



Exploring moral gaze: Children gazing at suffering in dark tourism

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ABSTRACT

Dark tourism experiences are often imbued with moral matters. This study adopts the participant-generated photo-elicitation method to explore the tourist gaze at the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Thematic analysis of children's photographic narratives reveals that they gaze upon the suffering of others. When interpreting these experiences of suffering, children form moral judgments about what and who caused the suffering. The findings reveal four distinct types of moral gaze: historical moral gaze, interpretive moral gaze, empathic moral gaze, and judgmental moral gaze. The use of participant-generated photo-elicitation method enables children to produce, select, and interpret their own photographs, thereby giving voice to their experiences. This method offers a more nuanced understanding of the children's moral gaze, which has important theoretical and methodological implications for conceptualisation of tourist gaze in dark tourism.

1. Introduction

Dark tourism refers to the act of travelling to sites of death, atrocity, suffering, and disaster (Light, 2017; Stone, 2006; Stone & Sharpley, 2008). Recent theoretical developments in dark tourism have examined a broad spectrum of themes, including definition and conceptualisation, emotional and experiential aspects, ethics and morality considerations, narrative and memory dimensions, impact on communities, tourism management strategies, and educational implications (Iliev, 2021; Light, 2017; Martini & Buda, 2020). Many dark tourism sites provide the social and political contexts to convey specific moral situations. These sites serve as repositories of visual signifiers for historical events, featuring visual representations related to harmful events and actions. This highlights the importance of visual representations in navigating complex histories. They often utilise photographs to present images of atrocity, suffering, and death to construct specific narratives (Friedrich & Johnston, 2013; Gillen, 2014; Hughes, 2008). However, a photograph is not merely a concrete visual depiction but rather a polysemic site, capable of being presented and visualised in multiple ways, subsequently contributing to the construction of various (re)presentations. The act of looking at these images then leads to the formation of diverse interpretations, contributing to the construction of differing narratives and understandings of the dark site and its exhibitions (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003; Stylianou & Stylianou-Lambert, 2017).

Researchers recognise the importance of children as a crucial audience in dark tourism, especially considering the large number of school

students visiting such sites for educational field trips (Hodgkinson, 2013; Israfilova & Khoo-Lattimore, 2019; Yoshida et al., 2016), thus emphasising the significance of the voices of children in understanding dark tourism encounters. However, much of dark tourism research focuses on adults, leaving a critical gap in our understanding of children's experiences. Furthermore, researchers express concerns about the potential impact of exposure to 'dark' images and narratives in dark tourism on children (Kerr & Price, 2018). They acknowledge the importance of engaging with children to explore their experiences within dark tourism research, while also highlighting the challenges associated with research in this context, particularly in implementing suitable methodologies to inform our understanding of children as tourists to dark sites (Canosa et al., 2019; Harper, 2002; Kerr & Price, 2018). This results in their perspectives being overlooked and leaving their voices unheard.

The concept of the tourist gaze has been typically used to interpret tourists' experiences (Urry, 1990). Tourists often gaze through a filter which is shaped by previous experiences, emotions, and expectations characterised by personalities, gender, and nationality (Larsen & Svabo, 2014; Urry & Larsen, 2011). Urry and Larsen (2011) describe this as "the process by which the gaze is constructed and reinforced, and consider who or what authorizes it, what its consequences are for the places which are its objects and how it interrelates with other social practices. The tourist gaze is not a matter of individual psychology but of socially patterned and learnt ways of seeing" (p. 2). Furthermore, there is a growing trend in utilising visual elements of the tourism experience

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(Lennon & Foley, 2000; Sharpley & Stone, 2009), which is examined within the context of tourist gaze (Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016; Lo & McKercher, 2015). Photography plays a crucial role in constructing the visual elements of tourism, with photographs serving as objects of tourist gazes (Urry, 2009).

Research into the tourist gaze has predominantly focused on adults, thereby neglecting the gazing practices of children and creating yet another critical gap in our understanding of their experiences (Larsen & Svabo, 2014). In this study, Urry's (1990) tourist gaze concept has been selected as the theoretical framework to gain insights into children's experiences in dark tourism, focusing on the role of photographs as a methodological tool to explore the photographic gaze. The objective is to examine what children photograph, what meanings they attribute to their photographs, and how the act of photographing contributes to the construction of their tourist gaze at a dark site. Employing the participant-generated photo-elicitation method, this research seeks to understand what children observe when visiting a dark site. By providing insights into tourist gaze in children, this study will make a theoretical contribution to visual approaches in dark tourism and add another dimension to the broader theories of the children's gaze.

2. Literature review

2.1. Dark tourism, tourist gaze, and photography

The literature on motivations for visiting dark sites has emphasised the fascination with death (Poria et al., 2006; Stone & Sharpley, 2008). However, other studies have found that motivations for sought experiences are not necessarily associated with death (Biran et al., 2011; Iliev, 2021; Zheng et al., 2018). Beyond death, some researchers suggest that the most frequently reported motive for dark tourism is the desire to learn and understand historic events (Light, 2017; Yan et al., 2016). Dark tourism sites offer visitors opportunities to gain insights into social, cultural, and political contexts of the past and present. Additionally, other motives for engaging in dark tourism include commemoration and remembrance, cultural and political interest, spiritual and religious, curiosity and entertainment, emotional connection, national identity, and self-understanding (Biran et al., 2011; Kang et al., 2012; Zheng et al., 2018). This suggests that motivations for dark tourism are multifaceted and vary widely among tourists, with research highlighting the multidimensional motivating factors and emphasising the need to understand those who travel to these dark sites (Iliev, 2021).

Dark tourism offers opportunities for tourists to gaze on the sites of tragedy, atrocity, suffering, and death of others (Stone, 2012). Urry (1990) introduced the concept of the tourist gaze to explain how we look and see tourism destinations through a gaze. He proposed that gazing at what we encounter is socially constructed (Urry, 2002). Essentially, it is a "socially patterned and learnt ways of seeing" (Urry & Larsen, 2011, p. 2). According to Urry and Larsen (2011), there are various ways of gazing within tourism such as host gaze (Chan, 2006), local gaze (Maoz, 2006), mutual gaze (Chan, 2006), collective gaze (Urry, 1990), reverse gaze (Höckert et al., 2018) and selfie gaze (Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016). The tourist gaze is multifaceted and influenced by various sociocultural factors and social relationships between people and places. It is shaped by factors associated with the gazers, including nationality, ethnicity, personalities, age, and gender (Larsen & Svabo, 2014; Maoz, 2006; Urry & Larsen, 2011). Additionally, "differing tourist motivations and expectations, including the desire for pleasure, excitement, recreation, spirituality or education construct alternate gazes" (Samarathunga & Cheng, 2021, p. 345). There is not just one single gaze at a particular site. Instead, the gaze is influenced by multitude of factors that lead to the construction of various gazes. These gazes embody individual experiences, interpretation, and differing ways of seeing, resulting in diverse tourist behaviours and expectations.

Urry (1990) elaborates on how the tourist gaze is both produced and sustained through the utilisation of visuals. Photography is central to the

construction of the visual element in tourism, where photographic images are carefully selected and presented to stage destinations and create scenes that shape the tourist gaze (Garrod, 2008; Haldrup & Larsen, 2010; Lanfant, 2009; Markwick, 2001). This includes landscapes, towns, architectural structures, ethnic communities, cultural events, historical artefacts, recreational activities, museums, galleries, and dark tourism sites, all of which can be focal points of the tourist gaze. As such, "tourism is essentially about 'consuming places' visually" (Haldrup & Larsen, 2003, p. 24). Photographic content has the capacity to create aspirational imagery, construct compelling narratives, elicit emotional responses, and personalise visual content for specific target audiences. Both the act of photographing and gazing shape the perception of what is important about a place. This is particularly relevant to dark sites, which serve as repositories of historical events. These dark sites provide visitors with historical context, offering a testament to the events and illustrating the reality of dark tourism sites (Lennon, 2018; Lennon & Foley, 2000). Photographs play a crucial role in documenting the conflicts, atrocities, and suffering at dark sites (Friedrich & Johnston, 2013; Gillen, 2014; Hughes, 2008). To witness this evidence is to gaze at these photographs, which have now become part of Urry's tourist gaze. They are visually choreographed and carefully staged to create a commodified dark tourism experience.

Photographs are not just passive visual records of what was seen, but also narrative tools, suggesting that they are important in constructing 'stories' (Scarles, 2012; Stylianou & Stylianou-Lambert, 2017). At the dark sites, photographic narratives serve to capture the political complexity of the larger milieu, including people, place, and history. Photographs depicting atrocities, suffering, and death play a critical role in guiding the interpretation of the dark site. However, they are not mere literal depictions of the dark site, but rather offer multiple interpretations of the historical past (Lennon & Foley, 2000; Sharpley & Stone, 2009). Furthermore, "gazing is not merely seeing, but involves cognitive work of interpreting, evaluating, drawing comparisons and making mental connections between signs and their referents, and capturing representative signs photographically" (Larsen, 2006, p. 247). The act of seeing and interpreting destinations is influenced by the visual narrative created through photography (Lo & McKercher, 2015; Scarles, 2012; Urry, 1990). As such photographs become integral components in the construction of tourist experiences, influencing the ways in which places are perceived and understood.

Tourist gaze and photography are interconnected practices, each reinforcing the other. Tourists' interactions and experiences are integrated into the act of capturing and engaging with images. Photography serves as a means for tourists to capture and frame their travel experiences. The framing of the subject matter in the photographs guides and structures the way they see and interpret the places they visit (Haldrup & Larsen, 2010; Lo & McKercher, 2015; Scarles, 2012; Urry, 1990). As such, photography become a mediating tool that structures and reflects the tourist gaze (Garrod, 2008; Lanfant, 2009; Larsen, 2006). Photographs direct the tourist's attention to specific aspects of the site, thereby highlighting that what is deemed worth gazing at is also worth photographing and remembering. Specifically, dark sites are viewed as complex spaces imbued with historical significance, imagery, and interpretation. Photographs at a dark site can be utilised to shape the gaze construct and tourists' perceptions, thereby contributing to their narrative understanding of the dark site and its exhibitions (Maoz, 2006; Urry & Larsen, 2011). This dynamic relationship between the act of photography and the gaze not only shapes the perception of what is important about a place but also influences the selective, curated, and reflective gaze of tourists.

2.2. Research with children in dark tourism

Research with children in tourism presents a multifaceted challenge (Canosa & Graham, 2016). Dark tourism sites, associated with difficult historical realities, inherently add layers of complexity to research

involving children. One of the foremost challenges revolves around incorporating children and their voices into the research process. This involves implementing suitable research methodologies and designs to elicit, observe, and interpret children's experiences. It also involves considering the adult-child power dynamics, as well as addressing specific ethical challenges relating to obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy, and maintaining confidentiality during data collection (Price, 2022). Thus, empowering children to have more control over the research process. Despite these challenges, there is widespread recognition of the importance of including children's perspective in dark tourism research (Ballantyne et al., 2023; Kerr & Price, 2016). Additionally, there is a growing acceptance that children not only have the right to express their perspectives but should also be acknowledged and respected for their unique contributions to the broader dark tourism discourse. Research with children requires creative 'co-research' methods to allow children control over their own experiences.

Despite efforts being made to develop collaborations with children to explore their experiences, a critical gap in methodological and design persists, necessitating further research, particularly concerning how to utilise creative methods to actively involve children in the research process and effectively bring out their voices and experiences (Ballantyne et al., 2023; Kerr et al., 2021; Khoo-Lattimore, 2015). As such, there is a need for child-driven methods in dark tourism research to provide agency to children. Pursuing such research interests has the potential to provide children with an active voice in shaping the research agenda, ensuring that their voices are not only heard but also contribute meaningfully to the overall research design. By empowering them to actively participate can broaden our understanding of children's perspectives. It also serves as a means to further explore how their perspectives impact and are impacted by dark tourism. Research that aims to reveal the significance of children's voices in dark tourism remains a central concern.

The methodologies such as drawing, painting, and photo-elicitation have shown to alleviate certain methodological issues in research with children, enabling them to visually interpret their experiences (Dresler, 2024; Khoo-Lattimore, 2015). Of particular importance is photo-elicitation, a research method that utilises photographs as stimuli to elicit responses, emotions, and meanings within an interview context. This method involves integrating images into the interview process to gain additional perspectives (Epstein et al., 2006; Harper, 2002). Photo-elicitation promotes "deep and interesting talk" (Harper, 2002, p. 23). Furthermore, photo-elicitation methods "rely on the unique abilities of visual materials to convey information or affect..." (Rose, 2016, p. 328). Photographs offer a visual platform for representing participants' experiences, thoughts, feelings, memories, and cultural practices. This allows participants to construct and make sense of their experiences in ways that "words alone" cannot elicit (Harper, 2002, p.13). With photo-elicitation "it is possible for participants to speak, to perform, and to represent" (Buckingham, 2009, p. 648). Furthermore, some researchers suggest that photographic images may assist children in discussing more difficult subjects, potentially revealing insights that might otherwise remain unassessed (Guillemin & Drew, 2010; White et al., 2010). Furthermore, children may introduce topics into interviews that adult researchers might not have access to or deem important (Clark-Ibanez, 2004; Guillemin & Drew, 2010).

Photo-elicitation can be broadly categorised into three methods based on the source of the images: (1) researcher-generated images, (2) researcher-participant-generated images, and (3) participant-generated images (Epstein et al., 2006). The level of participant involvement in the research process varies across with each method, and it differs depending on whose interest the photos aim to depict (Danker et al., 2017; Leonard & McKnight, 2015). There is a growing interest in collaborative methods, partly in response to concerns about researchers prioritising their own interests and agendas over those of participants and exerting control over how participants are represented through data analysis and presentation (Buckingham, 2009; Zhang & Hennebry-

Leung, 2023). Many researchers prefer the 'participant-generated images' method as it has the potential to afford participants more agency and control over the content of a research project (Guillemin & Drew, 2010; Bök & Mykkänen, 2014). This method allows participants to choose the content they want to capture, select which photographs to discuss, and articulate their thoughts on the images as they wish. Participants are positioned as 'storytellers' with greater control in narrating their own stories and depicting their own experiences through the photographs they produce (Danker et al., 2017; White et al., 2010).

When considering research involving children in dark tourism, two notable gaps emerge within the existing literature. Firstly, while the utilisation of photo-elicitation to explore children's experiences has gained popularity across various disciplines (Mizen, 2005; Torre & Murphy, 2015; Walls & Holquist, 2019; Walton & Niblett, 2013), its application in the context of dark tourism remains rare. Moreover, there is limited methodological discourse on photo-elicitation in research with children in dark tourism. Secondly, much of tourist gaze studies is centred on adults, with limited attention given to the gaze of children (Leonard, 2019). Thus, children's gaze remains largely unexplored in the dark tourism research. It is important to understand how children gaze upon dark sites. Their gaze may differ from that of adults, offering a unique perspective for viewing and interpreting these dark sites. Examining their gaze can help identify how these experiences contribute to their understanding of historical events. Analysing children's gaze has the potential to diversify the exploration of dark tourism experiences, recognising the significance of their role in shaping the broader narrative. This study examines the tourist gaze of children at the War Remnants Museum, in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Specifically, the focus is on the gaze directed towards children's photographs, contributing to the importance of the visual in dark tourism, where imagery serves as a medium for interpreting and experiencing dark events at various dark tourism attractions (Lennon & Foley, 2000; Sharpley & Stone, 2009). This study utilises the 'participant-generated photo-elicitation' method to explore children's tourist gaze in dark tourism. The research question is: How do the children view the exhibitions at the War Remnants Museum and how does this relate to their tourist gaze?

This research extends the study of children's dark tourism experiences by exploring the nuances of children's tourist gaze at the War Remnants Museum, thereby adding a new dimension to their interpretive experiences in dark tourism.

3. Methods

3.1. The context of the study: the War Remnants Museum

The field trip to the War Remnants Museum in 2019 provided the context for this research. This study was part of a larger research project, with some details of the methods have been outlined elsewhere (Dresler, 2024). The War Remnants Museum presents the historical events of the US war in Vietnam from a perspective of the Vietnamese people. This museum is one of the most popular dark tourism destinations in Vietnam, attracting both international and domestic visitors. Furthermore, the museum hosts school field trips to educate young visitors on Vietnam's memoryscape. The War Remnants Museum is well known for its highly politicised content associated with death and suffering. This dark site displays some of the most confronting artefacts retrieved from the war and tells stories of extreme violence and human suffering (Gillen, 2014). It also makes extensive use of photographs to carry its narratives of the War. The photographs are organised into themed rooms, with each room containing mainly enlarged photographs, supplemented with a short text in both English and Vietnamese. Despite the brief text given, the visitors are to experience the exhibits visually and immerse themselves in the war, suffering, and death. The War Remnants Museum was selected for this study as the use of photography and photographs is integral to broader considerations of museum practices, particularly in collecting and displaying. These practices form a crucial museological

milieu of this dark site.

3.2. Data collection

The participant-generated photo-elicitation method was selected to collect data from children, which included both photographs and texts they produced. This process helps children in articulating their perspectives (Liebenberg, 2009), by providing them with a medium through which they can express themselves visually and verbally. By producing their photographs and texts, children are encouraged to communicate their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Additionally, engaging in the production of these materials may prompt deeper reflection, thereby leading to a more nuanced articulation of their perspectives. In applying the participant-generated photo-elicitation method, this study is situated within the theoretical contexts of visual methodological and participative co-production (Rose, 2016). Visual methodologies emphasise the importance of utilising visual material to understand social phenomena, while participative co-production highlights the active involvement of participants in the research process. By incorporating this visual method into the research design, there is recognition of the importance of visual communication in conveying complex ideas and experiences, particularly for children who may find it challenging to articulate their perspectives verbally.

The main characteristic of the photo-elicitation method is that photographs are used in the in-depth interview (Chronis, 2005; Harper, 2002). In this study, the worksheet approach was used to allow for both child-centred activities and self-directed exploration of the museum (DeWitt & Storksdieck, 2008). In the field trip worksheet, the children were asked to select one photo they had taken during the trip and describe their thoughts on it. They were also asked to explain why they chose that specific photograph (Appendix A). In this way, each photograph had its own narrative panel provided by each child, an approach that assists in uncovering meanings that may not always be obvious in the photograph itself. Participant-generated visual data is particularly suitable for this study, as taking photographs is part of the field trip experience. Photographs can be useful in the recording and recalling of information from the field trip, to complete their worksheet activity. Children had a high level of control over which exhibits to photograph and over their selection of images to discuss in the worksheet activity. This combination of visual and written methods allowed the children time to select the photographs they were interested in and to reflect on their images they wanted to write about, rather than them trying to verbalise an immediate response to questions in an interview situation. There were no interactions between the members of the research team and the children before, during, or after the field trip to reduce the imbalance of power between the researchers and the children (Price, 2022).

The data were obtained from nine classes in a secondary school located in the southern region of Vietnam. The three-phased consent process was applied to gain access to the students' worksheets. First, the school principal was approached to gain consent to collect data on the field trip. Second, parental consent was obtained. The parents were informed that if they did not wish their child to participate in the study, their child's worksheet would not be given to the research team for analysis. Third, the students were informed that they would not have to answer any questions and that they could withdraw at any stage of the research process. There were 30 parents and/or children who declined the invitation to participate in the study, and 41 children decided to opt out of this phase of the study. Taken together, there were 395 Vietnamese students aged 14 years old participated in the field trip. For the purpose of this study, the term 'children' was specifically defined here as those who are 14 years old or younger. To maintain anonymity, a random letter with a number was assigned to each of the 324 students' direct quotes (for example, "G-241" indicated the student was in the G Class and was number 241 from the 365 students). Ethical approval was obtained from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee.

3.3. Data analysis

Photographic images provide opportunities for children to construct their interpretations of the exhibits at the War Remnants Museum (Sharpley & Stone, 2009). The photograph is not a concrete visual depiction of the subject but instead a polysemic site that may be presented and visualised in multiple ways and subsequently employed in constructing a variety of (re)presentations and in providing diverse visual narratives and differing understandings. For children, factors such as their personal exposure to the US war in Vietnam, including their cultural background, social identity, and personal connections, can impact how they interpret and relate to the content of the photograph (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003; Stylianou & Stylianou-Lambert, 2017). Furthermore, children's behaviours, reactions, and the content they choose to engage with may be influenced by supervising teachers as part of the educational activity. Similarly, for the members of the research team, their interpretations may be influenced by various factors, including their cultural background, professional expertise, theoretical framework, and research objectives. Together, each student and member of the research team engaged with the photograph in a way that is informed by their individual knowledge, understanding, experience, relationships, and emotions, contributing to the process of interpreting the photographs (Batchen et al., 2012).

The photographs and texts were analysed together using inductive thematic analysis to identify patterns across the data, capturing the meanings that the children gave to their photographs (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Langmann & Pick, 2018) (Appendix B). Both the photographs and texts were open coded, resulting in the formulation of corresponding subthemes categories. The thematic analysis initially involved analysing the data to identify the meanings conveyed by what children described in their photographs and extracting meanings from the visual content. The analytic process involved the following phases: (a) reading each transcript and viewing the accompanying photograph to familiarise with the data, (b) generating initial codes by making descriptive notes using children's own words, along with descriptors, to identify different elements within the photograph and gain a comprehensive understanding of its visual content and context, (c) identifying initial themes by providing text quotes with the relevant aspects of the visual content to organise the codes and capture the main ideas of each theme, (d) reviewing themes by identifying recurrent patterns and themes across transcripts and the visual contents of the photographs, and (e) defining and labelling themes based on the text and the photographic content. To ensure rigour and trustworthiness of the findings, a process of member checking functions was conducted. This involved three research members independently analysing the photographic and textual data and, through group discussion, reached consensus on the codes, themes, sub-themes, and labels to ensure the contents were suitably represented. In the event of contradictions, the team re-evaluated and redefined the themes accordingly.

4. Findings

At the War Remnants Museum, the visual representations of suffering and death captivated the attention of many children, directing their gaze towards the harsh realities of war. Images of suffering were extraordinary subjects to be gazed at and experienced. As children focused on specific aspects of the conflict, they reflected upon the moral dimensions of the war, such as issues of suffering, accountability, justice, and human rights. Children engaged in various moral gazes concerning the US war in Vietnam, and these moral gazes have been grouped thematically into four central themes: historical moral gaze, interpretive moral gaze, empathetic moral gaze, and judgmental moral gaze. The visual representations emphasised how photographs of suffering acted as the central element for performativity involved in the moral gaze.

4.1. Historical moral gaze

Through their photographs, children captured specific scenes, events, and artefacts related to the war. They selected images revealing “the cruelty and destruction of war” (J316) and “people suffering from the consequences of the war” (F211). The historical moral gaze contributed to a deeper historical understanding of the conflict and its broader implications: “the harm of war” (G249), “devastating consequences of the war” (F194), and “the consequences of war in the past and at the same time warns us of future wars” (I271). Through their historical moral gaze, children engaged with the moral lessons of the past. They emphasised their commitment of preventing future conflicts and promoting peace as a moral imperative. Some children demonstrated a moral commitment to “...prevent war” (H285) and determined “we should not go to war” (B46). This indicated a moral commitment that transcends mere historical understanding to include a proactive stance on contemporary and future issues. Through their photographs, they engaged in a historical moral gaze that allowed them to actively engage with the subject matter, appreciate its complexities, develop historical awareness, and comprehend its consequences.

Children used their photographs as a deliberate act of remembering and honouring the lives affected by the suffering, serving as markers of remembrance and moral reflection. Through these visual representations, they showed a respectful attitude towards the experience and memories of those who lived through the war: “Because I feel respect, having experienced the harsh war, but the Vietnamese still tried to come through” (I353). Some children acknowledged the sacrifices made for their country: “the sacrifice of previous generations” (D141) and they “deserved to be respected and remembered forever” (A8). The historical moral gaze served as a means of bearing witness to the past, ensuring that the struggles of those affected by the war are acknowledged and remembered.

4.2. Interpretive moral gaze

Photographs provided visual elements of the military actions, the ensuing suffering, and the consequences of war, enabling children to engage in an interpretive moral gaze. Many children perceived the cause of the conflict as “...the U.S. invasion of the country” (D128), attributing the suffering to “the barbaric actions of foreign invaders against our people” (A4) and “...the cruelty of the people who invaded our country” (G249). In gazing into their photographs, some children viewed the Vietnamese as being the victims of a moral standard violation. Specifically, actions against innocent people: “I chose this picture because it clearly shows the cruelty and brutality of the American military towards innocent Vietnamese people” (H290). They are not merely seeing a historical event but also morally assessing the actions of US military and considering questions of responsibility and accountability: “because the picture shows the savagery, brutality and lack of humanity of the American soldiers, casually smiling and taking pictures while stepping on the bodies of our people” (G250). Children’s interpretive gaze revealed their engagement with complex moral issues surrounding the war. They viewed the photographs not merely as images of the historical events, but as illustrations of moral transgressions, victimisation, and the need for accountability.

Some children engaged in the interpretive moral gaze in an attempt to identify the consequences of the war: “I see the consequences of the war” (H270). Some children gazed upon images of destroyed landscapes: I360 showed, “the devastation caused by American troops”, comparing the landscape before and after the war highlighting lasting ecological destruction. Others recognised the enduring impact of the war through intergenerational suffering. They selected photographs that accentuated the details of ongoing suffering, linking the past and present together: “This image seems to speak of the consequences of the war that affected the next generation, even though it was over” (J366). Specific references were made to the environmental impact of Agent Orange:

“because it reflects the devastation of the war...the physical environmental effects of the Agent Orange poisoning” (D137). They recognised the ongoing suffering of the innocent victims born after the war: “This photo shows the body of a newborn who was a victim of the Agent Orange poison caused by the cruel war” (F220).

4.3. Empathic moral gaze

Children’s photographs served to depict suffering, aiming to convey the human toll of the conflict. Their empathic moral gaze involved recognising and empathising with the suffering of the Vietnamese people. The children used descriptors like ‘suffered’, ‘suffering’, and ‘harm’ to align with their images of the suffering produced during the war: “In fact, when I look at this picture, what I see is the suffering” (C102). Many children gazed upon the images of helpless and innocent victims: “I chose this photo because I feel so sorry for those people. This is the consequences of war, death and suffering” (B46). The recognition of the suffering, implied that the children were not merely gazing at their photographs but were acknowledging the pain and suffering endured by the Vietnamese during the war. The empathic gazing revealed a deep emotional engagement with the content of the photographs: “The reason I chose this picture is because this is the one that makes me feel the deepest, it is the brutality of the war that our people suffered” (F217). The empathic moral gaze evoked an identification with the victims depicted in the photographs: “Every time I look at this picture, I feel in my heart there is an insecurity, both sympathy and fear for the people during the war” (H307). This identification is central to the empathic gaze, as it enabled children to emotionally connect with the pain and suffering of others. The empathic moral gaze often elicited feelings of sadness: “When I took this photo, I was very sad and I cried” (I331).

Children’s empathic moral gaze is not limited to recognising physical suffering. Some children added to their description of physical suffering to include other forms of suffering such as fear, anxiety, and humiliation: “the fear and anxiety shown on the faces of the mother and her children – war caused people to be truly mentally distressed, physically tormented” (G272). Some children selected photographs depicting extreme suffering to the extent that the images were deemed to be degrading: “The reason I chose this photo was because it depicted the cruelty of American soldiers during war and helped the reader feel the pain of the person being dragged behind the tank” (H282). Some children experienced fear when looking at their pictures: “When I looked at this picture, I felt a little scared”. This sentiment was echoed by others who expressed that “War is terrifying” (A28). Images of suffering were used as an indicator of morality and may prompt children to question the moral aspects of the situation depicted in their photographs, potentially leading to a deeper exploration of the moral dimensions of the US war in Vietnam. Children emphasised the emotional and psychological impact of war, thus expanding the scope of the empathic moral gaze.

4.4. Judgmental moral gaze

The judgmental moral gaze requires assessing the historical events and the actions of those involved, and making evaluative judgment based on perceived moral standards. Children used their photographs to gaze upon the US military and pass moral judgments about their actions. The judgmental gaze was centred on the foreign invasion as the cause of suffering. The judgmental gaze evaluated the actions as “barbaric cruelty of American soldiers” (J312), “the cruelty, evilness, and inhumane actions that the America’s military” (F213), “the savagery of the invaders” (G256) “the wickedness of America’s military” (I278), and “immoral of the American soldiers” (G258). The judgmental gaze reflects a certain level of historical understanding. The children are not just depicting the US military as the aggressor, but they are placing it within the broader context of the war, and summarising the suffering as the outcomes of military violence.

The judgmental gaze can lead to attributing blame and

accountability to those perceived as responsible for the immoral actions. Some children sought to identify those who could be blamed and expressed moral condemnation for the harm inflicted on the victims: “I just want to condemn the crimes” (I327), “...condemn the cruelty”, (K356), and “condemn those who invaded my country” (A24). When gazing upon actions they deemed morally wrong, many children reacted with anger: “I felt very angry” (H225). Children’s anger reflected their moral disapproval of the US military’s actions: “I feel angry about the atrocities...” (A24). Additionally, the judgmental moral gaze evoked feelings of moral disgust, especially when children encountered images they found to be morally repulsive, offensive, and inhumane: “I saw some pictures of the US army killing Vietnamese people. They cut off the heads of the Vietnamese people and they took pictures” (B71). Judgmental moral gaze extends beyond observing and documenting physical harm to encapsulate a broader narrative of moral wrongdoing.

5. Discussion

The tourist gaze is structured through photography, with photographs playing an important role in influencing the tourists’ gazes and travel experiences (Markwick, 2001; Urry, 1990). The act of photography provides insights into children’s perspectives and experiences at this dark site. When taking photographs, children may engage in the tourist gaze. As such, “to gaze is not just seeing, but seeing something or somebody intently” (Lanfant, 2009, p. 240). Children’s photographs serve as both political artefacts and moral prompts, bringing visibility to subjects of their choosing and reflecting their experiences. The moral gaze is shaped by how children perceive, interpret, and evaluate what they see at the War Remnants Museum. Specifically, the tourist gaze at this dark site extends beyond mere observation, often involving active engagement and revolving around moral judgments. For these Vietnamese children, gazing upon images of suffering and death is seen as a moral activity. The act of gazing at photographs can itself be a form of performance within the dark tourism space (Larsen, 2006).

Suffering was identified as a critical moral issue in children’s gazing at war-related photographs. These images become the visual sites of suffering, serving as moral spaces of encounter. Within the War Remnants Museum, photographs function as visual signifiers, encapsulating historical narratives, symbolising suffering, eliciting emotional engagement, facilitating interpretation, and contributing to the process of meaning-making (Edwards, 2014; Gillen, 2014; Stylianou & Stylianou-Lambert, 2017). Most importantly, they act as visual narratives through which children construct their moral considerations relating to this dark site. In their capacity as gazers, children actively engage in the performativity of the visual elements of the photographs. Children moralise the images of suffering at the War Remnants Museum. These images serve as symbols that evoke moral reflections, emotions, and remembrance, illustrating how photographs provide a stage for performativity, enabling children to connect with their people, culture, and history (Edwards, 2014; Harper, 2002). Photographs become a dynamic and influential medium for shaping the moral gaze of children, particularly in the context of suffering in dark tourism.

In the historical moral gaze, photographs provided a tangible representation of the historical event, making abstract concepts more concrete and accessible. Children vividly portrayed the harsh realities of war, such as destruction and suffering, which might not be as impactful through words alone (Harper, 2002). Photographs serve to document the atrocities, suffering, and death (Friedrich & Johnston, 2013; Gillen, 2014). When children gaze upon their photographs, they are not just looking at an image, they are engaging with history and the experiences of others. The historical gaze emphasised the historical awareness in shaping their moral perspective and nuanced the complexities of the war and its consequences. The historical moral gaze recognised the historical significance of the war and those involved. Children appreciated its complexities and the impact on their society and people. Photographs of suffering, when viewed through the historical gaze, encapsulate

memories of a specific group (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003), thereby playing a crucial role in how a group collectively understands and relates to a particular dark site.

For the children, their photographs are more than historical records; they serve as tools for wider interpretation of the historical past and creating meanings through both individual and collective remembrance (Garlick, 2002; Sharpley & Stone, 2009). They captured images to recognise and interpret the impacts of the war, reflecting the suffering of the entire nation. They broadened their description from human suffering to include wider social, economic, environmental, and cultural suffering. The interpretative moral gaze enabled children to understand that people today are still enmeshed in the war. They interpreted that individuals are not only suffering from the war itself but also from the outcomes of the war. This is especially evident for victims of Agent Orange (Martin, 2009; Ngo et al., 2006). Interpretive moral gaze is associated with their understanding of the war’s moral dimensions, the nature of victimhood, and its impact at both the individual and collective levels. This engagement indicated multiple levels of moral assessments and understanding (Haidt, 2003; Hoffman, 2000).

The emphatic moral gaze reveals that children are not detached observers; instead, they feel a deep connection with the subjects of their photographs. As such, photographing is not a passive activity, children respond to the immediacy of gazing and photographing the suffering of others with feelings of sadness and fear. Thus, their photography is not just a means of capturing images but also a way of understanding, expressing, and connecting with the deep emotional realities of those affected by suffering. Gazing into the suffering of others stimulates emotions of empathy, sadness, and fear for the other’s situation (Decety & Jackson, 2004; Eisenberg et al., 2005). This emotional response is a critical aspect of the empathic process, as it demonstrates a genuine concern and understanding for the suffering of others (Decety, 2011; Decety & Cowell, 2014).

Gazing into images of injustice prompts children to consider the moral implications of war, eliciting expressions of moral considerations regarding behaviours that violate moral standards (Uhlmann et al., 2015). Children’s judgmental gaze indicated their moral stance on the conflict, highlighting what they considered to be negative moral qualities about unjustifiable acts of harm inflicted on others (Prinz, 2011; Quigley & Tedeschi, 1996). This aspect is critical in the judgment gaze as it implies that the children were not merely reacting to any behaviour, but they were actively evaluating actions they perceived as both intentional and immoral. The feelings of anger and disgust emerged from these perceptions (Rozin et al., 1999).

Since the introduction of the tourist gaze concept, criticisms have emerged from researchers, emphasising the importance of interactions, relationships, and the utilisation of space in shaping the tourist gaze (Hollinshead, 1999; Leiper, 1992; Perkins & Thorns, 2001). By reconceptualising the act of gazing within the broader context of performative tourism practice, the tourist gaze can undergo a transformation from viewing into active interaction and engagement (Barenholdt et al., 2017; Perkins & Thorns, 2001). Therefore, the tourist gaze involves not only the visual practices of the tourist experience but also recognises the complex social relations and power dynamics that shape the various forms of gazes. As such, each of the moral gaze provides a specific perspective through which children engage with the moral dimensions of their experiences. Understanding the different forms of moral gaze offers insights into the multifaceted nature of children’s experiences at such sites and allows researchers to see not just how children interpret and evaluate specific images of suffering, but also how they respond to these images within a broader moral context. Dark tourism, while centred on death and the dead, often reveals insights into the living through its consumption and performance (Stone, 2018). Tourists do not merely gaze at the dark sites, but also at the impacts of the dark events on the victims, perpetrators, survivors, and local communities within the broader significance of the sites. Hence, they are engaged with the ongoing social, cultural, and political dimensions associated with dark

sites (Wright & Sharpley, 2018). Moral gaze in children contributes to the development of nuanced perspectives on the complex narratives of the war and fosters a more comprehensive understanding of how children navigate the complexities of dark tourism narratives.

6. Implications and directions for further research

Researching with children in the context of dark tourism requires special theoretical and methodological considerations to facilitate their understanding and expression of the historical events. In this study, participant-generated photo-elicitation method was used, and children's own photographs provide a visual medium through which they actively engage in capturing, selecting, and discussing their images to illustrate their moral gaze. This study offers a novel approach to establishing a link between the act of taking photographs (the practice of photography), verbal reflection (photo-elicitation), and the tourist gaze (experience). Researchers acknowledge that 'who produces' the photographs can have important theoretical and methodological implications for research processes and outcomes (Epstein et al., 2006).

From a theoretical perspective, through the act of taking photographs, children not only capture images of suffering but also become active participants in the experience. Taking photographs emphasises the active roles in constructing the image and illustrating the subjective meaning of suffering. As children have control over curating their experiences, they are able to determine what should be included in their photographs (Clark-Ibanez, 2004; Garlick, 2002). During this process, they gaze upon their images, analyse their content, and make moral judgments. Participant-generated images show the types of photographs children take, how they reflect on the suffering, and how they relate these images of suffering to themselves. By examining why children choose specific photographs and how they interpret them, researchers can gain a deeper understanding not only of what children see but also how they see it. This analysis provides insights into the multifaceted nature of their moral gaze, enriching our understanding of their encounters with suffering, memorialisation, and ethical dilemmas at dark sites. Such insights form a crucial process in understanding the moral gaze in dark tourism, as it reveals how children interpret and derive meaning from the moral complexities inherent at many dark sites.

Participant-generated images provide a critical insider's perspective, contributing to an emic understanding of children's experiences in dark tourism. By examining children's photographs, researchers can gain insights into the emic understanding of how children perceive, interpret, and engage with dark sites. Their photographs offer a direct representation of their experiences and interpretations of the moral gaze. The Vietnamese children, as insiders, capture photographic images that carry cultural, historical, and political significance for them. This unique and context-rich perspective adds depth to the understanding of the moral gaze. Emphasising the importance of emic understanding of children's experiences in dark tourism through participant-generated images acknowledges the influence of the cultural, historical, and political context of the dark site. Their selective moral gaze shapes not only the photographs themselves but also how the children perceive, interpret, and remember a dark site. In actively constructing their moral gaze, participant-generated images serve as a "powerful medium to help the researcher understand their reality" (Harper, 2002, p. 140). As such, without directly involving children in the creation process, researcher-generated methods may inadvertently overlook culturally specific nuances, potentially limiting the depth of the insights into children's moral gaze in dark tourism.

From a methodological perspective, communicating the intricacies of moral issues can be challenging for many children, as they attempt to convey the complexity of human suffering. Photographs serve as valuable prompts for children, facilitating discussion about abstract concepts. Additionally, photographs can assist children in articulating their moral thoughts that may be difficult to express verbally (Croghan et al., 2008; Guillemin & Drew, 2010). Using photographs as moral prompts

engages children in a wider discussion on various aspects of the moral gaze, such as their perceptions of justice, accountability, and responsibility as they evaluate actions and events presented at the dark sites. As such, the visual nature of the photographs helps children describe and illustrate their differing understandings of suffering, express their emotions in response to such suffering, and articulate their moral perspectives. This contributes to insights into different forms of moral gaze, adding value to their perceptions and experiences within the context of dark tourism. This implies that visual representation can convey meanings and experiences which might not be possible with other forms of communication.

The participant-generated photo-elicitation method provides a means to create a visual encounter, allowing children to gaze at suffering through their own eyes. This approach enables them to form their own perspectives, rather than being influenced by adults' perspectives, which may disregard their voices. Therefore, "photo elicitation as a method is good at giving children agency because the images and explanation mainly come from the kids themselves" (Clark-Ibanez, 2004, p. 78). Children's photographs of suffering offer a means to visualise the historical event, providing a context in which they can develop their moral gaze. This visual voice allows for different forms of moral gaze to be expressed. The participant-generated photo-elicitation method not only provides researchers with a method to understand the different forms of moral gaze, but it also enables children to direct the focus of the research, thereby gaining insights into the multifaceted nature of their experiences in dark tourism. This method enriches our understanding of how children perceive and navigate the complexities of dark tourism experience.

Notably, the participant-generated photo-elicitation and worksheet approach, children are recognised as collaborators in this research. This approach allows children to take control of the research content, thereby positioning themselves as experts on their experiences (Epstein et al., 2006; Liebenberg, 2009). By asking children to select images they have already photographed, the research team removes themselves from the image production process, which in turn discourages children from developing perceptions of what might be considered as the 'right' photographs (Garrod, 2008; Power et al., 2014). This ownership enhances the authenticity of their experiences, providing a "... more representative of how they themselves interpret their context, relationships, decisions and realities" (Liebenberg, 2009, p. 442). Furthermore, children are not being interviewed by the researcher, thereby overcoming hierarchies in adult-child research relationships (Böök & Mykkänen, 2014). This positions the children at the center of the research process, thereby transferring further control to them and enabling them to produce, direct, and communicate their gazes. The strength of this particular approach is its ability to enable children to reveal aspects of their moral gaze that might otherwise remain unexamined (Guillemin & Drew, 2010; White et al., 2010), aspects which may not be possible to uncover in an interview with a researcher (Clark-Ibanez, 2004).

There are some limitations to be noted. An important limitation of this research is that the sample diversity is confined to Vietnamese children aged 14 years. Therefore, the findings are not generalisable to all children. Another limitation is that nature of the moral gaze is situated within the specific historical context of the US war in Vietnam, reflecting complex social dynamics influenced by cultural, historical, and political factors, as well as the relationships between a specific group of people and the dark site. As such, more work is needed to further understand and characterise the moral gaze in children within the context of dark tourism. First, age-stratified studies focussing on children of different ages would be useful, as they may provide insights into how moral perspectives evolve and develop through various stages of childhood. Second, analysing the experiences and moral judgments of children, young people, and adults at dark tourism sites could reveal insightful differences in perception and moral reasoning across different age groups. This comparison offers a more nuanced understanding of how moral gazes are shaped by age, experience, and cognitive

Table 1 (continued)

Themes	Description of the photographic images	Description of the text
Historical moral gaze	devastation. - Tortured prisoners and brave soldiers.	- Analysing implications of war.
Interpretive moral gaze	Images capturing: - Casualties of bombing - Suffering of civilians - Environmental impact of Agent Orange - Consequences of military actions - Controversial issues of war crimes and atrocities	- Interpreting meaning of the acts of aggression and brutality - Analysing the use of toxic chemicals and the environmental devastation. - Considering the moral dimensions of military actions and the consequences for civilians.
Empathetic moral gaze	Images depicting: - Casualties of bombing - Agent Orange victims - Disabilities/deformities	- Expressing of empathy and compassion towards innocent victims. - Contemplating the suffering endured by Agent Orange victims. - Evoking empathy with people with war-related injuries and disabilities.
Judgmental moral gaze	Images displaying: - Violence and human rights abuses. - Images of corpses, atrocities, and executions.	- Assessment and evaluation of military actions. - Reflecting on moral responsibility of individuals involved in perpetrating such acts of violence and holding them accountable for their action.

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