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To cite this article: Emma Dresler (2022): Dark souveniring: just a souvenir or something more complex, Journal of Marketing Management, DOI: [10.1080/0267257X.2022.2088601](https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2022.2088601)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2022.2088601>



Published online: 17 Jun 2022.



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# Dark souveniring: just a souvenir or something more complex

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## ABSTRACT

Dark tourism shops have faced considerable moral criticism. This study draws on site observation and worksheets associated with a field trip to the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, to examine children's souvenir purchasing experiences. Employing thematic analysis of children's narratives, the findings reveal that dark souvenirs can facilitate contextualisation of the site, emotional engagement, and symbolic meanings for the purchase of such souvenirs. Souvenirs and souveniring are discussed in reference to cause-related marketing strategies to balance the commemorative, educational, and economic objectives. The cause-related marketing partnership between the museum and charitable organisation enhances the acceptance of the souvenir shop and its products. The concept of cause-related marketing is valuable for explaining museum and charity shop dynamics, to inform effective management.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 21 March 2021  
Accepted 4 May 2022

## KEYWORDS

Dark tourism; cause-related marketing; souvenir shops; dark souvenirs; empathy

## Introduction

Tourists tend to acquire memorable tangible reminders of their travels in the form of souvenirs (Anderson & Littrell, 1995; Paraskevaidis & Andriotis, 2015; Swanson & Horridge, 2006; Swanson & Timothy, 2012; Trinh et al., 2014). Souvenirs represent material cultures and are communicative of people, place, and event which function to facilitate memories and experiences. Shops have become increasingly prominent at dark tourism destinations (Brown, 2013; McKenzie, 2018; Potts, 2012). Stone and Sharpley (2008) define dark tourism as 'sites, attractions or events linked in one way or another with death, suffering, violence or disaster' (p. 574). Notably, 'dark souveniring' is a complex social, cultural, and economic phenomenon occurring in places of continuing political and ideological influence (Buda & Shim, 2014; Buda, 2015). Dark tourism sites with shops have been accused of trivialising the events commemorated, for example Auschwitz and New York's Ground Zero (Brown, 2013; Potts, 2012). Hence there are ongoing social concerns relating to the commercial activities which may detract from the public service of dark tourism sites. Similarly, ethical concerns are raised about the nature of the material objects in the form of souvenirs, educational materials, and memorabilia offered at dark tourism sites.

The appearance of profiting from others' suffering has many important implications for site managers, visitors' experiences, and presentation of material culture (Seaton, 2009).

Shops at dark sites have faced considerable ‘moral criticism’ (Stone, 2009, p. 58). They have been accused of undermining the memory of death and disaster (Cole, 2000). Dark tourism sites with commercial operations raise concerns whether these operations are appropriate in supporting visitor functions, or perhaps perceived as tasteless and unacceptable exploiters of others’ suffering (Beech, 2009). Beside its commercial value, shops are increasingly seen as an attractive element of the visit to dark tourism sites. This draws attention to the function of shops in the design of the overall visitor experience. Despite a large body of literature that criticises the dark tourism shops for their commercial and marketing activities (Brown, 2013; Cole, 2000; McKenzie, 2018; Potts, 2012), retailing at the dark sites is not well understood. Dark site managers need to explore a range of ethical innovations in an attempt to balance moral sensitivities and economic objectives, which may involve marketing and promotional activities.

The incongruence between the consumption of commodities and the process of commemoration in dark tourism may not necessarily indicate that dark products cannot be educational or meaningful for visitors. Furthermore, souvenir meanings are socially constructed and can be invaluable for helping visitors to contextualise the complexity of lived experiences situated in a specific place, people, and event. Unlike other tourism sectors, dark tourism has been slow in adopting cause-related marketing as an integral part of the marketing mix. This research examines visitors’ experiences with social cause-related souvenirs at a dark tourism destination. For the purpose of this study, the War Remnants Museum located in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam is selected. This dark site has retail activities connected with the charitable shop, thus exploring the sale and purchase of social cause-related souvenirs will make a theoretical contribution to our understanding of the souvenirs and souveniring experiences in dark tourism. This research also has important practical implications for dark site managers operating in a complex environment as they attempt to reduce moral tension while meeting commemorative, educational, and economic objectives at sensitive dark tourism sites. As such this research makes an important contribution to theory and practice to the dark tourism literature.

## **Theoretical background**

### ***Souveniring at dark tourism sites***

‘Souveniring’ refers to ‘the act of acquiring an object or image that represents an experience’ (Cave & Buda, 2018, p. 709). Souvenirs are tangible objects that provide narratives of the individual’s experiences of people, place, and event (Anderson & Littrell, 1995; Hashimoto & Telfer, 2007). Tourists acquire souvenirs from a wide range of reasons to meet their psychological and/or social needs, for example, souvenirs as proof of their journey (Kim & Littrell, 1999), symbolic reminders and memories (Swanson & Timothy, 2012), a quest for authenticity (Soukhathammavong & Park, 2019), novelty-seeking (Hsieh & Chang, 2006), functional needs (Paraskevidis & Andriotis, 2015), gifts for friends and family (Kim & Littrell, 2001), and acts of altruism (Saayman et al., 2020). Souvenirs are objects of social and cultural construction; they are created through social relationships and are imbued with meaning and significance. Souvenirs and souveniring are integrated and inseparable from the travel and tourism phenomenon; their meanings emerge from the commercial economies, cultural structures and community relationships (Cave et al., 2013; Tosun et al., 2007).

Aside from the wider economic value of tourism, souvenirs also have a symbolic value in the process of transmitting the social, cultural, and political meaning of a destination (Littrell et al., 1994). The symbolic meanings of a particular product are not intrinsic in the material object per se; the object acquires meanings through social relationships that are connected to its owner (Kleine & Kernan, 1991). Souvenirs' meanings are socially constructed, derived through social and symbolic interactions, and are therefore layered with personal and collective associations. Souvenirs can be representative of material cultures and symbolise the realities of experiences, activities, and places (Belk, 1992; Low & Altman, 1992; Trinh et al., 2014). For dark tourism the role of the local people at the destination needs to be considered more directly, as the narratives of their lived experiences may be linked to the tourists through their interactions at the site. Meaning-making constitutes the lived experience of the visitors as they interact with those who live and work at the destination; and both are interacting with the material objects.

Souvenirs are holders of meanings embedded within the dynamic and interactive object-place-person relationships (Baker et al., 2006; Cave & Buda, 2018). The object-place relationship indicates that souvenirs are tangible objects symbolically embodying the experiences at the destinations. The objects may play a crucial role in defining spaces and the performances at these destinations, thus influencing the tourism encounter, and resulting in differing understandings of place (Anderson & Littrell, 1995; Gordon, 1986; Hashimoto & Telfer, 2007). The place-person relationship signifies that the souvenirs are symbolically representing the specific qualities of a place connected with the person. According to Low and Altman (1992), a place is the 'space that has been given meaning through personal, group, or cultural processes' (p. 5). As such, place provides opportunities for creating cultural meanings and a defining of the self (Low & Altman, 1992; Milligan, 1998). The object-person relationship refers to the engagement between souvenirs and the person. This involves the negotiation of values and meanings ascribed to souvenir objects and the impacts that these objects have on the person. Tourists may use their souvenirs to 'differentiate the self from or integrate with others' (Littrell et al., 1994, p. 3), thus objects can be a source of meanings in constructing and communicating individual and social identity (Belk, 1988, 1992; Timothy, 2005).

### ***Shops at the dark tourism sites***

In recent years, retail activities at dark tourism destinations have received increasing attention as shops have important commercial value in destination economies (Brown, 2013; Horodnikova & Derco, 2015; Loxham, 2015; Magee & Gilmore, 2015; Potts, 2012). Many dark sites provide gift shops, cafes, and other commercial services to support visitor functions. Unavoidably, conflict follows such commercialisation. For some visitors, it is deemed incompatible, especially with religious and cultural heritage sites. Notably, Auschwitz is intrinsically linked to commodification and a source of continuous debate over what some people perceive as 'commercial, political and religious exploitation of the site' (Wollaston, 2005, p. 66). Many dark sites are confronted with a diverse range of moral dilemmas associated with site management, including marketing, promotion, and retail operations (Bird et al., 2018; Cole, 2000; Hartmann, 2005). The management of shops is particularly problematic because management decisions must navigate a difficult path to balance moral sensitivities and economic objectives. There is a general agreement that

dark sites need to be managed 'appropriately based upon an understanding of and respect for the manner of the victim(s) death' (Sharpley, 2009, p. 9) and 'it is unacceptable to profit from the dead' (Seaton, 2009, p. 87).

Many dark sites have retail operations but deciding what can be sold, for example, the type of souvenirs, can raise moral tension because of the sensitivity of the site (McKenzie, 2018; Stone & Sharpley, 2008). Shops can face severe criticisms of profiteering if the products are too commercial. For instance, the National September 11 Memorial and Museum in New York has been criticised for the selling of souvenirs such as mugs and t-shirts, which are seen to trivialise the terror attack, and was subsequently accused of crass commercialism (Phillip, 2014; Potts, 2012). The gift shops are 'highly constrained by issues of taste and decency' (Brown, 2013, p. 273). Many souvenir objects are thought to be a distraction and may diminish the significance of the dark sites. Furthermore, the commercial aspects are emphasised in the site design. With many sites, the visit begins with tourists entering through the gift shop, while at others the visit concludes with tourists exiting through the gift shop, thus creating a strong impression of commercialisation, and 'the site may not be internalised as a locus of the past and history but as a ... locus of modern consumer experience' (Gazin-Schwartz, 2004, p. 100).

It is recognised that shops and souvenirs at dark tourism sites need particular attention, as they may be considerably more complex than other forms of shops given the political and ideological influence (Buda & Shim, 2014; Buda, 2015; Wollaston, 2005). Understandably, these moral tensions are likely to be more profound as commodification of dark objects, places or events may arouse deeper emotions than other tourism contexts. Site managers need to develop new strategies which either overcome the generalised distaste that surrounds shops or develop ethical innovations which integrate the shop into the museum. Macdonald (2012) suggests that shops must 'somehow index their relationship to the museum. If they don't, they risk being "just shops" nothing more than profiteering enterprises' (p. 45). This shop-museum relationship may not only allow for sensitive management of shops but also provide opportunities for shops and products to enhance the visitor experience by engaging the visitors with interpretations that make sense of the people, place, and event. Dark tourism shops need to be more than just shops (Macdonald, 2012).

### **Cause-related marketing**

Charitable organisations have financial and social significance in their contribution to the tourism industry, specifically, to fulfil goals in facilitating education, socio-cultural development, and charitable giving linked to various tourism sectors, for example, volunteer, conservation, and sustainability tourism (Coghlan, 2015; Cousins, 2007; Shinde, 2020; Wearing & McGehee, 2013). Some charities use tourism as a means for fundraising, while other charities seek opportunities for social activism to raise the profile of social causes. Cause-related marketing (CRM) campaigns are the type of fundraising and promotion that may contribute to social causes. Varadarajan and Menon (1988) define CRM as 'the process of formulating and implementing marketing activities that are characterised by an offer from the firm to contribute a specified amount to a designated cause when consumers engage in revenue-providing exchanges that satisfy organisational and individual objectives' (p. 60). The goals of CRM are to provide financial assistance to the

charities and to promote corporate performance (Gupta & Pirsch, 2006; Ross et al., 1992). CRM can have multiple benefits for the company in promoting product sales (Liu & Aaker, 2008; Strahilevitz & Myers, 1998), generating brand image (Polonsky & Speed, 2001), strengthening consumer attitudes (Gupta & Pirsch, 2006; Ross et al., 1992), and increasing purchase intent (Barone et al., 2007; Lafferty, 2007). Consumers can benefit from participating in CRM campaigns. They can project their personal identity and display their moral views associated with some social cause. Furthermore, they can feel empowered in making consumption decisions that have benefits for themselves as well as others in society (Berger et al., 2006; Yoon et al., 2006).

Several theories have been identified to influence the effectiveness of CRM, three are of particular importance: social identification, personal relevance, and perceived fit between the cause with firm. First, consumers prefer CRM campaigns that are closely connected to them (Lafferty & Edmondson, 2014). The perceived similarity between a consumer's identity and company's identity is essential in forming customer-company identification (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Lichtenstein et al., 2004). Second, consumers are inclined to have more favourable responses to the CRM campaigns when they perceive the cause to be relevant to them (Grau & Folse, 2007; Lafferty, 2009). Personal relevance is evoked within a specific situation or part of the consumer's self-concept (Bigne et al., 2010; Zaichkowsky, 1985). Furthermore, personal relevance can be enhanced by emphasising the local aspects of a cause (Grau & Folse, 2007). Finally, high fit between a brand and a cause has shown positive responses to CRM campaigns (Gupta & Pirsch, 2006). The cause fit refers to the perceived link between a cause and the firm's image, positioning, and target market (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Varadarajan & Menon, 1988). Perceived fit can provide an explanation as to why a firm is supporting a particular cause (Sheikh & Beise-Zee, 2011).

CRM campaigns are thought to perform distinct functions, as social causes can enhance emotional responses (Chang, 2012; Roy, 2010). Furthermore, CRM campaigns may evoke moral emotions (Zemack-Rugar et al., 2016; Zheng et al., 2019). Moral emotions refer to 'those emotions that are linked to the interests or welfare either of society as a whole or at least of persons other than the judge or agent' (Haidt, 2003, p. 276). Several studies indicate that moral emotions are connected to people's charitable behaviours (Arnett et al., 2003; Hoffman, 1981; Kim & Johnson, 2013). Effective CRM strategies encourage consumers to develop empathy (Winterich & Barone, 2011). Empathy performs important functions in (a) perspective taking, which signifies the ability to take others' viewpoint, (b) affective sharing, which reflects that the affective states of others are shared, and (c) empathic concern, which refers to the emotional response for others in need (Decety & Cowell, 2014; Decety, 2011). These components of empathy interact with each other to motivate individuals to offer caring responses to alleviate suffering (Batson, 2009; Goetz et al., 2010) and generate solidarity (Davis, 2006; Tangney & Dearing, 2002).

There is a recognition for the need of new and innovative marketing approaches in the operation and development of museums (McLean, 1995; Rentschler, 2004). CRM can be valuable within the museum context since it can support the commemorative, educational, and economic objectives (Gilmore & Rentschler, 2002; Rentschler, 2004). Museums and social causes can together build partnerships in commercial ventures designed to promote each other and enhance financial viability. CRM activities can promote visitor identification, engagement, and commitment with the museum (Bergami & Bagozzi,

2000; Bhattacharya et al., 1995). Museums can purposely draw ‘visitors “inside” the organisation by making them members, volunteers and patrons’ (Rentschler, 2004, p. 156). When museums align with social causes, they enable visitors to identify with the museum mission and with what they represent (Bhattacharya et al., 1995). CRM can connect a museum with a specific social issue for the design of visitor experiences. Subsequently, the nature of exhibitions, the type of interpretation, symbolic propositions, and retailing can be shaped by CRM initiatives. The conceptual framework of CRM has not been examined in any detail within dark tourism research, including the retail activities taking place within dark sites. Further to this, a relatively less studied area of CRM research is educational dark tourism.

The use of CRM may offer insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with dark tourism shops. Charity shops are modelled by different business practices and they may play different roles in informing discourse related to dark tourism sites. The charity shops may not be just a physical space selling souvenirs, but an alternative teaching space to be interpreted in different communicative functions to enhance the visitor educational experience. The social cause-related souvenir objects may foster additional narratives to facilitate wider understanding of the significance of the dark site and thus contribute to a multi-faceted experience. It is important for managers of dark tourism sites to understand this particular type of retailer to strengthen their capacity to enhance visitor experience. The main objective of the study is to examine Vietnamese childrens’ purchase behaviours for social cause products at the War Remnants Museum. The guiding question for the study is ‘What are childrens’ souvenir purchasing experiences at a dark tourism destination?’. This study makes a meaningful contribution to the dark tourism literature by providing important insights into the sale and purchase of a specific commercial aspect at a dark tourism site.

## Methods

The War Remnants Museum provided the context for this research. This museum is one of the most popular dark tourism destinations in Vietnam, attracting approximately half a million visitors every year (<http://warremnantsmuseum.com>). The War Remnants Museum presents the historical events of the US War in Vietnam from a Vietnamese perspective. It is not an actual site of death, but it is well known for its highly politicised subject matter. The site displays some of the confronting and disturbing items retrieved from the War and tells stories of extreme violence and suffering (Gillen, 2014). The site is divided into two main areas: The *outside* area consists of a collection of US military weaponry used during the War, for example, tanks, helicopters, missile launchers, and fighter jets. The *inside* area consists of three floors comprising of themed rooms with names, for example, ‘Agent Orange aftermath in the US Aggressive War in Vietnam’.

On the first floor, the *Agent Orange Room* documents the long-lasting effects of Agent Orange and other chemical defoliant sprays on Vietnam’s environment and population. The Agent Orange room exhibit is an exceptionally powerful display, symbolically painted in the colour orange. During the War, the US military sprayed millions of litres of Agent Orange (Martin, 2009; Stellman et al., 2003). Millions of Vietnamese people are affected with health problems as a consequence of the exposure to Agent Orange (Martin, 2009; Ngo et al., 2006). Outside the Agent Orange Room there is a souvenir shop with a wide



variety of products suitable for both domestic and international visitors, for example, key rings, bookmarks, dolls, earrings, necklaces, bracelets, handbags, and hats. The shop is operated by the charitable organisation Vietnam Association for Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin (VAVA). VAVA was founded in 2004 and was established to support the Vietnamese victims of Agent Orange. VAVA has two main objectives in providing resources to support victims of Agent Orange and seeking justice for Vietnamese victims of Agent Orange ([www.vava.org.vn](http://www.vava.org.vn)).

This research adopted the qualitative descriptive approach (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019) with two stages of data collection to provide a multiplicity of data sources. The first stage related to site observation conducted by two members of the research team in 2019. This approach provided opportunities to visually observe the Museum exhibitions and to build an understanding of how the souvenir shop functions in its natural social context within this dark tourism site. The second phase of the data collection related to the completion of a field trip worksheet. The children's motivations and meanings of the souvenir purchases arrived from three open-ended survey questions in the worksheet: 'Did you buy any souvenir during your visit?'; 'What did you buy?'; and 'Why did you buy that item/those items?'. These broad questions were designed for children to provide reflection, deep thinking, and interpretations about their souvenir acquisition experiences. The children were aware that these questions were not to be graded by their teacher and thus did not contribute to the assessments of the field trip. There were no interactions between the members of the research team and the children before, during, or after the field trip. The worksheet approach was particularly useful for collecting data in a non-threatening manner and allowed children to consider and construct their answers to the questions rather than trying to verbalise an immediate response to questions in an interview situation.

The survey data were obtained from nine classes in a secondary school located in the southern part of Vietnam. The three-phased consent process was applied to gain access to the students' worksheets. First, the school principal was contacted to obtain consent to collect data on the field trip. Second, the consent for participation was provided by the parents. 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. Taken together, there were 395 Vietnamese students aged 14 years old who participated in the field trip. There were 30 parents and/or children who declined the invitation to participate in the study. To maintain anonymity, a random letter with a number was assigned to each of the student's direct quotes (for example, G-216 indicated that the student was in the G Class and was number 216 of 365 students). Ethical approval was obtained from the Massey University Ethics Committee.

There were 105 children who reported purchasing souvenirs from the VAVA shop. The worksheet comments and related field notes from the site observation were analysed using inductive thematic analysis to identify patterns across textual data. Thematic analysis is a qualitative descriptive approach described as 'a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The study involved initially analysing the data at a semantic level and identifying the surface meanings. This subsequently moved to the 'deeper' thematic style of moving back



and forth over the data until ‘meaning-making’ occurred. The analytic process involved the following phases: (a) familiarising with the data; (b) generating initial codes; (c) searching for themes; (d) reviewing themes; and (e) defining and naming themes. This then allowed patterns to appear, sub-themes to be grouped, and finally, key themes to emerge. The worksheets and field notes were open coded into broad codes and grouped together into relevant themes with corresponding subthemes. To ensure rigour, all the research members analysed the data and, through group discussion, reached consensus on emerging themes. In the event of contradictions, the team re-evaluated and redefined the themes accordingly. Second, a review of the codes, subthemes, and labels was carried out by three colleagues to ensure that the contents were suitably represented. The worksheets and observational notes were analysed independently, and the findings were then compared. Next, the data were integrated by systematically matching the themes to form a rich and diverse data set. Notably, English is a second language for all the children, and to maintain the accuracy of their thoughts and feelings, no grammatical corrections were applied to their comments in the data analysis.

## Findings

The findings highlight the importance and meanings the children attached to their souveniring experiences. The souvenirs and souveniring experiences have been grouped thematically into three central themes. The first theme involved the ‘shop’ with sub-themes of the people and products. The second theme was concerned with ‘affective engagement’ with subthemes of sadness and empathy. The third theme focused on the symbolic meanings of ‘identity’ with subthemes of solidity and support. Souvenirs may be examined from either the perspective of utility or symbolic functions. The children made multiple references to the utility functions of souvenirs, for example, tangible evidence of the travel; facilitator of travel memory; a means of evoking nostalgia to extend their visit experiences; a device for decoration, owing to its aesthetic appearance; gift for family and friends; a conversation piece for their visit; and an aid for self-development and further learning. However, this article focused exclusively on the symbolic aspects of children’s souvenir acquisition. The themes reveal that dark souvenirs are objects allowing children to develop narratives about themselves, their histories and their emotional engagement with themselves and others across space and time.

### *The shop, the people and the products*

The observation revealed that the location of the shop space was critical to the experiential part of the visit. The Agent Orange Room displayed numerous photographs of babies, children, and adults born after the War, living with severe disabilities. The observation further showed in the VAVA shop, the ongoing suffering of victims. Like most children, E162 observed, ‘I saw people with Agent Orange in real life at the museum. I can feel how painful it is for them’. Children connected the shop and its community to Agent Orange Room exhibits; A86 identified correctly that the souvenirs were ‘made from Vietnam Association for Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin – VAVA people’. Furthermore, children made a connection between the shop to the historical event of the US war in Vietnam; C103 stated that the shop was operated ‘by

the people left behind by the war – wounded people’. Children emphasised the importance of context around the shop and its products; J315 asserted the ‘terrible consequences of war’ and I278 acknowledged ‘those who suffer from Agent Orange’. Similarly, G216 described the victims of Agent Orange as ‘the unfortunate people who are infected with Agent Orange’. The shop was intrinsically related to the particular ‘people’ and captured the cultural, historical, and political contexts of the War.

For many children, the souvenirs were not ordinary objects but symbols of an historical event with heightened meanings of honour, admiration, and respect; K351 described his souvenir; ‘I think it is so honourable that the victims from the old war made it’. Similarly, J316 shared his thought; ‘I think maybe I can help them or at least show my respect for them’ and D146 professed, ‘I admire the people who made them, they are affected by Agent Orange’. For some children, the souvenirs were associated with life difficulties; as B8 related, ‘I bought a fan, it was nothing special, but I still bought it because I wanted to support and honour the people with disabilities because they know how to cope with difficulties’. For other children, making souvenirs was associated with resiliency; K358 explained, ‘although they are affected from the war, they have overcome their difficulties’. Similarly, H252 emphasised, ‘I acknowledge the work of those who had proudly stood up amid of the misfortunate life’. The souvenirs that were produced by the victims of the War, strongly suggested that the work was carried out with strong commitment for independence.

The children purchased a wide variety of different souvenir items, for example, necklaces, keyrings, handbags, and hats; D146 observed, ‘there were many types of souvenirs, suitable for all ages’. The children displayed amazement with the production of the souvenirs; C98 expressed that ‘they are made with the feet’ and B27 continued with that sense of marvel ‘I wonder how they could make that’. The souvenirs evoked a sentiment of esteem and appreciation for the Agent Orange victims; I270 elaborated, ‘it’s the products of their efforts, even though they have disabilities, they still create beautiful products like this. I’m a normal person, I can’t do it like them’. The children emphasised that the products were handmade, of high artistic quality and time-consuming, such as B45, whose souvenir ‘was handmade and very beautiful with lots of colours’. When describing the elements of souvenirs, children emphasised the ‘uniqueness’ of these products; K346 stated that the souvenirs were ‘rare and unique’. For the children, they are not buying mass-produced unauthentic souvenirs seen as ordinary commodities. The children perceived their souvenirs to be ‘special’ and ‘meaningful’ and as symbolising the victims; J298 explained, ‘I bought a bracelet, I think it was meaningful because it was made by a person that has been affected by Agent Orange dioxin’. Likewise, C107 expressed, ‘the bracelet was made and sold by a disabled person. It means a lot to me’. The children perceived the products were made with love and imbued with meanings. They wanted to express their appreciation for the victims of Agent Orange; J297 acknowledged, ‘I appreciate and love the products that the Agent Orange victims made’. Likewise, C118 shared, ‘their products are very beautiful, and I think the same of them too’.

### ***Emotional engagement***

Many children visited the VAVA shop during their visit to the War Remnants Museum; J294 explained ‘I had a chance to visit the souvenir shop of the victims of Agent Orange section on the first floor. I didn’t expect to see them in reality, and I felt really bad for them’. The children witnessed the ongoing effects of Agent Orange with the victims suffering from

injuries and disfigurements; K352 observed, 'there was a disabled man sitting in a wheelchair making dragonfly keychains' and F211 noted, 'I saw the salespeople, they all have disfigurements'. The spatial closeness of the victims evoked strong feelings. The children described their general feelings as being 'sad', 'bad', 'sorry', and 'shocked'. The children displayed an empathetic understanding of the victims' situation; D146 expressed, 'I feel so sorry for their lives, they have to live with physical disabilities ... sitting in the wheelchairs forever' and C119 stated, 'I felt shocked'. Many children showed sympathetic distress in experiencing sadness; J325 declared that 'I felt sad for the poor people'. Similarly, B25 asserted, 'I sympathise with them'. The children responded empathetically in their desire to support the victims, thus in purchasing souvenirs fulfilled that specific need; C118 indicated, 'I feel sympathetic for all those who were injured in the war, and we must help them and their families' and B15 offered 'I wanted to give a small heart for those affected by war and disabilities'.

### ***Symbolic values and meanings of souvenirs***

For the children, their souvenirs contained symbolic values of self and others. The meanings they attached to their souvenirs signal who they are; K356 described her souvenirs 'I bought a chicken and a dragon keychain because the chicken stands for my age and the dragon stands for our nation'. Many children used their souvenirs to confirm their collective identity. Purchasing souvenirs provided the children with a sense of who they are as Vietnamese and connected them to the struggles of the Vietnamese people in their journey for national independence; G207 shared his belief that 'we are really lucky and fortunate to be born in the era of peace'. Some children demonstrated gratitude to those who have suffered in the war; B38 expressed, 'I am grateful to those who were exposed to Agent Orange'. The framing of collective identity is embedded in the stories and relationships located across the continuity of time and place; H234 conveyed that the souvenirs 'symbolise for the peace and a happy future'. The acquisition of souvenirs signified the symbolic practices reflecting the relational connection of time and place in the continuous social, cultural, and political context of the dark site.

The children derived a sense of community and shared bonds with others through their souvenir acquisition. The souvenirs were used for the purposes of connection and served as a tangible link between the children and the victims, thus forming part of the narrative of the self; D160 explained, 'I bought it to support those who are tougher than me and also used it to strengthen my spirit'. Likewise, C102 reflected, 'I think it will bring me luck and on the other hand, it will make people who make the souvenir happy'. The children's purchasing activities were associated with feelings of solidarity and linked with a sense of identification with others, which J299 expressed, 'I bought it because I want to support those who suffer from the Agent Orange and share in their sad situation'. The solidarity was associated with the affective bonds that children experienced with the victims; K333 described, 'when I looked at the Agent Orange Victims, I felt their pain, so I bought some souvenirs to help them'. Some children desired to express a sense of love; G215 encapsulated this: 'I bought a dragonfly made of small stones; it was so cute. I bought it right away and I love the people too'.

The children's sense of solidarity was formed through the motivations for action. Their purchases were a direct and deliberate act of support for the victims. They used descriptors of 'help' and 'support' in the souvenir acquisition; D126 expressed, 'I want to do something to help them'. Likewise, I272 related, 'I know that the money isn't very much, but the most important thing is that I want to help them'. B29 elaborated further, 'I want to buy to support, offset a small part for their disadvantage'. The children displayed a particular kind of purchase, showing their efforts to make a gift; J315 believed, 'buying a souvenir was small but it was like a gift to encourage their morale'. Further, they made an act of purchase and at the same time donated to a cause; J323 explained, 'I bought those items because I want to donate the money to the charity, to help those victims'. Similarly, K340 spoke of donating: 'I bought a bracelet to donate a little money to people that are less fortunate'. The gift was associated with providing financial support; K341 wanted 'to raise funds and support the Agent Orange Victims'. However, some children were sensitive to the feelings of victims' striving for personal independence; F214 declared, 'I want to give them money. But if I do that, they could feel hurt, so I bought souvenirs to help them which were made by them'.

The children indicated multiple forms of support for the victims. They emphasised the importance of creating job opportunities; B47 wanted 'to help them have a job and money'. They expressed concerns for the general well-being of the victims; D128 explained, 'because it helps them to feel happy in their work'. Similarly, K356 stated that 'I want to see them smile when they can make money from doing something'. Some children have the desire for optimism; K 350 explained, 'I wanted the people affected with Agent Orange to be optimistic and have more laughter in their lives'. The support for the victims was in the form of motivation to have a fulfilling life; C124 needed 'to contribute to the motivation of those affected'. Likewise, C117 aimed 'to help them to have a life as full and comfortable as normal people so that they don't feel sad and give up on their life'. Some children wanted the victims to have a sense of purpose; to this end, A48 said 'I bought souvenirs to help people affected by Agent Orange because you still have to try in your life'. Also, J309 believed that 'buying souvenirs help to encourage the victims of Agent Orange ... they are still beneficial for society'.

The interactive process between the visitor and the site depends partly on the negotiation of the meanings of the material objects. The act of purchasing provided the children with an opportunity to negotiate the meanings associated with the victims and the souvenirs. The children did not simply buy souvenir objects, but components of identity, a sense of solidarity, and an expression of support and encouragement for the victims.

## Discussion

This study examines Vietnamese children's souvenir purchasing experiences at the War Remnants Museum. First, the museum and shop relationship can facilitate the Museum's commemorative, educational and economic objectives. Second, dark souvenirs are imbued with empathy for the ongoing suffering of the victims. Third, dark souvenirs can be an important source of symbolic consumption. The production and retailing of dark souvenirs reveal complex and layered meanings located within the souvenir acquisition. For the children the souveniring at the War Remnants Museum symbolises the realities of people, event, and place at this dark site destination.

### ***The observed site: the museum-shop relationship***

Museum shops at dark sites raise ethical concerns about generating income from commercial activities which may diminish the commemoration of the sites (Brown, 2013; McKenzie, 2018; Potts, 2012; Wollaston, 2005). CRM partnerships may be a creative means for dark tourism sites to balance their commemorative, educational, and economic objectives. Museums at sensitive dark tourism sites can build partnerships with social causes to reduce the moral tension associated with commercial operations. However, there must be a dialogue between the shop and the museum in the construction of meaning to balance the museum's commemorative and educational mission, the shop's economic viability, and the visitor's learning experience (Kent, 2009; Macdonald, 2012; Mottner & Ford, 2005). Most dark tourism sites 'display difficult subject matter for public consumption' (Brown, 2013, p. 272). The War Remnants Museum is recognised for displaying the 'brutality and pain of war' (Gillen, 2014, p. 1311). Based on the observations, the War Remnants Museum displays numerous photographs of victims living with severe disabilities; thus the Museum represents their suffering. The VAVA shop complements the narrative of the Museum by having the victims represent themselves with their ongoing suffering evident. The VAVA shop may be viewed as working collaboratively to support the institutional objectives. In turn, the War Remnants Museum provides a practical location to economically support the shop (Mottner & Ford, 2005; Theobald, 2000).

Together the museum and shop can be seen as a communicative space in shaping meanings and helping visitors to make sense of the dark site. Macdonald (2012) argues that 'museum shops should not be seen as an added "extra" to the museum but should be regarded as fully part of the complex object-identity work that museums perform' (p. 53). Significantly, VAVA is a charitable organisation intrinsically linked to the War Remnants Museum to provide a coherent 'fit' (Hamling & Wilson, 2004, p. 665). The VAVA shop is strategically located next to the Orange Room, indicating the purposive flow of the overall visit. Thus, the VAVA shop is designed as an integral part of the Museum visit, and therefore has the capacity to extend the on-site experience, instead of functioning as 'just a shop' for purely commercial purposes. More importantly, shops can offer different routes for accessing the historical past. They can facilitate the cultural, historical, and political contextualisation of the site. Shops can meet visitor-centred objectives and play an essential role in augmenting the visitor experience.

Shops at the dark sites are shaped by the historical, political, and economic processes. The charity shop is functionally a different type of retail than other souvenir shops at dark tourism sites. The VAVA shop can effectively communicate the ongoing suffering of the victims. The narratives of human suffering allow the shop to operate for the main purposes of supporting the victims and empowering a community. Macdonald (2012) suggests that shops impart values upon their products. Despite their severe disabilities, the Agent Orange victims produce products of high quality, which the children described as handmade, artistic, and beautiful. Notably, these material objects are explicitly souvenirs; most of them lack educational qualities and historical significance. As the VAVA shop is an institutionally endorsed space, it has considerable commercial freedom with regard to the souvenirs that can be sold. The social-cause products are not seen as unconnected to the subject matter of the museum; nor are they viewed as opportunistic or insensitive. By categorising the VAVA products as social cause-related products, the act of purchasing systematically was accompanied with an

act of giving as described in the CRM literature (Gupta & Pirsch, 2006; Strahilevitz & Myers, 1998). In purchasing souvenirs, the visitors perform multiple forms of gift-giving to provide financial, emotional, and spiritual support for the victims. Shops at dark tourism sites need to be cautiously managed to promote the acceptability of the products being offered. Ultimately, successful merchandising at the dark site constitutes a balance between commercial viability and cultural appropriateness.

### ***Emotional engagement with social cause-related souvenirs***

The use of CRM partnership in dark tourism can stimulate emotional engagement with people, places, and material objects. Emotional responses can be derived from the consumers either having a particular connection to the social cause (Grau & Folse, 2007; Myers et al., 2013) or perceiving the social cause to be of critical importance (Lafferty, 2009). According to the observations, the War is a recent event for which many Vietnamese are still dealing with the consequences, for example, genetic mutations from the Agent Orange. The impacts of the War are therefore very present and relevant with ongoing suffering experienced by many people. Through CRM partnership, visitors to this dark site are encouraged to identify with Vietnamese narratives of suffering; in particular, understanding that their suffering is not transitory but perpetual and chronic. This emphasises the management activities in providing opportunities for consumers to support this specific social cause.

Visiting the museum and the shop, many children responded empathetically to the suffering of the victims. Empathy is a moral emotion referring to the feelings evoked by the suffering of others (Haidt, 2003). These feelings entail caring for others and comprehending their situations, prompting motivation to help the less fortunate people (Decety & Jackson, 2004; Tangney et al., 2007). But how exactly do the children care? The children acknowledged that buying social cause-related souvenirs was associated with the notion of providing 'small' and a 'little' support for the victims. However, they expressed deep concerns for the victims in the considerations for their needs, including the needs for dignity, self-respect, and independence. The feeling of empathy is multidimensional in inducing solidarity, love, esteem, encouragement, and support. Hence the souvenirs symbolically embody the significance of emotional and affective engagements of specific people, place, and material objects. The findings are consistent with a large body of literature suggesting that empathy has a prosocial capability to promote helping behaviour (Batson & Shaw, 1991; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Hoffman, 2000; Penner et al., 2005). The CRM partnership can create a powerful context for emotional engagement in understanding the meaning of souvenirs in dark tourism.

### ***Symbolic values and meanings of social cause-related souvenirs***

Souvenirs are objects of visitor interpretation with personal and collective meanings (Decrop & Masset, 2017; Kleine & Kernan, 1991). The observations indicate that the CRM partnership allows both the museum and the shop to collaboratively assert their missions, their identities, and tell their stories in the production of souvenirs. The War Remnants Museum, victims of Agent Orange and souvenirs are emblematic of the dark event. Further, social cause products at a dark site are considered to be 'special' objects imbued with images, symbols, and meanings, which are the presentations of the collective identity of the

dark place (Littrell et al., 1993; Trinh et al., 2014). For the children, ordinary objects such as key chains became part of the narratives, revealing complex and layered meanings in the abstractions of time, identity, and national belonging. The souvenirs embodied the cultural, historical, and political significance of the US war in Vietnam which symbolises the relationship to the past, present and future. The acquisition of souvenirs reflects an interplay of relationships and meanings of identity to people, place, and event. Souvenirizing can be an important process through which a specific cultural, historical, and political context is recorded, negotiated, and communicated.

The process of souvenirizing allows the children to construct personal narratives highlighting the dynamic and interactive object-place-person relationships (Baker et al., 2006; Cave & Buda, 2018). From the object-place relationship perspective, 'souvenirs play an important role in establishing and preserving the image of a destination' (Schouten, 2006, p. 200). By partnering with a particular social cause, dark sites can enhance their identity to visitors. The CRM partnership allows the museum to form a strong connection with the local culture (Grau & Folse, 2007). According to observations, the War Remnants Museum is intimately linked to the US war in Vietnam, displaying personal and collective representations of suffering and national independence. The local community for the victims of Agent Orange creates distinctive images of suffering. The production and retailing of social cause-related souvenirs play a crucial role in communicating social and cultural meanings which are the symbols of identity of place (Timothy, 2005). Hence souvenirs may play an important role in creating general awareness of the cultural, political, and historical contexts of the dark site.

From the person-place perspective, souvenirs not only have a communicative function of self, they also convey certain images and meanings of the site and subsequently play a significant role in communicating with visitors. The observations show that through the CRM partnership, victims of Agent Orange have been integrated into the experience of tourism located within the spatial, cultural, and political contexts of the War Remnants Museum. Also, the suffering of the Agent Orange victims can be commodified into consumptive souvenirs at the dark tourism destination. For the children, the production and retailing of the VAVA souvenirs are associated with tangible symbols of the atrocities and suffering associated with this dark site. The souvenir products symbolise strength and resiliency associated with Vietnamese national independence. The souvenirs can be used to negotiate the ongoing suffering of the Vietnamese people and the political narratives of the US war in Vietnam. Dark shops can contribute to visitor experience enhancement and play an increasingly important role in the in-place consumption of social cause souvenirs.

In terms of the object-person relationship, the acquisition of souvenirs at this dark site contributes to constructions of identity. The souvenirs can serve as tangible, symbolic markers both for oneself and others. The souvenirs provide opportunities for defining oneself and may be viewed as an 'extension of the self' (Belk, 1995, p. 72). The CRM partnership may be important for enabling the visitor's identification with the cause to occur. The children's souvenir acquisition can be understood in terms of social identity theory (Lewisch, 2004; Reed, 2002), specifically the cause identification overlapping with the children's self-concept and the solidarity with whom they are identifying (Bigne et al., 2010; Zaichkowsky, 1985). The children consider the cause to be personally relevant to them (Grau & Folse, 2007; Lafferty, 2009), and their souvenirs convey to them aspects of their 'Vietnamese-ness' (Bigne et al., 2010; Zaichkowsky, 1985). Through their souvenirizing, children express feelings of solidarity with the victims and communicate their collective identity.



Through symbolic meanings, dark souvenirs play an important role in identity construction. For the children, their souvenirs have the capacity to 'define who we are', reinforcing bonds 'with whom we are', and narrating 'our stories of who we are'. Dark souvenirs can help the children to establish themselves as individuals as well as members of a group, and thus they straddle both the individual and collective signification (Decrop & Masset, 2017; Trinh et al., 2014). Dark souvenirs have the capacity to emphasise the personal significance and the wider collective understanding of experience (Belk, 1988, 1992; Timothy, 2005). Dark tourism destinations are performative places which serve to establish and reinforce personal and collective identity through phenomenological encounters of the self with the material objects at the destination place.

## Implications

Shops at sensitive dark tourism sites are confronted with moral criticism for the types of souvenirs being sold. There are a number of findings from this study into the souvenirs and souveniring associated with dark tourism that can have important implications for both researchers and dark tourism site managers. From a theoretical perspective, researchers need to examine (a) the 'nature' of the link between the shops and the museum's overall objectives in facilitating meaningful interactions (b) the roles of souvenir shops and souvenirs in promoting understanding in the visitor experience, and (c) the impact of emotional engagement in the souvenir acquisition. The main theoretical question is whether dark tourism sites require an alternative approach to marketing and management of the shop than other forms of tourism. Shops and souvenirs at sensitive dark tourism locations need to be carefully presented so as not to trivialise and demean the site. More importantly, shops need to avoid criticism surrounding the act of profiting from the suffering of others. It is critical for researchers to discuss and respond sensitively to the social concerns surrounding shops and souvenirs. Thereby, they will be able to develop more responsible and ethically sound practices of marketing and management within dark tourism.

From the management application perspective, the site managers need to consider how shops and souvenirs could (a) reflect the understanding of the site, (b) compliment the core exhibitions, (c) provide auxiliary ways of representing culture, and (d) help visitors commemorate their visit. The main challenge for retailers is the positioning and marketing of souvenir products at dark sites. The War Remnants Museum has adopted CRM strategies in creating an integrated experiential feature of the shop in their service offering for visitors. Such implementation involves integrating the shop and retail activities into the museum to achieve a coherent fit to augment the visitor experience. Other dark sites with shops that are purely commercial ventures, with a detached offering of products, could consider the CRM partnerships for facilitating meaningful interaction between the shop and museum. In particular, for promoting understanding, enhancing relationships, and fostering emotional engagement with self and others.

This study has some limitations, in that it focused specifically on the retail activities at the War Remnants Museum. With the people-place-event specific context, the shop is operated by the victims of Agent Orange and the symbolic meanings of their souvenirs. As such the sociocultural production of souvenirs is in need of further research. Research examining a diverse range of shops from different dark sites will provide a better understanding of the

implications of souvenirs and souveniring in dark tourism. It is conceivable that differing charitable activities may draw out differing judgements, decision making processes and behaviours, due to visitors' identification and emotional engagement with the social causes. Another limitation is the sample diversity with only Vietnamese school children. Therefore, owing to potential differences in demographic or cultural profiles, data cannot be generalised to all visitors. Further research could explore souvenir and souveniring experiences across different groups of visitors, for instance to determine the levels of emotional engagement in response to CRM initiatives such as the mechanism of empathy, pattern of empathy, and level of empathy for different groups of visitors. Comparing empathy between different groups and determining the predictive features would make important contributions to theory and practice in dark tourism studies.

## Conclusions

This research provides new insights on two facets of souvenirs and souveniring in dark tourism. First, CRM partnership between the museums and charitable organisations presents a creative means for dark tourism sites to balance their commemorative, educational and economic objectives. Together the museum and shop can act as a communicative space in shaping meaning and helping visitors to make sense of the dark site. Explicitly, shops and souvenirs can facilitate cultural, historical, and political contextualisation of the site. They can offer different routes for accessing the historical past in creating and communicating symbolic meaning about a dark tourism destination. Second, dark souvenirs play an important role in identity construction, emphasising the individual and collective representations of the self. The CRM partnership highlights the importance of the dynamics of the museum and the shop in meeting the visitor-centred objectives and plays an essential role in augmenting the visitor experience. This furthers our understanding about the interplay between people, place, and material objects in dark tourism.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

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# Dark souveniring: just a souvenir or something more complex

Dresler, E

2022-06

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