FULL LENGTH ARTICLE

Conceptualising dark events: A new framework

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ABSTRACT

Dark events are organised events linked to death, disaster and suffering, and this conceptual study provides a new framework that can be used in their analysis. The framework has been developed through a theoretical synthesis of concepts from the domain theory of thanatology, and the method theories of dark tourism, dark leisure and collective memory. Six concepts of value for research into dark events are identified: commercialisation; approaches; public sphere; deviant behaviour; experiences; presence of death. The conceptual framework establishes a coherent conceptual footing for dark event research, and highlights links to established theories and methods that can be of value to future researchers in this novel area. Finally, we present an agenda for future research into dark events.

Introduction

The term 'dark events' has emerged to describe organised events that are linked to death, disaster and suffering. The term has its roots in the growth of scholarship into dark tourism over the past three decades (Isaac, 2021), and has antecedents in studies of dark leisure (Spracklen, 2018) and memory studies (Sierp, 2021). Dark events have been increasing in frequency and popularity across a spectrum of darkness that encompasses playful 'day of the dead' themed hospitality events, tours of graveyards, immersive horror experiences, re-enactments of historic battles and commemorations of crimes against humanity.

As the field of events studies matures, and a more critical approach develops (Robertson et al., 2018), there is a need for some of the field's concepts to be defined and explained, informed by, but independently of, previous approaches that have been heavily influenced by tourism and hospitality research, so that their utility for future research can be evaluated. As Duignan (2023:1) argues, studying events provides unique opportunities for theory development, as 'temporally bound incubators and microcosms of society and social contexts'. We argue here that although the term dark events has become used with increasing regularity in the events and tourism literature, it suffers from under-conceptualisation and this highly diverse group of events are often simplified as merely elements of dark tourism supply, mainly from Western perspectives.

Although the term dark events was initially used solely in the study of commemorative events, such as the anniversary of the WWII bombing of Darwin, Australia (Frew & White, 2015), more recently it has been applied to sports events including elite national and international competitions (Šuligoj & Kennell, 2022), walking tours in Prague and Krakow (Morton, 2019) and heritage

events in Serbia (Dimitrovski et al., 2014). This suggests that the term is proving useful to researchers, despite having never been fully analysed conceptually.

As a conceptual contribution, this paper identifies "a focal phenomenon that is observable but not adequately addressed in the existing research" (Jaakkola, 2020: 19). Current research into dark events has deficiencies in two main areas. First, the relatively new literature on dark events is highly dependent on dark tourism for its underpinnings. Because of this, the literature over-emphasises the importance of travel, and its economic and social impacts, and does not engage with dark events as worthy of study in themselves. Tourism research often mentions events in discussions of experiences and dark tourism supply, for example describing them as "dark tourism events or festivals" (Golz, 2022), but has not yet considered them as objects of study, in and of themselves, aside from how they are consumed by tourists (Light, 2017). This deficiency reflects a broader problem (seen in many critical studies of events that take place outside of the more standard 'events management' field) wherein events are primarily analysed in terms of their significance, or contribution to, other domains (Lamond & Spracklen, 2015). Second, most previous research has been case-study based and has not considered more than one dark event type at a time, meaning that the connections between different types of events, and their shared features, have not been adequately identified.

Therefore, this research aims to make a theoretical contribution that enhances our understanding of the phenomenon of dark events. Jaakkola (2020) highlights four different types of paper that have the potential to make conceptual contributions: *theory synthesis*, *theory adaptation*, *typology* and *model*. This research takes the approach of synthesising theory from thanatology, dark tourism, dark leisure and collective memory, to summarise and integrate different approaches from a fragmented body of literature. Synthesis has been identified by Xin et al. (2013) as one of the twelve types of conceptual research in tourism. They note that this is most often carried out through a review of the literature and has been used previously to create new models that bring together concepts in novel ways. Carrying out a theory synthesis of this kind helps to identify areas of coherence and divergence in theoretical approaches to a topic, to promote greater theoretical coherence in a field (Cropanzano, 2009). Consequently, the findings of this research are of value to future researchers, practitioners and policymakers seeking to understand the emerging phenomenon of dark events.

Method

To generate new knowledge about dark events, a theory synthesis approach was employed (Jaakkola, 2020). This mapping and synthesis of diverse extant knowledge allowed for the construction of a new perspective on dark events, which is represented in a new conceptual model. To conduct the synthesis, we followed the approach of Lukka and Vinnari (2014), who analyse the field of management accounting. This field is an area of academic study similar to tourism in that it is confronted with the problem of 'indiscipline' (Tribe, 1997); debates persist about the extent to which it is a subject in its own right, or just a field in which knowledge from other fields is applied. In applied fields of study, it can be complex to ascertain the extent to which research makes theoretical contributions to a parent discipline, or more practical or methodological contributions to a practical context, which are informed by theory.

To help to resolve this confusion, Lukka and Vinnari (2014) proposed a form of conceptual analysis that identifies, first, the domain theory relevant to the research area being critiqued and, second, the method theories that have been applied to the area to investigate it from different perspectives. Domain theories are those that are used to understand a domain of research, or make claims to do so, notwithstanding definitional issues over what constitutes a research domain, the nature of which will be determined by the specific research that is being undertaken, framed by 'formal and informal discussions taking place within a research community' (Lukka & Vinnari, 2014: 318). Method theories, on the other hand, are identified as specific applications of theory that attempt to study substantive issues involved in the domain in ways that are usually intertwined with the domain theory, but not necessarily so.

Lukka and Vinnari's (2014) approach to analysing applied fields of study has been applied in various other contexts, and is recommended by Kirillova and Yang (2022) as an appropriate method for supporting conceptual research in tourism. Thus, Farmaki and Stergiou (2021) identify 'peace-through-tourism' as a domain theory for understanding the relationship between peace, tourism and justice, Jahari et al. (2021) identify risk perception for analysing the impact of COVID-19 on travel, and Seraphin et al. (2022) develop a theoretical adaptation of multiple domain theories for their multidisciplinary study of children's empowerment in sustainable tourism. Similarly, in this study, thanatology was chosen as the domain theory because it is concerned with the sociological perspective on death in society, which has been used frequently to provide a conceptual foundation for dark tourism (e.g., Korstanje, 2016; Stone, 2012; Stone & Sharpley, 2008), and has thereby significantly influenced research into dark events. In practical terms, applying this approach involved first reviewing the literature related to dark events that had taken place from a thanatological perspective. Doing this allowed us to begin the process of identifying concepts that could be further investigated through the synthesis approach that we took in this study (Xin et al., 2013), which we then extended through the identification of method theories relevant to the study of dark events in diverse practical contexts.

Through an extended literature review that was informed by the analysis of thanatological research, we identified three method theories (Lukka & Vinnari, 2014) that could help to interrogate the use and value of the thanatological perspective on dark events. The theories were each concerned with the empirical study of specific thanatological contexts and were used in this research to provide insights into the ways in which dark events have been analysed to date. The three methods theories identified were dark tourism, dark leisure and collective memory. Approaching a domain theory from the perspective of method theories has the potential to 'expand, help to organize, or offer a new or alternative explanation of concepts and relationships' (Thompson, 2022: 4). Smithey Fulmer (2012) recommends that conceptual papers should propose clear links between the
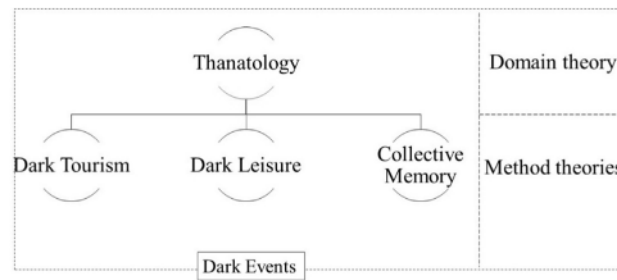
Fig. 1. Conceptual structure of the literature review.

constructs under investigation and should represent these visually to make the conceptual structure of the research explicit. Accordingly, the relationship between this study's perspectives is given in Fig. 1. Within each section of the literature review that follows next, the extant research on dark events is analysed based on its relationship to these domain and method theories. (See Fig. 2.)

Literature review

Domain theory: Thanatology

Although earlier scholarly, secular writing has engaged with death from psychological and sociological perspectives (e.g., Durkheim, 2005; Freud, 1917/1957; Lindemann, 1944), thanatology, as a multidisciplinary approach to the study of death in society, did not emerge until the second half of the twentieth century. Thanatology is frequently linked to the phenomenon of the privation of death; death has evolved from something that is experienced in the home, within families and within communities, and is marked by communal rituals, to something that is managed by professionals, in private settings (Stone & Sharpley, 2008). In this context, thanatology has developed to generate knowledge about 'death, its rites and its meanings' (Fonseca & Testoni, 2012: 157).

Thanatological perspectives have been influential in the fields of death studies, death education and in end-of-life care (Doka et al., 2016), and they have often provided a theoretical underpinning for dark tourism research. For example, Stone and Sharpley (2008: 575) claim that the literature on dark tourism "remains eclectic and theoretically fragile", arguing that introducing a thanatological perspective on dark tourism consumption allows it to be understood as a social phenomenon. The term 'thanatourism' has been used to distinguish dark tourism that engages specifically with death (Mionel, 2019). Seaton (1996) argues that dark tourism can be explained as a modern manifestation of 'thanatopsis', the process of the contemplation of death, which has historically been rooted in religious rites, or visits to battlefields, but now finds a postmodern expression in travel behaviour.

Many recent papers in dark tourism scholarship, especially those associated with its recent emotional turn, draw on concepts and theories that are common in thanatology research, including existentialism (Farkić & Kennell, 2021), emotional experience and spirituality (Zheng et al., 2020), mortality salience (Oren et al., 2019), ontological insecurity (Zhang, 2022) and terror management theory (Biran & Buda, 2018). This intertwining of thanatology and dark tourism demonstrates the ways in which the long-term interaction of domain and method theories can lead to a degree of mutual constitution, creating a perception of absolute interdependence. However, as Lukka and Vinnari (2014) explain in response to this critique of their approach, this constitution appears to take place in only one direction, from domain to certain method theories. Although dark tourism research has taken on many concepts from thanatology, research in thanatology, appears not to have been influenced by dark tourism scholarship, other than to note it as a recent development in relation to the commercialisation of death.

Some research into dark events explicitly engages with the core concerns of thanatology. For example, Lamond and Dowson's (2022) edited collection on events marking the end of life: i) contains contributions from different cultural contexts; ii) links events research to societal aspects of death and dying; and iii) includes different types of dark events, such as funerals, commemorations, religious ceremonies, and fundraising events for charities concerned with illness and end of life care. Laws and Deverell's (2019) study of the events management aspects of funerals draws on key thanatological sources such as Giddens (1991) arguments about the sequestration of experience and the movement of funeral rites from the public to the private sphere.

Although thanatology offers a set of concepts with the potential to extend the scope and criticality of dark event research in specific contexts, it also presents significant limitations. As a field of study, event research most often takes place within commercial settings, or in third-sector settings where commercial activity supports social or community goals (Bladen et al., 2023). Thanatology research rarely engages with issues of commercialisation or economics (Slemrod, 2003), apart from in the application of quite narrow theoretical critiques that position the encroachment of capitalism as a negative force in the consideration of death and dying (Rothe & Muzzatti, 2018). This perspective suggests that that these natural, humanistic processes should somehow be separated from commercialism as far as possible (Shelvock et al., 2021). Because of this, important issues such as the cost of end-of-life care, life insurance policies, funeral payments and the purchase of memorials, can be neglected (Slemrod, 2003). The 'sensational' portrayal of death in events with commercial elements, in mainstream films and other media products, and through dark tourism, is regarded by many thanatologists to be, at best, poor tase and, at worst, damaging for society (Korstanje, 2017).

There is a great diversity of events that might be considered to be 'dark', and this presents problems when applying a thanatological perspective. For example, Šuligoj and Kennell's (2022) research into sports events including the UEFA Champions League and the European Women's Basketball Finals in the Western Balkans shows that, due to deviant fan behaviour and media portrayals, and the events' relationships to recent conflicts, some sports events can be seen as dark. Collective experiences at events that are not 'about' death, and that cannot be reduced to the idea of postmodern death rituals, are not easily analysed using thanatology. Similarly, dark events that involve animal death and suffering, such as the Torneo de Lazo in Mexico where large crowds watch bulls torment and gore horses ridden by local cowboys, do not sit easily within the thanatological tradition. Many events that involve animal cruelty share features with events that involve human suffering and death (Aaltola, 2014); however, thanatology offers us minimal analytical power when we seek to understand the existence and persistence of those events, other than to focus our attention on the possibility of pan-species thanatopsis as a motivator for attendees.

Thanatology is the domain theory most appropriate to the study of dark events (not least because of its wide application in dark tourism research), and it is from thanatology that much dark event research has grown. However, in recognition of the limitations of the thanatological perspective, it is useful to analyse previous research in which dark events have been analysed from more applied perspectives. For this, the three method theories of dark leisure, dark tourism and collective memory are explored next, to examine whether they can offer additional, productive insights for dark event research.

Method theory 1: Dark leisure

Dark leisure challenges the idea that leisure should necessarily be enjoyable or personally beneficial. Spracklen (2018) locates dark leisure within discussions of deviance and deviant leisure, invoking a spectrum of activities that range from 'casual' (which are undertaken for pleasure) to 'serious' (which could go as far as violence and killing). Research into some of these practices can be 'risky' (Berdychevsky, 2018) due to the ethical, disciplinary and methodological issues it provokes. Consequently, the literature on this topic is relatively minimal, although conceptually rich in comparison to dark tourism.

Kavanagh et al. (2016) provide an analysis of abuse directed at spectators, sports people and journalists in online environments; they suggest that the liminal spaces of the internet offer opportunities for people to enact dark leisure. In this vein, dark leisure can also be related to deviant behaviour and criminality. Deviant leisure is a term that has been used to denote leisure practices that fall outside of socially acceptable norms (Lamond & Garland, 2023; Rojek, 1999; Stebbins, 1997) and which includes discussions of the harm that can be caused by deviant tolerable or non-tolerable leisure practices, whether to individuals or to society at large (Stebbins, 1997). Frequently, dark leisure research of this type is framed by critiques of commodification. Smith and Raymen (2018: 70), for example, explain that outbreaks of violent behaviour associated with the night-time economy are best explained 'as a normalized consequence of contemporary leisure and consumer capitalism', positioning the intersection of these two fields as a sufficient condition for violence to occur. These critiques of commodification limit the value of the dark leisure approach when considering commercial events, other than in contexts where the analysis includes a critique of contemporary capitalism.

Dark leisure is cast in an emancipatory light in the work of Spracklen and Spracklen (2012), albeit in a way that presents mainstream leisure as somehow fatally compromised by capitalism, when compared to the freedom offered by 'darker' subcultures such as Goth, or Black Metal. These musical subcultures are celebrated in events such as Deathfest in the USA, which sells 6000 tickets per day for an annual four-day event and are seen in an extreme form in the Norwegian black metal scene, which has been described as 'evil' in the media because of its associations with Satanism and violence (Wallin et al., 2017). In Whitby Bay, in the United Kingdom, more than ten thousand bed nights are booked out every year for the annual Whitby Goth Weekend, a festival that celebrates Goth culture in a location from the fictional story of Dracula as told by Bram Stoker (Whitby Guide, 2023).

A similar position is taken by Swain (2018: 488) in their study of grime music. Swain contrasts media narratives about Grime with the development of artists within the genre who 'show a moral responsibility', in a contemporary social context that has relegated morality to an aspect of individual responsibility. Swain's perspective is useful because it draws our attention to how dark events associated with musical subcultures linked by some to violence and other deviant behaviour, such as Trap in the USA or Drill in the UK, can form part of the public sphere. This is a role not really conceived for them in leisure studies, which tend to focus on events as sites of individual or subcultural resistance, and which see dominant groups in society as 'others' who can almost always be taken for granted as representing a social position that individual leisure opposes.

Violence associated with events, especially sports events, has been considered from the perspective of deviant leisure (Berdychevsky, 2018), but has not been studied in dark leisure research, which focuses more on cultural events. Stebbins' (1997) examples of non-tolerable leisure are an exception to this, and include verbal violence by sports fans, which can include death threats and often escalates into physical violence that endangers the safety of participants (Pavasovic Trost & Kovacevic, 2013). Research into harmful dark leisure behaviour has also questioned to what extent issues of substance abuse associated with musical subcultures could be considered leisure (Harmon, 2018). Palamar et al. (2019) found that problematic, unplanned drug use could be exacerbated by the atmosphere and attendee behaviours at Electronic Dance Music events in the USA. Even the leisure aspects of serial murder have been examined (Williams, 2020), especially the ways in which preparing for the killing could be see seen as the killer's leisure activity. Actual death and physical harm occur in some events involving animals, although this has yet to be analysed from a dark event perspective. Some research in the leisure studies tradition has engaged with the idea of multispecies leisure (Danby et al., 2019) and animal ethics (Lovelock, 2017), with Marinova and Fox (2019) providing a useful study of British millennials' attitudes towards the use of live animals in events, through a study of their perception of animal cruelty involved in horse racing, interestingly bringing sports events back into focus as an area for dark events research.

It is at these more extreme edges of leisure practice where dark leisure research is explicitly in dialogue with thanatology. As Kaul and Skinner (2018: 6) argue, 'death has long been a fascinating and macabre playground where a multitude of leisure activities occur'. This playground manifests when leisure contains the possibility of death, or where the imagery and iconography of death are present in subcultural expressions of leisure. The conceptual richness of research in leisure studies has resulted in the dark leisure perspective offering a number of theories and methods that can be useful in the study of dark events which are yet to be applied in this emerging area of research (Lamond & Garland, 2023). However, the leisure perspective has a very clear focus on the audiences and participants in events, and rarely considers their planning, management or evaluation, which are core concerns of events management research. Also, darkness within events is not always deviant, and not always counter-cultural or presented as an act of resistance. A WWII Remembrance Day commemoration in the United Kingdom, for example, has strong themes of death, sacrifice and suffering, but may reinforce dominant ideologies through an atmosphere of sadness, pride, gratitude, celebration and mythologisation, something that the dark leisure perspective can struggle to explain.

In fact, dark leisure research, as well as its antecedents of serious and deviant leisure, frequently neglects issues of politics and heritage, or representation of these in a collective sense, which studies of dark events have argued is often the source of some events' dark nature (Kennell et al., 2018). Dark leisure research can also struggle with less tragic, more enjoyable and light-hearted forms of dark events, such as in the *Dia de los muertos* parades in Latin America that are visited by millions of tourists each year and feature the consumption of the iconography of death and the commercialisation of dark experiences; another example is that of haunted house experiences at Halloween in the USA. Dark Tourism research, which has from its inception grappled with the idea of a spectrum of dark experiences, has generated useful debates about the nature of darkness in these contexts; these debates are considered in the discussion of our next method theory.

Method theory 2: dark tourism

Dark tourism is 'visitation to sites associated with death, suffering and tragedy' (Farmaki, 2013: 281). The idea that tourism could have dark characteristics and that some tourists would seek out dark experiences was initially 'both novel and shocking' (Ashworth & Isaac, 2015: 316). Opinions diverge on whether dark tourism is a practice that has endured since ancient times, with roots in pilgrimage (Collins-Kreiner, 2016) and visits to sites associated with famous or public deaths (Seaton, 1996), or whether it is a postmodern phenomenon linked to the sequestration of death (Stone & Sharpley, 2008). Both perspectives sit well with the thanatological tradition and exemplify dark tourism's grounding in that field (Biran & Hyde, 2013). However, not all dark tourism involves death (Light, 2017), with some authors suggesting that the link to deviant behaviour may be a useful explanatory device (Biran & Poria, 2012). Because of this diversity views on how to categorise tourism experiences, dark tourism scholarship has always engaged with the commercial aspects of the phenomenon, in a way that distinguishes it from thanatology and dark leisure, in which commercialism and contemporary capitalism are the symbolic 'other' to more authentic experiences of death.

Recognizing the diversity of dark tourism experiences, scholars have proposed a range of 'shades' of darkness, represented as darker-lighter nuances. Although Stone's (2006) Dark Tourism Spectrum is the most widely applied (and criticised), other research has also recognized and described this heterogeneity in similar ways, with the idea of a spectrum of dark tourism experiences proving remarkably persistent. Miles (2002) first proposes a distinction between 'dark' and 'darker' tourism, noting that some sites are just associated with dark pasts, whereas other sites are those where the dark pasts occurred. Sharpley (2006) identified five shades of dark tourism based on sites' intended tourism consumption. Initial studies focused on categorizing and interpreting the supply of the darkest tourism attractions (Biran & Hyde, 2013), but frequently overlooked the demand side of dark tourism and its lighter aspects. More recent research, however, has begun to address these lacunas. Ivanova and Light (2018) explored non-formal educational and non-commemorative motivations for visiting lighter sites, and Hwang et al. (2023) emphasized educational, aesthetic, and escapist experiences in lighter thematic tours. Zheng et al. (2020) investigated positive and negative emotional experiences, yet the psychological aspects of dark tourism remain insufficiently explored (Jovanović et al., 2021). Scholars have examined both supply and demand sides, covering the darker-lighter spectrum in dark tourism. However, this often lacks the conceptual depth of dark leisure, rooted in extensive research on serious and deviant leisure (Lamond & Garland, 2023).

Research into dark events has often been carried out from a dark tourism perspective, and by/with tourism researchers. Podoshen et al. (2015) look at the example of the Inferno Festival in Norway and Switzerland, which features death and black metal music; they position events with dark themes as an aspect of dark tourism supply, yet the extent to which these types of events can be, or need to be, understood from a tourism perspective is not clear. The travel and accommodation aspects of events considered by dark tourism research are rarely made explicit. Often, when dark tourism scholarship turns its attention to events, the utility of the thanatological perspective appears to diminish, perhaps because many studies involve commercial activities and do not involve encounters with actual or imagined death. For example, Janoske McLean and Vibber's (2021) study of the annual Death Week celebration of Elvis Presley's life and death in Memphis, USA, focuses on how public relations activities can help to deepen the dark tourism relationships between attendees and managers. Because of the commercial aspects of many dark events, dark tourism research can seem to offer an appropriate set of concepts for analysing them.

Event management research developed, in a large part, from tourism scholarship and during a period when the eventification of business and society (Pasquinelli et al., 2019) necessitated new ways of thinking about events. Dark tourism research is flexible; however, although it has some emerging methodological and theoretical diversity, it remains a fairly narrow field, with limitations that become apparent when analysing dark events through a tourism lens. The focus travel and accommodation in its conceptualisation barely features in dark tourism research, suggesting that it may not always be the most appropriate perspective

to take on dark events. Tourism scholarship's concern with host-guest relationships has led to a concentration in many dark tourism studies on the differing perspectives of tourists and locals when considering dark sites, despite many dark events not being produced for tourist audiences entirely, or at all. Current tourism-influenced research on dark events lacks engagement with their management and planning. Crucially, dark tourism's relegation of politics and power to issues of representation and interpretation, which it has inherited from heritage tourism research, undermines its utility in engaging with events that draw their darkness from these spheres.

The final method theory to be considered within this conceptual analysis is collective memory. Many dark events with explicitly political significance have been considered within the memory studies field. Collective memory research has engaged with these events from a novel perspective that is not dominated by the concerns of dark tourism scholarship.

Method theory 3: collective memory

The field of memory studies is multi-disciplinary; it unites the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences in a productive programme, despite critiques that accuse of it being "incoherent and dispersed" (Sierp, 2021: 2). Research into memory, both individual and collective, has grown significantly in the last thirty years as part of the phenomenon known as the 'memory boom' (Lorenz, 2010). An area within memory studies of particular relevance to this study is that of collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992). In contrast to individual memory, which has a physiological basis, collective memories are held in socially accessible 'repositories' marked by spatial, material, narrative and non-narrative characteristics (Nora, 1989). These repositories of memory exert an influence over individuals and groups (Barash, 2016).

Collective memories, however, are not homogenous or settled objects that can be analysed by scholars; instead, they are actively produced through the 'memory work' (Björkdahl et al., 2017) of 'memory actors' who seek to promote particular versions of the past and to delegitimise the versions of others. In particular, this may encompass sentiments of nostalgia, promoting a perceived idealized past (Goulding & Domic, 2009). Memory work is frequently employed in the service of political agendas (Ingiriis, 2021). The outcomes of these memory work practices have been explained by collective memory research as 'disputed memory' (Törnquist-Plewa & Andersen, 2016) or 'dissonant memory' (Van Huis et al., 2019). In fact, they create competitive or multidirectional memories that can often instigate new conflicts (Van Ooijen & Raaijmakers, 2012) and that undermine collectivity, which can be a problematic impact of dark events in complex political settings.

The concept of collective memory has been used in event management research to help explain the role of dark events. McQuaid (2017) uses collective memory to explain the tensions that surround marches in post-conflict Northern Ireland, where competing ethno-nationalist communities parade annually on various dates related to the recent and historical past, in areas that remain contested territories. Kennell et al. (2018) construct a model that relates collective memory and contemporary political significance to map the darkness of commemorative events linked to recent conflicts in the countries of the former Yugoslavia. Outside of Europe, Liao (2016) uses the concept of collective memory to analyse how cultural performances can subvert dominant, national narratives in Taiwan through an analysis of how am operatic event caused controversy through its representation of the 1996 Taiwan Straits Crisis and the impacts that this had on national identity. Mutlutürk et al. (2021) find that Turkish public events, including for example the 2013 Gezi Park pro-democracy protests at which twenty-two people were killed and more than 8000 injured, in collective memory contexts, can be analysed based on their political and non-political characteristics.

Collective memory research analyses the nature of permanent commemorative objects (e.g., memorial plaques and statues (Sendyka, 2021)) or national memory sites (Sumartojo and Graves (2018) more frequently than it analyses temporary commemorative events. Lischer (2019: 810) states that 'memorials rely primarily on inanimate objects to tell the story of atrocity'. However, commemorative events are not completely overlooked. Šuligoj and Rudan (2022) analysed Croatian war-related commemorations; previously, Goulding and Domic (2009) raised concerns about memory-related identity, otherness, politization and historical revision. Sumartojo (2016) characterised ANZAC Day's 'commemorative atmosphere,' involving national identity, memory, mourning, rituals, and diverse representations of war and death. Similarly, Milošević (2018) analyses a range of spontaneous and temporary memorials created by the public in response to unexpected losses. One example of such was the creation of a temporary site of memorial in the *Place de la Bourse* in Brussels, following the deaths of 35 people in a terrorist attack; this temporary memorial was as an interactive, commemorative event, created from items brought by members of the public, that lasted for 60 days. Later, it was made 'official' through its incorporation in political narratives of the tragedy and it was relocated (in parts) in a museum, which draws attention to the ways in which the spontaneous memory work of a temporary event can be memorialised and brought into official commemorative discourses.

Ljubojević (2021) explains the annual Nezuk-Potočari Peace March in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which takes place to commemorate the Srebrenica massacre in 1995, as a 'mnemonic practice'. It involves visits to battlefields, massacre sites and monuments, and the staging of commemorative events. Ljubojević argues that the event involves processes of the spatialisation, localisation and territorialisation of memory through a set of mobile practices that demonstrate the active nature of contested memory in a post-conflict context. In Northern Uganda, Mwambari (2021) investigates the nature of commemoration ceremonies related to recent conflict, with a focus on the ways in which the commemoration events became sites of contestation for identities in a post-colonial context. In the post-Holocaust era, as global institutions and civil society have considered how to deal with contemporary crimes against humanity, various crisis hotspots (e.g., Rwanda, Cambodia) have also engaged the international community. Transitional justice, addressing conflict legacies and human rights violations for peaceful transitions, also incorporates memorial sites, museums, and commemorations, shaping transnational and collective memory practices. Thus Björkdahl et al. (2017)

Table 1
Conceptual evaluation.

Theory	Features	Value to dark event research	Limitations for dark event research	Concept
Domain theory - Thanatology	Diversity of approaches	Suggests diverse perspectives from which dark event research can be conducted	Breadth can come at the expense of depth	Approaches
	Focus on death and dying	Clear links to certain kinds of dark events, especially end-of-life events and commemorations	Limited scope for engagement with events that do not feature death	Presence of death
	Focus on understanding human experience	Can capture diverse aspects of dark event experiences, beyond hedonism	Lacks perspectives on non-human death and suffering	Experiences
	Engagement with commercial activities	Emphasises the preservation of authenticity and tradition	Limits the type of events that can be considered	Commercialisation
Method theory 1: Dark Leisure	Multi-disciplinarity	Suggests diverse perspectives from which dark event research can be conducted	Breadth can come at the expense of depth	Approaches
	Focus on audiences and participants	Supports the emphasis of contemporary event management research on understanding event experiences	Lacks engagement with the practical aspects of event management, e.g., planning, management, evaluation, risk management	Commercialisation Experiences
	Antagonism to capitalism	Can challenge dominance of neoliberal perspectives in event management research	Limits the scope of research through a lack of engagement with commercial events	Commercialisation
	Discusses deviance as well as death	Adds a new element to how dark events could be defined, beyond death and suffering, and with an appreciation of their deviant and sometimes dangerous natures	Can mythologise dark events or place them far outside quotidian experience	Deviant Behaviour Presence of Death
	Places darkness within the public sphere	Draws attention to the socially embedded nature of events	Potential tautology in the labelling of events with a tragic background	Public sphere
	Focus on dark symbolism opens up new kinds of events for analysis	Broadens the scope of dark event typologies	The peculiarities of subcultures can make them inaccessible to outsider researchers	Presence of Death
Method theory 2: Dark Tourism	Early emphasis on supply-side perspectives	Addresses both darker and lighter perspectives, place-based identity.	Lacks depth of engagement with touristic and less sensational cases, but can still emphasize importance to individual communities.	Commercialisation Public sphere
	Body of research covers a wide range of dark tourism experiences	Interdisciplinary and multi-dimensional, considering both the institutional and personal perspectives to guide future research.	Can be reductionist in using discrete categories/ cases, ignoring personal awareness/experiences and feelings, not just rational ones.	Approaches Experience
	Diversity integrated with commercialism	Draws attention to the commercial potential of dark events, not just the darker ones and the most attractive/recognisable.	Ignores the deeper meanings of dark events, including issues of authenticity and local traditions; lack consideration of the practical aspects of event management and tends to present an erroneous simplification of the complexity of events	Commercialisation
	Emphasis on travel	Draws attention to the touristification of tragic historic events in national or international settings.	A focus on non-local audiences limits the scope of research that can be conducted into events that are not for, or visited by, tourists	Commercialisation
	More recent attention to visitor perspectives (demand)	Emphasis on visitor's profile including needs/ expectations/motives, attitudes.	Lacks depth when considering personal and psychological aspects, including visitors' emotions and behaviour.	Commercialisation Experience
Method theory 3: Memory Studies	Multi-disciplinary	Suggests diverse perspectives from which dark event research can be conducted	Breadth can come at the expense of depth	Approaches
	Emphasis on events linked to tragic historical events	Provides concepts and theories that can extend event management research into sensitive areas, including human death	Limited value for events not linked to significant, collective death and suffering; ignores the events of 'others'	Approaches
	Strong focus on memorialisation and commemoration	Provides a depth of knowledge to draw on for research into these types of events	Limits the scope of research into different types of dark event	Public sphere Approaches
	International focus	Cross-cultural and comparative studies suggest new perspectives on event management research	Tends to focus on collective narratives and experiences – the individual perspective is only a lens through which to view the collective. Dark events in smaller nations/communities remain beyond the interest of researchers	Approaches
	Views events as part of 'memory formations'	Draws attention to the socially embedded nature of events, including those in transitional post-conflict settings	Overlooks possibilities for the integration of disciplinary diverse ways of viewing dark events	Public sphere
	Emphasis on non-commercial aspects of memory	Draws attention to the deeper meanings of dark events, authenticity and local traditions	Lacks engagement with the practical aspects of dark event management	Commercialisation

attempt to bring events into a conceptual framework to better understand the memory work that is employed towards achieving peace in post-conflict societies. They emphasize the ritualistic aspect of commemorative events and their capacity to both reinforce and challenge established social structures. Within this ritualistic memory framework, such events constitute a component of mnemonic configurations that can be assessed in post-conflict contexts to examine interactions among memory sites, agents, narratives, and occurrences. This approach allows for comparative analyses of the various roles that events assume in diverse contested memory contexts.

Studying dark events from a collective memory perspective focuses our attention on the roles that events can have in society and how they can become sites where memories are preserved, crystalised and moved from intangible to tangible realms of experience (*Lieux du memoire*, after Nora, 1989; Sumartojo & Graves, 2018). Memory studies offer a toolkit of useful concepts for how to think about the external impacts of events and how the events form part of social discourse. However, memory studies do not consider the full range of events, nor their commercial aspects or management. Although the memory studies perspective could, conceivably, be applied to a range of different types of events, in past research there has been a strong focus on memorialisation and commemoration events. These previous studies help to link collective memory to thanatology through a shared concern with the social meaning of death and dying. Collective memory research usually has its focus at the level of communities and states, only considering individual perspectives as lenses through which to view larger political processes. This can miss both the insights into consumption in dark events that are offered by leisure studies, and the engagement with commercial practices that are offered by dark tourism research. The following section shows how a theoretical synthesis of the domain and method theories reviewed thus far, allows for the construction of a new conceptual framework for studying dark events.

New conceptual framework

This study aims to synthesise existing theories of dark events to develop a new conceptual model that can be used to study such events in the future. In this section, the key conceptual features of the domain and method theories reviewed above are juxtaposed, so that their relative value for dark event research can be evaluated. Table 1 provides an evaluation of the features of the theories that have been discussed, along with a summary of the concepts identified involved in this evaluation.

The process of summarising the features of the domain and method theories has allowed for their valuable conceptual elements to be evaluated and for the limitations of each approach to be identified. Thanatology is identified as a highly influential domain theory for the understanding of dark events, not least due to its influence on dark tourism research. However, this conceptual research shows, through a review of method theories related to thanatology, that even when thanatology is used in contextually diverse ways, it cannot alone explain the phenomenon of dark events, which require a new conceptual perspective. From the evaluation above, Fig. 2 provides a new model of six concepts (in green) that are linked to dark event research. Each of the six concepts is linked to three associated topics (in yellow). Thus, the model depicts the interdisciplinary nature of dark event research.

There are, of course, many other concepts that could have been included in this model. As a relatively new field of academic study, event research is characterised by a diversity of concerns and a sense of indiscipline (Tribe, 1997). We hope, however, that by identifying the six concepts, and associated 18 topics, that are linked to dark events, the above model can be a useful guide for new research in this emerging field. Dark events have been studied from multiple theoretical perspectives, although this is the first study that has attempted to analyse them through a synthesis of concepts from related domain and method theories.

As the field of critical event studies (Robertson et al., 2018) has developed, attempts have been made to develop event-specific knowledge, while strengthening the field by drawing connections between it and established fields beyond tourism research, from where it originally emerged. The conceptual model derived by this study contributes to this development by providing support for new, critical research into the role and management of dark events. Table 1 and Fig. 2 provide a summary and a visual representation, respectively, of the *theory synthesis* (Jaakkola, 2020) approach used to produce this conceptual paper. Theory synthesis was conducted to identify areas of convergence and divergence in theoretical approaches to dark events, with the aim of promoting greater theoretical coherence (Cropanzano, 2009) in future studies.

By using thanatology as the domain theory for conceptual analysis of this phenomenon, it has been possible to illuminate the value of thanatology for dark event research and, conversely, the possible ways in which the study of events can be brought into the thanatological perspective of death studies. Many of the concepts developed in thanatology have explicitly informed studies of dark tourism and dark leisure, and collective memory research shares thanatological concerns with the role of death in society. The thanatological concepts identified in this new framework include the presence of death in events, the relationship between dark events and the public sphere, and the multi-disciplinarity of approaches that can be taken to researching these relationships. However, thanatological perspectives struggle to conceptualise other aspects of dark events, such as deviant behaviour, commercialisation and the diversity of human and non-human experiences that are inherent to them. This research shows that these thanatological and non-thanatological concepts can be linked through dark event research, suggesting that death studies research can be enhanced through the study of dark events.

Conclusions and future research directions

This conceptual paper has analysed 'a focal phenomenon that is observable, but not adequately addressed, in the existing research' (Jaakkola, 2020: 19). Table 1 indicates the limitations of previous research into dark events and this study contributes to the development of new understandings of a set of highly diverse yet, we argue, interconnected social practices. Reflecting this,
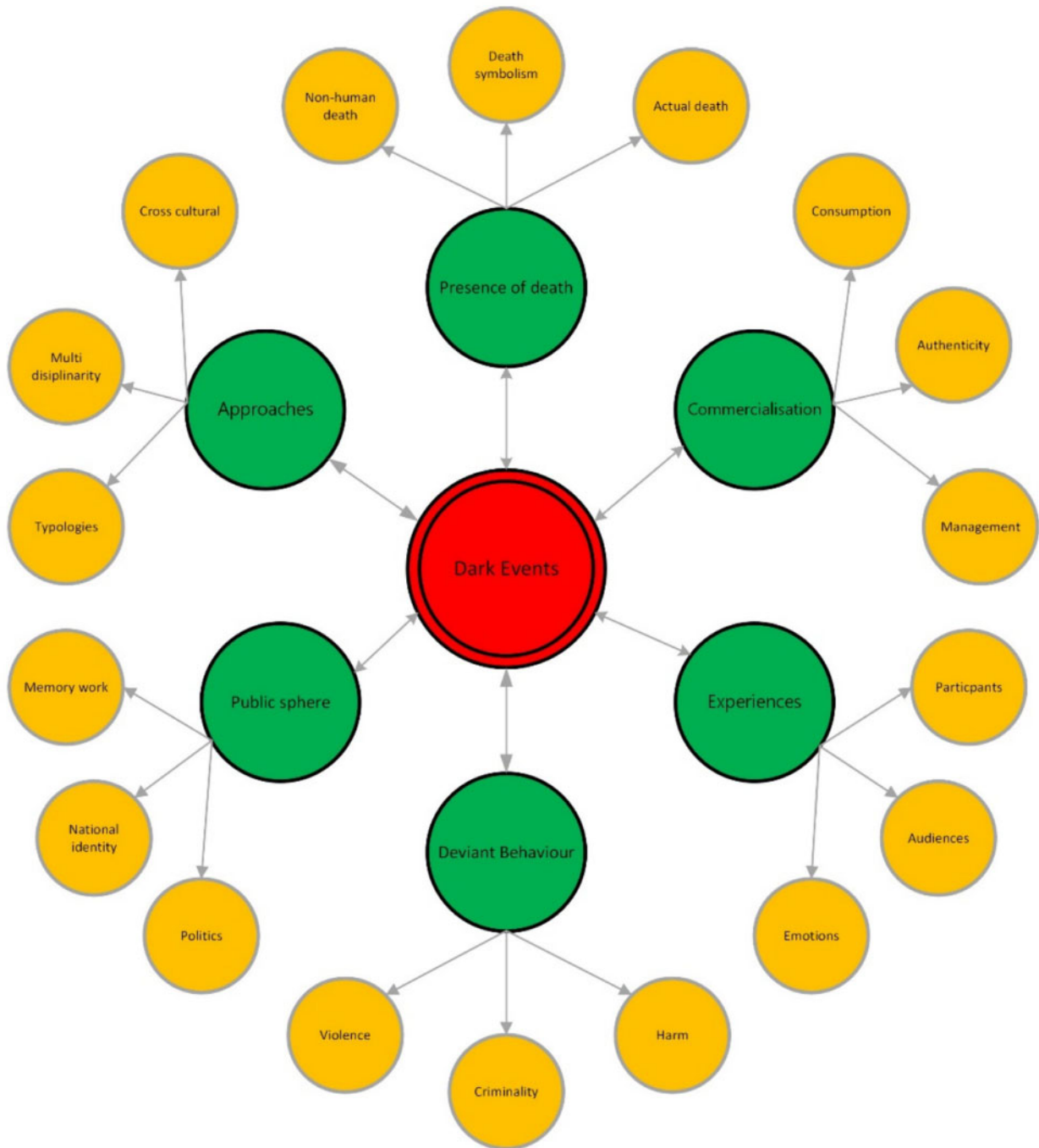
Fig. 2. Conceptual model of dark event research.
(Author's own.)

and in common with much conceptual research in tourism, its conceptual analysis manifests a 'fuzzy' quality that has elements of many different typologies of conceptual research including defining the core concept of dark events, but also mapping its scope and creating a synthesis of previous research in this area (Xin et al., 2013). Given the growth of events that could be considered dark, it is important to examine the use and value of the term dark events to provide a guide for future scholarship. For example, research into events associated with deviant behaviour in the metaverse (DuQuette, 2020), protest events (Đurić et al., 2023), controversial commemorations (Šuligoj & Kennell, 2022), funerals and other end-of-life events (Laws & Deverell, 2019), or into

the role of animal suffering in events (Marinova & Fox, 2019), could be carried out from a dark event perspective, if this area of scholarship is found to be useful and to have a sense of theoretical coherence.

For dark events to develop as a productive and impactful area of study, it is necessary to interrogate its conceptual foundations and this study is the first to attempt to do this, using a theoretical synthesis approach (Jaakkola, 2020). A synthesis summary is outlined in Table 1, and Fig. 2 introduces a new conceptual model supporting dark event research. This model identifies six conceptual areas and 18 associated topics, suggesting independent or interconnected research. Rooted in thanatology, dark tourism, dark leisure, and memory studies, the model implicitly connects with the theories of these fields, serving as a methodological toolkit for future studies on dark events. This conceptual paper contributes theoretically to the evolving field of critical event studies, particularly in interdisciplinary dark event research.

The first conceptual area for future research proposed in this study relates to the *presence of death* in events. We have shown that some dark events involve the potential for actual death to occur, whether human or non-human, and that research into end-of-life events such as funerals and celebrations of life from the death studies field offers new insights for researchers in mainstream, and more critical, events management research. A further field of study that is linked to this involves events that make use of the symbolism of death, including music and other subcultural expressions such as goth and dark metal, which can be found in a growing range of music events and festivals, and which have also gained prominence in tourism research that has engaged with the recent growth of this symbology in popular culture (Brown, 2023). For future researchers in dark events, we recommend engaging more explicitly with thanatology and the death studies field. This perspective offers powerful analytical tools such as the concepts of thanatopsis and mortality salience, and is a particularly inter-disciplinary field that combines psychology, sociology, medicine, anthropology and other disciplines in ways that could deepen the critical engagement of events research in settings where the presence of death is a vital concept. Additionally, critical events research can further enrich death studies because of its incorporation of topics that thanatology can struggle to engage with, such as management, marketing and other commercial practices.

Two further conceptual areas demonstrate how the consideration of these types of practices in dark events has been influenced by the development of dark tourism research. C*ommercialisation* has been a concern of many studies of dark events, seen in a focus on the management of events and consumption by attendees on the one hand, and worries about the impacts of this on the authenticity of the events, on the other. This tension is a core concern of much tourism research, especially in heritage and cultural tourism. As explored above, early research in dark tourism had a strong focus on defining the nature of dark supply, the motivations of dark tourists, and the relationship between these and the more noble purposes of sites of commemoration. Notwithstanding more recent advances in dark tourism research, the extent to which the commercialisation of sites and practices causes social and cultural problems in host communities remains an issue for the management of dark events in tourist settings, and in complex political situations. Without neglecting or oversimplifying the sensitivities involved, dark event researchers should continue to develop approaches that draw on the significant body of work in tourism in this area. This approach could be particularly helpful when engaging with heritage events such as re-enactments and educational performances in heritage spaces, where these tensions could be seen as particularly acute.

Where dark tourism and dark events research can both be extended is in the understanding of *experiences*. Recent studies in dark tourism have developed this focus by engaging with ideas such as existentialism and emotion and this trend should be extended into the analysis of experiences taking place at dark events. The analysis of dark events experiences can also be informed by the emerging body of work on event experience design, and the psychological theories that have been applied in studies of experiential marketing. Because of the participatory nature of many dark events, for example in commemorations or in spectator sports, it is important to continue to analyse the experiences of audiences, but also to consider the perspective of more diverse groups of participants in dark events. Research into sports events in post-conflict settings has shown how these can take on nationalist and other political meanings, and these emotionally charged environments will be particularly amenable to an experience-focused analysis. Analysing dark events in post-conflict settings introduces categories such as victims and perpetrators, where theories and approaches from memory studies and criminology can be applied to move beyond the host-guest analyses that dominate dark events research informed by tourism studies. In this way, dark events research can contribute to the development of new perspectives in dark tourism research that move beyond simplistic views of events as just elements of tourism supply.

The area of *deviant behaviour* makes links between dark events and the ways that these have been studied in research in the field of leisure studies, but also in criminology and psychology, where the focus has been on violence, criminality and other forms of personal or societal harm. Leisure studies is one of the antecedent fields for events research, with much early research in events (for example on volunteering, or sports) being heavily influenced by this tradition. However, research on dark leisure and research on these practices that draws on criminology and psychology has not been widely used in research into dark events. The theoretical richness of previous studies in this area can be used to underpin the development of new research directions in dark events. This is often about the 'dark side' of dark events, which rather than viewing events as legitimate expressions of marginalised subcultures, or as contemporary or authentic mythological manifestations that should be preserved, would focus attention on problematic issues associated with dark events and the deviant behaviour that can be associated with them, such as sport fan violence or problematic drug use within music events.

Much of the research reviewed in this synthesis analyses dark events in terms of their relationships to issues in the *public sphere*, the fifth conceptual area identified in this study. These issues were particular prominent in studies of events with the darkest themes, linked to war, genocide and other tragedies, which mostly involved commemorative events although these themes were also seen in other events to more limited extents. Some events dark characteristics could be explained by the

presence of these themes in otherwise non-dark contexts through, for example, banners and chants of fans, or protests that took place by participants. Where these events have been studied, they often drew on theoretical insights from memory studies and political sciences to explain their contexts. Working with concepts from these fields, such as collective memory, memory work, or extremism, can help to provide new perspectives on dark events that come from outside of the mainstream of events research that has been heavily influenced by research in tourism, leisure and business studies. New research on dark events, in particular at events with specific political or activist content such as commemorations or protests, and their interaction with the public sphere can broaden the horizons of event studies. This expansion extends into realms of politics, religion, and communities, thereby enriching the scholarly landscape of critical event studies.

The final conceptual area identified in Fig. 2 relates to the *approaches* that have used to research dark events to date, and how this area can be developed methodologically. We have argued that important early work in dark tourism focused on the creation of typologies of dark supply, which did not sufficiently engage with events as objects of study in themselves. In extending the breadth and depth of dark events research in the future, creating new typologies of dark events that capture their diversity can be an important foundational step for a developing field. However, more recent dark tourism research, informed by the critical tourism studies approach, has seen a turn towards the study of emotions, atmospheres and non-representational, embodied aspects of experiences, and future research into dark events can be informed by this (Goulding & Pressey, 2023).

As the domain theory that was identified for this study, thanatology is characterised by a methodological and contextual diversity because of its multidisciplinary nature, and this suggests that dark events research that draws on thanatologically-related fields could be similarly diverse, and this will help to strengthen the field as it develops. Dark events researchers should also seek to broaden the scope of their research to more non-Western settings. This would follow developments in memory studies that have recently seen more studies from the global south, and from indigenous and post-colonial perspectives. In doing this, they can help to address criticisms of research in tourism, leisure and events that have emphasized their position within dominant Western academic contexts, and support the growth of events research outside of these traditional settings.

As a conceptual paper, this research is limited by the authors' choice of theories and concepts that were included within its scope. It is possible that alternative or complementary contributions could be made by analysing different perspectives on dark events. By following an explicit research design for the paper, and drawing on explications of the conceptual research approach that have been applied in similar studies, it is hoped that this limitation has been addressed, although it is impossible to overcome completely. Ultimately, the utility and limitations of the conceptual model proposed in this research will be illuminated through future empirical studies of dark events that apply it.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

James Kennell: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Metod Šuligoj:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2024.103799.

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