behavioural intention studies within the examined corpus. This trend is consistent with empirical studies that attempt to understand visitors' motivations and sought-after experiences in dark tourism (Biran et al., 2011; Isaac & Çakmak, 2014; Magano et al., 2022). However, the low *n* value in the early period and the partial coverage of 2026 necessitate careful reading of temporal comparisons.

The consistent appearance of the experiential/affective approach shows that emotions, bodily encounters, and affective intensities are increasingly discussed in dark tourism research. Buda's (2015) affective tourism approach strengthens the theoretical foundation of this line by discussing the relationship between emotion, body, danger, and political context in tourist encounters. Martini and Buda's (2020) study on dark tourism and affect shows that spaces of death and disaster can be considered not only as representations of the past but also as affective and socio-spatial encounters.

Martini and Sharma's (2022) conceptualisation of the sublime as affect in the context of post-disaster tourism also shows that dark tourism experiences can be examined through bodily and transformative affective intensities in addition to cognitive meaning-making. This study's identification of the experiential/affective approach as a separate category makes this affective transformation visible.

The increased visibility of the activity-based/performative visitor approach in the examined corpus indicates that the visitor is considered not merely a subject whose meaning or motivations are measured but also an actor who co-produces the experience through on-site interaction and bodily practices. This finding does not imply a linear epistemological transformation of the entire dark tourism literature. Rather, it represents a shift in the relative visibility of performative forms of evidence within the selected corpus. Ironside et al. (2026)'s study on prison museums is a strong example of this approach. It demonstrates that visitors do not passively receive their dark tourism experiences from established interpretive designs. Instead, they make sense of the difficult heritage together through social interaction and bodily practices. This finding shows that visitor-centrism

in the dark tourism literature is no longer limited to motivation and experience measurement; the visitor's spatial and interactive practices have also become objects of research.

Methodological findings show that while there is no statistically tested relationship between epistemological orientations and research methods, there are distinct patterns at the descriptive level. The fact that the motivational/audience-typology approach is largely associated with quantitative research is related to studies with this orientation's tendency to examine the visitor through measurable characteristics, intentions, attitudes, and motivational clusters. In contrast, the emphasis on qualitative research in the functional/social practice, experiential/affective, and activity-based/performative visitor approaches indicates that these orientations are more frequently seen with more contextual, interpretive, and process-oriented knowledge-producing logics. This pattern suggests that methodological choices are associated with different forms of evidence and analytical focus. Nonetheless, the descriptive results do not establish a deterministic relationship between method and epistemological orientation.

The most important contribution of this study is that it does not reduce conceptual stagnation in the dark tourism literature to the question of which definition is correct. The relationship between dark tourism and thanatourism, and the boundaries of these concepts with heritage tourism, have long been a problematic and controversial area (Light, 2017). Similarly, González (2018) suggests that the proximity and divergence between dark tourism and memorial tourism vary contextually.

The findings of this study show that a significant portion of this conceptual confusion stems from different epistemological focuses. Nonetheless, the validity of this interpretation should be considered in conjunction with the limitations of the research corpus. A simple search using the term dark tourism might exclude research that is conceptually adjacent. The aim of dark tourism research is not to produce a single and solid definition but rather for each study to clearly state its epistemological position. If a study measures visitor motivation, it establishes the phenomenon of dark tourism as a demand-driven and behavioural object of knowledge.

If a study examines practices of representation, curation, or commemoration, it establishes the phenomenon of dark tourism within the context of heritage and representation. If a study examines the bodily interactions of visitors, it establishes the phenomenon of dark tourism as a performative and processual practice. Making these distinctions clear will increase the theoretical coherence of the topic and better communicate at what level different studies can be compared with each other.

A second recommendation for future research is that the search strategy should be structured to be consistent with the research claim. A narrow search is justifiable if the study examines the core literature on dark tourism. However, if the claim is to encompass the entire meanings of death, trauma, and difficult heritage, related terms such as thanatourism, disaster tourism, memorial tourism, grief tourism, and trauma tourism should also be included comparatively.

The findings of this study also have some practical implications. The continued strength of the representational/heritage-centred approach indicates that ethical representation, authenticity, curation, and commemoration politics remain important to dark tourism sites. Stone and Morton's (2022) study on the representation of the female deceased in the context of dark tourism shows that representation is not a neutral process. It is intertwined with gender, gaze, exploitation, and power relations. The functional/social practice approach suggests that dark tourism sites should be considered not only as places visited but also as social spaces that play a role in processes of collective memory, education, reconciliation, and peacebuilding (Zhang et al., 2023). The experiential/affective and activity-based/performative visitor approaches indicate that emotional intensity and social interactions should

be considered in visitor management, interpretive design, and museum experience planning (Ironside et al., 2026; Martini & Sharma, 2022).

These method–orientation pairings show that different themes are not only examined through different techniques but also the type of evidence also limits how the object of research is constructed. While quantitative designs define the visitor primarily through measurable motivations, profiles, and behavioural intentions, qualitative designs make representation, social function, affect, and on-site interaction processes contextually visible. However, this pattern should not be interpreted as a methodological necessity. Future studies could examine the same epistemological orientation through different methods to determine the extent to which existing method–concept pairings stem from theoretical preference, data access, or disciplinary tradition.

5. Conclusions

This study mapped five dominant epistemological orientations in a corpus of 172 English-language, open access Scopus articles that explicitly use the term dark tourism. Post-consensus results show that the representational/heritage-centred orientation is represented by 54 articles (31.4%), the motivational/audience-typology orientation by 41 (23.8%), the experiential/affective orientation by 32 (18.6%), the functional/social practice orientation by 28 (16.3%), and the activity-based/performative visitor orientation by 17 (9.9%). Temporal and methodological comparisons indicate that, rather than a linear paradigm shift, forms of knowledge production based on representation, social function, motivation, experience, and performative practice coexist within the same corpus with varying weightings.

This study's key contribution is its classification of the diversity in the literature not only by subject heading but also by research object, type of evidence, and level of explanation. However, the results are limited to open access English-language articles indexed in Scopus and the search term dark tourism. This corpus does not represent the entirety of neighbouring traditions such as thanatourism, memorial tourism, disaster tourism, and difficult heritage. Inter-coder reliability was assessed in a randomly generated subsample of 35 articles. Separate coefficients were not calculated for secondary orientations. Future research could examine the extent to which these intracorporal patterns persist in the broader literature on death, trauma, and heritage tourism using different databases and neighbouring terms as comparative search sets.

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