

Holocaust Museum motivates visitors to create social change, study suggests

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"Dark tourism" experiences—sites and museums associated with

violence, tragedy and war—draw millions of travelers each year. New research suggests that exploring one of the darkest chapters in mankind's history—the Holocaust—may inspire tourists to act on human rights and social change.

Visitors to the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center in Skokie, Illinois, who were interviewed about the emotions and activities sparked by their visit said the experience empowered and motivated them to address injustice in their lives or communities, according to a study by faculty members at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and the museum's staff.

Welcoming about 130,000 visitors each year, the museum is the third largest of its kind in the world and includes information on pre-World War II Europe and the rise of Nazism. Among the museum's exhibits are interactive holograms of Holocaust survivors telling their stories and more than 20,000 artifacts donated by people in the Midwest.

The museum's mission, according to its website, includes remembrance and instilling hope in visitors that they can make the world a better place by confronting injustice and defending [human rights](#).

"This museum is designed—from the moment visitors enter until the end—to trigger self-reflection, to guide the traveler so they can digest the emotions associated with the exhibits," said study first author Joelle Soulard, a professor of recreation, sport and tourism at the university.

"The end goal is for the traveler to become an upstander who is engaged in their community. When they see something that is wrong, they stand up."

William Stewart, a professor in the same department, and museum staff members Marcy Larson and Eve Samson, the then-vice president of

marketing and business development and the associate director of development, respectively, co-wrote the study. The findings were published in the *Journal of Travel Research*.

The researchers explored the types of frames—the meanings and interpretations—visitors applied to what they saw and heard at the museum to determine if this triggered social mobilization, defined as the identification of a societal problem and rallying others to solve it. Social mobilization takes many forms, such as advocacy, protest and listening to others' stories.

The museum itself is emblematic of social mobilization, formed by Holocaust survivors in the Chicago area in response to a neo-Nazi group's push to stage a march in Skokie in the late 1970s. These survivors founded the Holocaust Memorial Foundation to educate the public about the corrosive effects of hate.

The museum sent a recruitment email and survey to nearly 1,000 adults who visited in spring 2021. Of the 85 people who responded, 39 agreed to be interviewed within one to two months after their museum visit. Participants were asked if they had viewed five specific collections, including the permanent Holocaust exhibit as well as temporary exhibits on women's rights and apartheid. They also provided and discussed a photo—such as shots of relatives, nature or artwork—that represented their thoughts and emotions while touring the collections.

Identified with pseudonyms in the study, the participants discussed any [social activism](#) in which they had engaged since visiting the museum. Soulard said while she had expected to find that participants were changed by their visits, she was surprised by the magnitude of these effects.

"I was expecting some change—but not to that level," she said. "They

had powerful experiences and undertook meaningful activities. It was heartwarming to see the way that people connected to the survivors' testimony because of similar experiences with hatred."

Visitors said negative emotions, such as a sense of pain and injustice prompted by the exhibits, "can lead to collective positive emotions, like being included in a community that understands each other because of this shared experience with ... hatred," the researchers wrote.

For a woman called "Morgan" in the study, the museum gave her a sense of having a community of allies that empowered her to talk about injustice. She subsequently participated in an anti-racism project and gave testimony about her reaction to the recently established federal holiday of Juneteenth that celebrates the end of slavery in the U.S.

For "Chris," a 44-year-old woman interviewed, the Holocaust survivors' stories about standing up to injustice reinforced her messaging about prejudice with her children and enabled her to identify a strategy to help her daughter contend with a school bully's racist taunts.

A few people noted troubling parallels between the social and political climates in pre-World War II Europe and the U.S. currently, such as increases in anti-Semitic rhetoric, racist propaganda and the deaths of minorities such as George Floyd. The dearth of coverage of the Holocaust and genocide in schools' curricula leaves "generations of adults ... vulnerable to political misinformation," they said.

Participants discussed how current societal problems impacted their families and suggested there was a need for [museum exhibits](#) connected with extant human rights issues, such as discrimination against Asian Americans and Blacks in the Jim Crow South.

The two individuals who did not engage in activism after their museum

visits felt overwhelmed by [negative emotions](#) after viewing the first portion of the Holocaust collection. Both people left without seeing the latter exhibits focusing on resilience, empowerment and actions individuals can take to address injustice in their communities, Soulard said.

A novel finding of the current study was that [museums](#) focused on war can evoke anger at one's government. Accordingly, a few of the participants condemned the U.S. government for turning away Jewish immigrants who were seeking asylum in the U.S. to flee Nazi persecution.

"The museum is designed to foster hope and act as a facilitator of social mobilization," Soulard said. "These tourist experiences can be designed in a way to promote change. But it's important for the information to be presented in a way that also respects visitors as critical thinkers by showing various sides of an issue."

More information: Joelle Soulard et al, Dark Tourism and Social Mobilization: Transforming Travelers After Visiting a Holocaust Museum, *Journal of Travel Research* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/00472875221105871](#)

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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