Dark rituals: Understanding society's fascination with death and disaster

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Understanding why the popularity of organized events steeped in themes of death, disaster and suffering--such as the well-known Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead), Jack the Ripper Walking Tours and Remembrance Sunday--could be key to a deeper understanding of
society, say researchers from the University of Surrey.

In a study published in *Annals of Tourism Research*, researchers introduce a comprehensive framework to analyze these events, drawing from fields as diverse as thanatology (the scientific study of death and the practices associated with it), dark tourism, and collective memory studies.

Dark events include a broad spectrum, from historical commemorations and sports competitions to cultural festivals and horror experiences.

Dr. James Kennell, co-author of the study and Associate Professor of Events and Hospitality at the University of Surrey, said, "People are fascinated with dark events for several reasons, embedded in psychological, cultural, and sociological aspects of human behavior. There is a natural human curiosity about the darker aspects of life, including death, tragedy, and the macabre. Dark events often provide a safe and controlled environment for people to explore these themes."

The framework developed in this study advances understanding of the evolving landscape of dark events by identifying six key concepts crucial for researching dark events:

- Commercialization—how dark events are marketed, consumed, and monetized.

- Perspectives from disciplines such as thanatology, dark tourism, and collective memory studies.

- Public sphere engagement—examining how dark events interact with the public sphere and how they fit in broader societal discourse—including media coverage, politics, public reactions, and the impact on social norms and values.
Deviant behavior—examining participant motivations, such as thrill-seeking or taboo exploration of violence, criminality or general harm.

Experiential aspects—analyzing how dark events evoke emotions such as fear, fascination, or reflection within the participants or audience.

The presence of death—centering on the symbolic and literal presence of death within dark events, including non-human death, death symbolism and actual death.

Metod Šuligoj, co-author and Associate Professor of Tourism Studies at the University of Primorska, noted, "The fascination with dark events stems from a complex interplay of curiosity, thrill-seeking behavior, cultural traditions, psychological exploration, and the desire for communal and shared experiences. These events allow individuals to engage with themes of death, disaster, and suffering in ways that are meaningful, educational, and sometimes transformative."


Provided by University of Surrey
