

Please note: this is an uncorrected pre-proof version, and readers should cite the final, proofed version.

James, S., & Cronin, J. (2026). When dark tourism goes para-terrestrial: Online legend-tripping and touring the void. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 118, 104172. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2026.104172>

WHEN DARK TOURISM GOES PARA-TERRESTRIAL: Online legend-tripping and touring the void

Abstract

Using Žižek's concept of ontological incompleteness, we theorise the touristic appeal of online legend-tripping as derived from the fantasy of traversing reality's uncharted horizons. While online legends such as 'the Backrooms' invoke curiosity in suffering and the macabre, they deviate from the sense of heritage, moral guardianship, and evidential integrity that characterise physical dark tourism. Drawing upon an observational netnography of the 'r/backrooms' community on Reddit, we unpack processes of *temporal suspension*, 'good' *alienation*, and *transcendence downward* which enable online legend-tripping to function as a 'para-terrestrial' variant of dark tourism. The importance of real-world referents recedes, giving way to subjective encounters with the unknown. Obscene enjoyment displaces moral engagement, and participatory mythmaking supplants the bureaucratisation and commoditisation of travel experiences.

Keywords: dark tourism, transgression, ontological incompleteness, Žižek, virtual, internet

1.0 INTRODUCTION

With much of the world's terrestrial space having been conquered, colonised, and absorbed into the circuitry of global capitalism through commercial tourism, heritage branding, and destination marketing, the internet is perceived by some as a last patch of wilderness outside the reach of total commodification. Although online environments are themselves subject to marketisation and platform governance, several online communities idealise their digital spaces as relatively autonomous wild-lands, unspoiled by sanitising commercial overreach, making them a sanctuary for subversive discourse, dark topical debate, and affective experimentation (see Andéhn et al., 2024; Bleakley, 2023). In this paper, we consider how the phenomenon of 'online legend-tripping' – which involves digitally and communally exploring mythic spaces that evoke themes of death, obscurity, and the uncanny – functions as an imagined refuge from the market pressures and moral didacticism that increasingly permeate tourism locations, including physical dark tourism sites.

Unlike physical dark tourism sites, which often centre on real-world referents and invite analyses focused on questions of historical representation and the tensions between remembrance and commodification of past suffering (Foley & Lennon, 1996; Stone, 2009a; Sharpley & Stone, 2009), online legend-tripping involves encounters with digitalised spaces which escape signification, are steeped in fiction rather than history, and “test conventional, experiential, and metaphysical limits” of reality (Kinsella, 2011, p.30). To address this conceptual difference, we turn to cultural critic Slavoj Žižek's psychoanalytic toolbox which shifts the focus from what is historically anchored or materially representable to what is unknown, ungraspable, or immaterial. Using Žižek's notion of 'ontological incompleteness', we approach online legend-tripping as a means of imagining uncharted spaces that expose the gaps and ruptures in the idea of a coherent, known world.

At the heart of ontological incompleteness is Žižek's insistence that not everything can be explained, commodified, or made knowable and it is this sense of unknowability that holds a peculiar fascination for the modern subject. While physical dark tourism seeks to curate coherent narratives based on 'truth', ontological incompleteness allows us to consider online legend-tripping as grounded in mystery and the refusal of closure, what Žižek calls 'the *Thing*' ('das Ding'): the ineffable 'something' or 'somewhere' that lies beyond comprehension but promises meaning or completion. By approaching online legend-tripping as encounters with the Thing – an “absolute void, the lethal abyss” (Žižek, 2008a, p.105) where all symbolic-explanatory frameworks falter – we identify an unsettlingly weird ontology of space, what we tentatively term *para-terrestrial dark tourism*. We use the prefix 'para' (meaning 'beside' or 'beyond the usual') to signify interest in locations that cannot be travelled to in any conventional sense whose essence and structure perpetually elude full comprehension.

We structure our analysis according to two interrelated questions: 1.) *What are the defining characteristics of para-terrestrial dark tourism?* and 2.) *How does para-terrestrial dark tourism represent a departure from conventional dark tourism?* To address these questions, we draw upon a long-term observational netnography of Reddit's 'r/backrooms' discussion board (with a community exceeding 342,000 contributors). 'The Backrooms' is an online legend that describes mysterious empty spaces, often resembling uncharted office blocks, basements, and hotel corridors, that supposedly exist in a parallel dimension to our reality. According to those who perpetuate their mythology through stories, wikis, art, vlogs,

and memes, the Backrooms exist outside ordinary time and place and cannot be intentionally travelled to; they are accidentally encountered by those who have ‘no-clipped’ out of our reality by slipping through cracks in the known world.

The Backrooms have become widely searched online and, according to Google Trends, generated more search interest at their peak in mid-2022 than several major real-world dark tourism locations including Auschwitz, Alcatraz, the London Dungeon, and Aokigahara suicide forest. A video purporting to be ‘found footage’ of the Backrooms has over 72 million views on YouTube and a website for a (fictional) service provider, *The Backrooms Travel Agency*, provides touristic advice to would-be ‘wanderers’ of the Backrooms.

Using the Backrooms to scaffold our concept of para-terrestrial dark tourism, we make two theoretical contributions to tourism research. First, we offer a more radical conceptualisation of the internet as a dark touristic destination in and of itself. Whereas the internet has previously been explored as a promotional or communicative device that complements conventional travel by enhancing tourists’ perceptions of, and connections to, real-world dark destinations (Bolan & Simone-Chateris, 2018; Hodalska, 2017), and as a platform through which real-world dark events can be encountered virtually (Denham, 2023; Lonergan, 2020; Lynes & Wragg, 2024), we introduce internet-mediated narrative transportation as a catalyst for subverting and reimagining ‘destination’ altogether. The shared imaginaries that online legend-trippers rely upon radically alter traditional understandings of destination by moving it from a geographically fixed endpoint to a shifting, participatory, and digitally constructed experience. Shared imaginaries emerge through collaborative storytelling and ongoing interactions that produce fictive-yet-affectively-resonant spaces. By privileging shared imaginaries over geographic mobility, the narrative transportation achieved through online legend-tripping introduces an alternative para-terrestrial logic that redefines what it means to ‘visit’ a place.

Second, our analysis complicates optimistic perspectives on the moral functioning of dark tourism. While several studies have already identified how commodification, spectacle, and curated narratives can undermine the moral integrity of dark tourism (e.g. Hodalska, 2017; Stone, 2009a), we show how para-terrestrial dark tourism openly refuses moral integrity altogether. Beyond merely lacking moral coherence, fantastical spaces such as the Backrooms require a commitment to a post-moral ontological drift allowing for meaning, history, and ethics to disintegrate – permitting transgression without guilt or consequence. We demonstrate how an obscene enjoyment (*jouissance*) derives not from the revelation of moral lessons but from their perpetual deferral.

2.0 THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1 Dark tourism’s virtualisation & online legend-tripping

Although its scope is debated, dark tourism broadly refers to travel motivated by interest in the tragic, macabre, or unsettling and is marked by several key features. First, dark tourism involves the representation of some breakdown in order. The absurdities and atrocities inflicted by seemingly transgressed morals, broken laws, or shattered assumptions concerning reality, decency, mortality, or normality are emplaced and represented for visitation (James et al., 2024). Second, dark tourism intersects with remembrance, working to shape meaning,

memory, and history for visitors who witness and draw conclusions about the catastrophic failure of order in some time-space (Farkić & Kennell, 2021). Third, dark tourism relies upon the auratic aspects of space to elicit affective responses including sadness, disgust, fear, guilt, gratitude, or even perverse thrills (Goulding & Pressey, 2023). Fourth, the signification of darkness at these auratic spaces is not ontologically fixed but is contingent upon socio-cultural discourses or, as Stone (2012, p.1568) suggests: “notions of darkness in dark tourism are socially constructed, rather than objective fact”.

Lack of ontological fixture means there is no single form of dark tourism. Instead, there is a continuum along which types of touristic encounters with the obscene or macabre can be situated according to “shades of darkness” (Stone, 2006, p.145). This ‘dark tourism spectrum’ runs the gamut from ‘darkest’, such as sites of actual tragedy like extermination camps (Goulding & Pressey, 2023) and slave plantations (Raymen, 2023), to ‘lightest’, including sites of fabricated, mythic, or semi-mythic death narratives such as the ‘Dracula Experience’ in Whitby (Stone, 2006) and the London Dungeon (Stone, 2009b).

Dark tourism is not solely reserved for sites grounded in material evidence or historical truths. As Stone describes, tourism locations can be considered dark simply by “*allud[ing]* to a sense of apparent disturbing practices” or “the *seemingly* macabre” (2006, p. 146, emphasis added). Several tourism researchers have conceptualised physical contexts associated with hauntings, ghosts, curses, and the otherworldly as dark tourism (Holloway, 2010; Stone, 2009b), often situating these encounters at the ‘lighter’ end of the spectrum, sustained by fantasy and speculative discourse (Ironsides & Smith, 2025). Additionally, although commodification occurs predominantly amongst lighter shades, any dark tourism experience has the potential to be “overshadowed by commercial and entertainment values” (Stone, 2006, p.150).

High-speed broadband internet and novel media technologies have ushered in a new era for dark tourism, enabling virtual engagement with sites alluding to death, tragedy, and obscenity through high-fidelity reproductions and simulacra without geographical or logistical constraints. “Building on the armchair tourism of previous eras,” Edwards (2020, p.117) suggests, “the virtual experience could substitute for perceptually curious individuals who may not have the resources to support a dark pilgrimage”. Digital content that mirrors the functions observed in terrestrial dark tourism may include websites that host amateur footage of real-life deaths from around the world, whether fatal accidents, criminal violence, or all manner of human atrocity (Denham, 2023). As Denham writes, “the internet is a place that some users go to in order to recreationally consume death – and by that definition, we can understand some internet spaces as dark tourist attractions” (p.232).

Nevertheless, beyond the virtualisation of geographically fixed horrors and instances of real-life destruction, a large proportion of the unsettling material consumed online is fictive, mutable, and relies on memetic stories, apocrypha, and conspiracies (Andéhn et al., 2024; Bleakley, 2023). Echoing Augé’s (2020) ‘non-places’ of supermodernity, where digital experiences replace stable, meaningful places, dark destinations are often untethered from specific geographies and histories when mediated by web-forums and blogging websites. Instead, participatory digital storytelling functions as a kind of online variant of the ‘legend-trip’ (Holloway, 2010). Unlike its offline counterpart which involves physically journeying to concrete locations to make sense of their mysterious reputations, online legend-tripping

compels travel to web-locations to *digitally* reconstruct and experiment with the truth value of stories discussed amongst like-minded others (Kinsella, 2011).

While it might centre on many of the same morbid or obscene themes associated with dark tourism, online legend-tripping relies upon narrative rather than terrestrial transportation. Narrative transportation involves the cognitive and affective processes of immersing oneself in stories, an experience that requires no geographic displacement yet nevertheless feels like one “[has] left the real world behind when visiting narrative worlds” (Gerrig, 1993, p.157). Kinsella (2011) underscores how the internet amplifies the socio-technical character of narrative transportation creating “legend ecologies”, defined as “the interactions between legends, legend-telling situations and communities, the material means and technologies of communication, and the environments throughout which legends circulate” (p.5). Legend ecologies align with theories of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2002) where digital platforms empower users to co-create folklore and through their collaboration, expand legends into dynamic, self-sustaining narratives that ‘feel’ real even in the absence of original truth.

The narrative transportation that legend ecologies facilitate is shaped by several antecedents. First, unlike physical and virtual dark tourism where definitive destinations and evidence of their horrors are curated by authoritative experts, online legend-tripping is decentralised, relying on collective mythmaking without a single, controlling authority. Second, the presence of unresolvable mystery sustains speculation, preventing symbolic closure and perpetuating immersion in the legend’s unfolding narrative. Third, immersion relies on a collective commitment to verisimilitude, achieved through the embrace of pseudo-realistic documentation such as first-person testimonies, “spirit photographs or anomalous electronic voice recordings”, diary-style entries, and “more ‘down-to-earth’ stories” which help to blur the boundary between fact and fiction and facilitate the suspension of disbelief (Kinsella, 2011, pp.5-6). Lastly, a legend ecology must resist didacticism, or, as Kinsella (2011, p.6) describes, “[i]nstead of producing moral certainty (‘You should not play cards with the devil’), many of today’s supernatural legends generate uncertainty (‘Should I try to communicate with the spirit in my house?’)”. Narrative transportation in this context involves “instigat[ing] interpretive dilemmas” (ibid, p.7) prompting creativity and experimentation.

These antecedents result in variegated, expandable, and unverifiable storyscapes or conspirascapes which are *parallel* rather than grounded to real places or events. Although virtual dark tourism is often framed as a way of engaging with real-world events and historical suffering (Denham, 2023; Lonergan, 2020), online legend-tripping prioritises fiction over factuality, entertainment over evidence, and embracing the incompleteness of ‘reality’ itself.

To explain how online legend-trippers’ gravitation to speculation and conspiracy reflects a desire to confront rather than resolve the inherent gaps that shape our knowledge (exposing a much graver, unsettling void in our understanding of reality), we turn to Žižek’s cultural-psychoanalytic concept of ontological incompleteness.

2.2 Ontological incompleteness

Psychoanalysis, while less utilised than phenomenological, social constructionist and associated perspectives in tourism studies, is steadily “offer[ing] ways to tackle dark and

‘deviant’ aspects of travel, to penetrate and make (even if partial) sense of unconscious irrationalities” (Buda, 2015, p.41). Freud’s notion of the death drive has been used to explore why tourists are drawn to confront danger, mortality and ‘unpleasure’ (Buda, 2015), Lacan’s concepts of fantasy and alienation have underpinned critiques of tourists’ unfulfillable search for authenticity (Knudsen, Rickly & Vidon, 2016) or relief from anxiety (Vidon & Rickly, 2018), while Freud-Lacanian theories of voyeuristic desire centred on witnessing the forbidden have been attached to the motivations for pursuing dark tourism (Buda & McIntosh, 2013). A Žižekian cultural-psychoanalysis offers something different: rather than emphasising individual desire and its irrationalities, the focus is on the irrationalities of social and structural systems. For Žižek, tourism does not reveal unconscious longing; it exposes cracks in a symbolic order ‘out there’ – incidents where the curated, managed, commodified version of a place struggles to sustain its symbolic story and tourists sense something unsettling, unstable, and imperfect underneath.

A main tenet of Žižekian cultural-psychoanalytic theory is understanding the space between ‘reality’ and the ‘Real’. For Žižek (2006, 2008a, 2008b), what we consider to be ‘reality’ is not the true state of things, but an accretion of meanings mediated by symbolic mechanisms – rules, messages, and signifiers – that we learn to interpret and unconsciously reproduce. The Real, by contrast, is the brute stuff of existence – a noumenal substrate that exists prior to and independent of anything we can name or make sense of; truths that are too frightening, too senseless, or just too big for us to comprehend or accept. In a tourism context, what visitors perceive of a place is not how it truly is, but a constructed ‘reality’ produced through marketing messages, social media imagery, culturally shaped assumptions, and holiday expectations.

Magaluf, a resort town in Majorca, serves as an illustrative example (Winlow, 2023). The ‘reality’ of Magaluf is constructed as a pleasure destination – marketed as a carefree paradise of beaches, curated nightlife strips, all-inclusive hotels, exciting bars, and packaged party culture symbolised with the prospect of sex, self-expression, and gratification. Once there however, this symbolisation fissures and cracks appear. The Real emerges in the nightly alcohol poisonings, comatose bodies, unreported sexual assaults, an overrun local A&E department, obscenely littered streets at sunrise, and the sense that the promised paradise never quite arrives – for it is after all *just* a place and a flawed one at that. Beneath tourism marketing and touristic motivations sits an unruly dimension of excess that the fantasy cannot explain or contain. It is at this point of rupture that Žižek (2006, p.242) detects the “ontological incompleteness of ‘reality’ itself”, meaning that “there is ‘reality’ only insofar as there is an ontological gap, a crack, in its very heart... a traumatic excess, a foreign body which cannot be integrated into it”.

Žižek uses ‘the Thing’ to denote the point at which our experience of reality fissures and we encounter the Real; a point “which cannot be symbolized... the empty, ‘indigestible’ place of the Thing” (Žižek, 2008b, p.150). Rather than equalling pure horror alone, the Thing holds an irrational, magnetic source of attraction over us. In tourism, this might be the eerie pull of entering a darkened alley, leaving the relative safety of the resort in search of ‘no-go’ zones, or in the case of Magaluf, cynically leaning into a culture of wild abandon and limit-breaking behaviours despite it all feeling somewhat sullied, deviant, and not quite in line with preconceived ideas of paradise. The Thing manifests as an obscene surplus within the tourism fantasy, appearing in the moment where tourists sense that something feels ‘off’ about the glossy, curated version of reality they are presented with, prompting them to dig beneath it.

Alternatively, the Thing can be understood as ‘the abject’, described by Žižek as “the reaction of horror, disgust, withdrawal, and ambiguous fascination triggered by objects or occurrences that undermine the clear distinction between subject and object, between *myself* and reality *out there*” (Krečič & Žižek, 2016, p.69). Encountering the abject both compels and repels us because it confronts us with the fragility of the symbolic order so essential to upholding our reality.

While prior scholarship has examined tourism providers’ efforts to sanitise and commodify the abject, such as the “absence management” that determines what is included and excluded at living museums (see Goulding et al. 2018), these analyses tend toward historical fidelity in the reconstruction of place-based trauma. The focus centres on commemorative work, what Goulding et al. (2018, p.32) call “material ‘re’-production of history”. For ‘re-production’ to occur, there needs to be “a ‘site’ of historical memory where the past is organized, frozen and embodied in the material” (ibid. p.32). We know far less about abject encounters that are devoid of knowable historical memory, material evidence, or identifiable location. Here, Žižek’s ontological incompleteness invites an epistemic shift in focus from the material and historical toward a void that cannot be symbolised. In the case of online-legend tripping, where legend ecologies claim no historical veracity, material evidence, nor invite restorative memory work, a Žižekian approach allows us to recognise the appeal of such ‘non-places’ as grounded in their own incoherence and unknowability rather than management.

In subsequent sections we explore online legend-tripping as a means of circumventing the market’s efforts to symbolise the Thing and to try, instead, to confront what remains evaded, occluded, or ungraspable within our reality.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Study area: The Backrooms

The empirical work for this paper was undertaken through long-term immersion in the ‘r/backrooms’ online legend-tripping community on Reddit. The legend of the Backrooms originated in 2019 with an anonymous posting of a photo of eerily empty, garishly yellow wallpapered rooms with drab carpeted floors and overhead fluorescent lights to a paranormal themed thread on the 4chan bulletin board (Figure 1).

In that photo, the dull, artificially-lit space is bereft of furniture, people, exits, or any obvious indication of purpose – just a disquietingly vacant warren of windowless dingy rooms, blind corners, and dead ends. As described by Greenshields (2023, p.17), “[w]hat strikes us in the eerie Backrooms photo is not just its emptiness and lack of explanation. This perfectly plain environment is entirely infected with an inexplicable oddness. The punctum that pricks us is everywhere.” A second user of the bulletin board responded to the image naming it ‘The Backrooms’, declaring it a labyrinthine void hidden beneath the fabric of reality, accessible only by accidentally ‘no-clipping’ out of our world (a gaming term for glitching out of bounds into unrendered spaces).



Figure 1: The original Backrooms image posted on 4chan (Internet Archive, 2024)

The original photo continued to attract posts from others and following its viral popularity, multiple communities dedicated to speculating about the Backrooms began to surface elsewhere including the ‘r/backrooms’ community on Reddit which currently has over 331,500 active members, an Instagram account ‘@xbackroom’ with over 230,000 members, and the TikTok account ‘backrooms_guides’ with 1.1 million followers.

Given that online legend-tripping relies on detailed storytelling (Kinsella, 2011), we selected Reddit for analysis because it best supports the text-based sharing of substantive comments and contributions. Unlike the truncated posts and short-form content typical of TikTok or Instagram, Reddit’s generous character limit allows for comprehensive accounting of users’ descriptions and theories. The r/backrooms community – a ‘subreddit’ – ranks in the top 1% of Reddit’s most influential and active discussion boards, with higher subscriber count and frequent posting activity. Content consists of collaborative mythmaking involving the sharing of supposed firsthand accounts, memes, videos, images, cryptic stories, and fan art, all facilitating a mass-transference of ideas and styles that sustain the plausibility of the Backrooms as a real place. Immersion for users is achieved through ongoing and cumulative commitment to their imaginative labour, narrative transportation, and communal participation, which is characteristic of online communities and fandoms in general (Jenkins, 2002; Kozinets, 2020).

The significance of the Backrooms as a site for alternative dark touristic engagement is not based on the duration of a user’s visit to the subreddit in a single session, but on the sustained depth of affective and narrative investment marked by *repeated* visits, re-reading, co-creation, and participatory mythmaking. This is demonstrated by continuous community activity such as prolific posting, upvoting, responding to, and expanding of ‘Backrooms lore’, all of which requires continuity and making detailed intertextual linkages between new and archived materials. The participatory culture that emerges reveals significant research and imaginative labour from its contributors. As Wiggins (2025, p. 4734) notes, “the backrooms attract individuals wishing to take part in the unfolding of the narrative, revealing hidden

truths and dark corners along the way”, an act of discovery that “inspire[s] others to continue and/or contribute to the discourse through comments, shares, and similar productions”.

In terms of classifying the Backrooms as dark tourism, a conventional reading might suggest that they are positioned at the “lighter” end of Stone’s (2006) continuum due to their absence of real-world deaths or commemoration of atrocity. Yet applying Žižek’s notion of ontological incompleteness complicates this positioning by focusing not on empirical referents but on the frightening uncertainty that stems from reality itself being brought into question. For Žižek, darkness not only emerges from factual death or actual loss; it is also catalysed by the trauma of the symbolic order failing, and of being helplessly plunged into conditions that cannot be stabilised or made sense of. The darkness of the Backrooms lies not in historical suffering but in the dreadfulness of a world being stripped of all structure and sense, thus provoking a form of ontological rather than material loss. Whilst even the most tragic real-world dark tourism experiences remain symbolically comprehensible through educational presentation and guided narratives, the Backrooms confront visitors with something fundamentally ungraspable.

Furthermore, while much of traditional dark tourism positions visitors as passive observers looking onto past suffering, the Backrooms present them with a live situation where the symbolic order is actively unravelling around them. Viewed through this Žižekian lens, the Backrooms can be potentially situated at the darkest end of Stone’s continuum because they stage an encounter with the Real at its most unfiltered and thus most unsettling.

3.2 Method: Observational netnography

Observational netnography, an interpretivist engagement with internet-mediated communications and interactions, was selected as the mode of inquiry to explore r/backrooms (Kozinets, 2020). Designed for immersion in virtual worlds, observational netnography has been used by tourism researchers to provide a window into naturalistic narratives about space, place, and travel as they unfold online (Brooks & Soulard, 2022; James et al., 2024). The authors adopted a “lurker” – or “silent observer” (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024, p.7) – position, observing but *not* interfering in or contributing to community discussions, allowing users to express themselves openly and without interruption.

While participation and dialogue are conventionally valued in offline ethnographic accounts, netnographers note that in certain online communities, active participation can disrupt the very dynamics under observation. “Lurking”, as Mkono and Markwell (2014) indicate, helps preserve experiential integrity by minimising the disruptive influence of researchers on the flow of content thus leaving insider meaning-making practices undisturbed. Given that r/backrooms function through the suspension of disbelief, narrative transportation, and earnest commitment to myth-building, lurking ensured we did not fracture the illusion or disrupt the subreddit’s internal logic.

Additionally, on Reddit – which Kozinets (2020, p.197) classifies as a “public site” because its content is publicly accessible through Google without the need to sign-in – lurking is itself a normative mode of participation. On public platforms, as Mkono and Markwell (2014, p.290) add, “‘participation’ is not expected or necessary, as individuals post... for others to read, many of whom may never contribute”.

After attaining institutional ethics approval, the first author installed the Reddit mobile-app and enabled notifications to immerse herself in new submissions on r/backrooms. This mobile observational approach – “data collection with a new on-the-go quality”, (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024, p. 5), mirrors the behaviour of an engaged follower or ‘lurker’ of r/backrooms: attentively observing content and dialogue without direct participation (Andéhn et al., 2024).

To locate relevant data, an evolving set of keywords was entered into the r/backrooms search bar to retroactively unpack the context of discussions and identify how and where they might relate to our research questions. The authors immersed themselves in over 500 submissions, with several garnering from a dozen to a thousand comments. Community posts were handled through “searching them, observing them, downloading parts of them, writing analytic and observational fieldnotes about them” (Kozinets, 2020, p.141).

Observational netnographic immersion is characterised by reading, deciphering, and inhabiting the symbolic world of the online community over extended periods of time, including recognising and being able to decode lore, in-jokes, norms, and affective registers, making connections between emergent conversations and archived discussions, and becoming familiar with intra-community terminology (Kozinets, 2020). Observational immersion, while unobtrusive and non-invasive, is indispensable when traversing legend ecologies like r/backrooms where posts exhibit retroactive continuity and are often deliberately obscure.

The first author maintained a reflexive immersion journal as recommended by Kozinets (2020) to capture the contours of searching, experiencing, reflecting on, and identifying emergent connections between data and themes in the dark tourism literature. Her journal was shared with the second author who was able to retrace her steps on r/backrooms, add thoughts, and make connections to concepts that offer plausible explanations.

Analysis and interpretation unfolded through an iterative process consistent with netnographic principles. Unlike content analysis which follows a fixed coding frame, we developed themes “through sustained and focused engagement with relevant traces, experiences, events, and actors” (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024, p.9) comparing, combining, and reconciling emergent patterns derived from our netnographic field notes.

Patterns were interpreted in dialogue with Žižek’s writings on ontological incompleteness, equipping us with generative vocabulary for theoretical explanation. Žižek’s concepts deepened our interpretations which were then clarified, re-evaluated or challenged through repeated returns to both field material and additional literature. This back-and-forth process was guided by principles of comparison, integration, and refutation through which the authors challenged each other’s interpretations, agreeing alignment with both theory and empirical insights (Spiggle, 1994). The resulting themes were inductively identified and abstracted through relevant theory, keeping our analysis grounded in empirical patterns while allowing for new conceptual leaps.

4.0 A TRIP TO THE BACKROOMS

Through our immersion in the legend ecology of r/backrooms, three main themes emerged. First, we discuss how the Backrooms create a sense of *temporal suspension* allowing online legend-trippers to reject the standard packaging of history in traditional dark touristic products and venture instead into a location where time no longer functions as expected. Second, we draw attention to ‘good’ *alienation* in the Backrooms, where online legend-trippers can revel in their collective ignorance, unburdened by the need for definitive answers. Third, we examine how the Backrooms manifest a sense of *transcendence downward* – a search for exalted meaning in the most obscene and sordid spatial encounters possible.

4.1 Temporal suspension

Many of the posts to r/backrooms are roleplay – they are written from the perspective of someone who has mysteriously ‘no-clipped’ into the Backrooms and is trying to make sense of their surroundings or build a picture for future travellers on what to expect. Beyond the profound sense of spatial displacement shared by those who tour the Backrooms, one of the most forceful themes to emerge is the feeling of *temporal suspension*; the experience of having stumbled into an event without historicity, a vaguely decayed place where it is impossible to discern whether it is day or night, past, present or future. Rather than providing obvious connections to known, well-mapped places or events, r/backrooms invite online legend-trippers into an abstract, unsettling experience that subverts all historical teleology and resolution. Mirroring Žižek’s (2008b) description of an encounter with the Real – triggered by the collapse of our symbolic structures “like abandoning time or space as the basic constituent of reality” (p.vii) – a common thread amongst r/backrooms participants is the sense that, in the Backrooms, time itself appears suspended.

First, r/backrooms embrace banality rather than iconicity. While conventional dark tourism reflects institutional tendencies to historicise trauma, locating past horrors within comprehensible temporal frameworks centred on historical icons – whether famous dead leaders such as John F. Kennedy and the walking tours that retrace his 1963 assassination in Dallas, Texas (Foley & Lennon, 1996), or famous dead spaces such as the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone and its symbolisation as an unintentional monument to Soviet life in the 1980s (Farkić & Kennedy, 2021) – the Backrooms draw upon the indeterminate and banal, such as anonymous, eerily depopulated quasi-office spaces and corridors which are not synonymous with any person, place, or year. As one legend-tripper reports:

.... [The Backrooms] exudes an eerie aura, reminiscent of a forgotten era, with dimly lit corridors and walls adorned with faded wallpaper from decades past. The air is heavy with a sense of nostalgia, evoking memories long buried in the minds of those who wander its halls... every step brings you closer to freedom but also increases the looming threat... Time is of the essence in this treacherous realm, where the past lingers like a haunting specter, and escape requires both speed and resilience.

The empty, drab wallpapered spaces of the Backrooms are vaguely reminiscent of some ‘forgotten’ era that was never meant to be remembered let alone iconised, producing at best a fuzzy déjà vu. The experience does not simply expose gaps in memory; it reveals the gap inherent in reality itself – the unsettling realisation that there are no ‘icons’ outside of our

collective imagination, no historical progress that pre-exists storytelling, only a senseless, indifferent void. As another tripper describes:

...the concept of the backrooms is at it's best when it's just an endless repetition of the same empty rooms and corridors. The concept of spending eternity just walking down the same old moldy [sic] hall ways, checking the same blank rooms desperately [hoping] to find something, anything, but you never do. I feel like that's more terrifying then [sic] any sort of monsters or different levels. [...] there is nothing worse I can truly think of other then having to spend eternity exploring this place, where there's just nothing.

The experience of being lost in an endless maze of repetitive, artificially lit rooms reverses the usual appeal of dark tourism; it is not the historically significant or remarkable that draws touristic attention, but rather the nightmare of the utterly *unremarkable*. There is no genocide to remember or tragedy to commemorate, no villainy to condemn or disaster to mourn, no cultural memory to contemplate. The primary horror of the Backrooms seems maddeningly pedestrian – a gradual death by dissociation as one succumbs to the slow violence of wandering empty rooms ad nauseam.

Whereas visitors at physical dark tourism destinations are led by expert curators through a carefully structured encounter with the gravitas of history, the Backrooms offer no concrete target for legend-trippers' curiosity. Instead, contributors to r/backrooms fixate on seemingly trivial details, exemplified by the following tripper who shares:

I found myself in a vast, dimly lit expanse of yellowed, damp carpeted rooms. The walls were covered in a nauseatingly repetitive pattern of yellow wallpaper, and the faint buzz of fluorescent lights filled the air. Panic set in as I realized I had no idea where I was or how I had gotten here. It was as if I had fallen through reality itself, into a place that should not exist... I spent hours wandering the endless maze of identical rooms, calling out for help, but all I heard was the echo of my own voice. I kept hoping I would bump into someone, anyone, who could explain what was happening.

Trippers are invited to step outside of normal chronological flow, unable to progress yet incapable of symbolising their stasis, suspended in an eternal present, where the Backrooms could belong anywhere or to any time in late modernity.

Another way that r/backrooms subvert a “sense of life as a chronological passage from yesterday through today into tomorrow” (Žižek, 2012, p.26) is through reference to obsolescence and anachronisms. Trippers describe that while relics of childhood, such as nostalgic gaming arcades, might be missing from our high streets they can still be found preserved for posterity in the Backrooms; a space one tripper classifies as “*the trash folder of reality*”:

[...] people and objects may accidentally glitch out of reality and expose the falsehood of their existence. they are sent to the trash folder of reality. a place full of deleted worlds and creatures who were never meant to exist in our world [...] thats why so many give off a weird sense of nostalgia. remember that 1 arcade you visited as a child that shut down a few years later? most likely it still remains within the backrooms, completely untouched for likely centuries to come.

Here, the Backrooms become a fantasy-preserve for pleasures lost to historical progress. Nevertheless, even seemingly innocuous seductions are treated with suspicion with many trippers suggesting they are mirages or traps ('Nostalgia Traps') used to lure visitors further into the depths of the rooms' nothingness.

The Backrooms' sense of pastness without specificity, a history-agnostic 'not-quite-nostalgia', denies visitors the comfort of a meaningful temporal anchor (Žižek, 2006). Unlike the "desire for a more stable, imagined past" found in traditional nostalgia (Goulding, 2024, p.270), or the anticipatory character of *mellostalgia* that involves imagining desirable futures (ibid), the Backrooms' affective atmosphere resists stability and chronology. Instead, legend-trippers immerse themselves in a temporally suspended emptiness where the touristic experience itself is formless, allowing them to glimpse the void beneath their symbolic order.

4.2 'Good' alienation

The second theme to emerge centres on the lack of definitive truths as a structural necessity for preserving touristic interest in the Backrooms. Unlike traditional dark tourism products which frequently prompt ethical questions, moral reflection, and an effort to discover truths that make sense of tragic events or disasters (Stone, 2009a, 2012), r/backrooms invite no such truth-seeking nor resolutions for the horrors encountered within. Although alienation from the truth is typically assumed to be negative, estranging us from answers and nullifying our sense of belonging or control, in the Backrooms alienation functions as a source of obscene enjoyment.

Not knowing – and not needing to know – sustains the freedom to tour the void without responsibility or consequence. To illustrate, Žižek (2022, p.86) describes how systems designed to alienate such as bureaucratic Soviet communism function through a "thick invisible cobweb" of esoterica and secrecy which can have a perversely liberating effect on those they subjectify. The impenetrability of that cobweb disabuses subjects of the felt pressures of ever needing to understand or control the world themselves, an experience he calls "good" alienation. The experience is similar for those who legend-trip to the Backrooms, an act that ostensibly ensnares them in a senseless void while freeing them of any expectation to achieve resolutions or moral reckonings.

The contours of 'good' alienation can be traced through posts on r/backrooms that emphasise the randomness of ending up in the mysterious void and encourage fellow trippers to make their peace with the possibility that this can happen to anyone:

The loud constant buzz, the yellow paper, the dim light, no sense of purpose or time, it messed with your mind and senses, you could end up in The Backrooms only by "no-clipping", you didn't have to do anything wrong to end up there, it simply happened (like most things in life), the idea of wandering alone for endless hallways unable to die but unable to live without having done anything to deserve it was truly terrifying, knowing that there were more people in that place but unable to find them...

Beneath the "terrifying" picture it paints, this excerpt suggests an unusual kind of relief can be derived from the Backrooms; one where trippers are disburdened from any need to explain how they arrived there. Unlike the forensic analyses that often accompany real-world disasters, the trauma of "no-clipping" is imagined as an objectless, random occurrence

that makes no such demands. Furthermore, attempts to impose too much order or clarity on the mysterious void often prompt frustration. The touristic allure of the Backrooms resides in the fact that answers remain elusive. One tripper shares:

[...] I always felt the original backrooms concept was solely brilliant because there was no lore. The idea that this mythical, unexplained designed thing exists and nobody knows why, was so important. Having people explain what it is, how to escape, what dangers there are on that level, etc completely destroys the entire purpose.

This excerpt reveals that the mystery of the Backrooms generates enjoyment through the *jouissance* of perpetual deferral – or what Žižek (1998) calls the “vicious cycle of deferred belief” (n.p.) – a state of excess enjoyment derived not from findings answers, but from answers being perpetually deferred. Belief in the Backrooms is enjoyable not despite the lack of evidence, but because this absence allows participants to turn their blind faith into a performative and ongoing practice. As Žižek describes, “for the belief to function, there has to be some ultimate guarantor of it, yet this guarantor is always deferred, displaced [...] It suffices to presuppose its existence” (ibid).

Unlike sites such as the 9/11 Memorial & Museum where darkness itself is explained and its perpetrators held accountable – allowing for resolution, rebuilding and healing – the Backrooms are marked by the endless deferral of answers:

[...] some people try to make [every] backrooms level (including old ones) more complicated by adding different areas, rules, and stuff like that. But doing this takes away the whole point of the backrooms - the mysterious and creepy feeling of these in-between spaces. When everything is documented and explained, it ruins the eerie atmosphere.

This sentiment is mirrored by others, stating “*Once everything is explained its not even interesting anymore*” and “*When it comes to horror and eerie vibes the less I know the better*”. Here, the true source of attraction for visitors is the gap between themselves and the “*objet petit a*” (Žižek 2008b, p.184) – the unattainable “object-cause of desire”. The desire lies not in discovering what the Backrooms are, but in the persistent gap between the visitor and any final explanation – an enigma that keeps trippers hooked precisely because it remains unsolvable.

‘Good’ alienation is also achieved in the Backrooms through indulging in all the adult content one would expect from a dark tourism site but without any of the accompanying responsibilities. Legend-trippers liken their experiences in the Backrooms to childhood. Besides the obvious juvenile fears of becoming lost or abandoned in a strange place, touring the Backrooms exudes a kind of childlike ignorance that comes with not yet being fully integrated with the explanatory-symbolic order of adulthood:

When you’re a kid, the world is basically an alien planet to you. You still don’t quite understand how everything works. That can be pretty fun and exciting...but also scary and dangerous. When you get older, you have a better grasp of the rules of the world. Nothing seems that alien anymore. The Backrooms (and liminal spaces) put us right back into that childhood viewpoint. It takes our world and makes it all seem so

strange again, while still being familiar. The Backrooms *look* like a big office/hotel/mall, but they've been twisted to *feel* like how those places felt as a kid.

The obscene enjoyment of lingering in the mystery – of never having to figure it out – is likened to a childlike period when the self has not yet been fully socialised or trammelled by the moral complexities of adult life. Some contributors compare the Backrooms to C.S. Lewis's book series, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, explaining:

...the Backrooms is Narnia but with liminal spaces and a degree of horror...the liminal space art of the Backrooms is so calming to me. The notion that it's a different world only adds to the feeling of peace for me. 'A world [of] liminal spaces' sounds relaxing, even though there are monsters there.

In C.S. Lewis's fantasy world, children-protagonists accidentally enter a mysterious, hidden realm, Narnia, where they are unburdened by the pressures of school, the expectations of peers, and the tribulations of growing up. Like Narnia, the Backrooms function at the level of 'good' alienation whereby trippers are freed from the tyranny of rational explanation: their entry is by chance, they are given reprieve from the burdens of ordinary life, and whatever dangers they may face are not meant to be fully understood. This engenders a level of "serenity" as exemplified by another's post:

[The backrooms are] where I want to go to finally be at peace... Ive been obsessed with the backrooms since I first [saw] them. I want to No clip and explore till the end of time. Nothing from this reality would be a worry. I feel like I could finally reach the serenity ive always wanted.

Just as children are developmentally incomplete, the Backrooms are ontologically incomplete, resembling how infants perceive the world before acquiring the conceptual tools to fully understand it. Childlike ignorance not only alienates us from the truth but also from responsibilities and burdens, fomenting a perverse peace with things as they are.

4.3 Transcendence downward

One of Žižek's intellectual forebears, Aldous Huxley, observed that humans are hostage to a "deep-seated urge to self-transcendence" (1999, p.22) exposing them to experiences that allow them to ascend beyond their immediate, self-contained subjectivities toward broader, decentred states of existence. Self-transcendence involves overcoming human conceits, individual weaknesses, and the obstructions of modern life to confront something greater than one's self, i.e. the pre-symbolic Real. As Huxley (1999, p.23) describes, "always and everywhere, human beings have felt the radical inadequacy of their personal existence, the misery of being their insulated selves and not something else, something wider". While dark tourism sites such as the 9/11 Museum & Memorial provoke a sense of self-transcendence based on higher existential reflection, solidarity, and ethical confrontation with mortality (Stone, 2012), r/backrooms invoke what Huxley calls "downward transcendence" (1999, p. 22), where one feels a sense of something wider through the obscene and sordid.

There is a tendency to speak of imagined 'victims' on r/backrooms nonchalantly with details that would appear disrespectful or crass at most dark tourism destinations. One tripper

describes how, having found themselves deeper in the Backrooms, they came by evidence that other lost travellers had been preyed upon: “*this area is full of blood due to humans [being] killed, the corpses were eaten by an entity*”. Another describes stumbling by a maze comprised of horrors far in excess of the banal, drab aesthetic typically associated with the Backrooms:

...a massive maze with walls, floors, and furniture that, upon closer examination, is made from sculpted bone, woven hair, and various other biological substances produced by the human body. Large puddles of blood, urine, and stomach acid can be found throughout the level. Also, all over the walls, there are sets of eyes that constantly observe those who walk past them... Upon coming into contact with a blood cell, then your skin, flesh, and bone will begin to rapidly burn and dissolve [sic]-similar to the effects of coming into contact with acid.

One would ordinarily expect such deathly scenery to be sublimated and thus sanitised at dark tourism sites, as death “require[s] inoculation and thus rendering into *something else* that is comfortable and safe to deal with and to contemplate” (Sharpley & Stone, 2009, p.127). However, the descent into explicit corporal horror in the above excerpts marks a deliberate abandonment of the solemnity and ethical storytelling associated with sublimation, functioning instead as a movement *downward* into pure sensation.

In contrast to dark heritage sites which curate and represent historical facts respectfully to achieve sublimation (Goulding et al., 2018), the fictive Backrooms are replete with gratuitous content dreamt up simply to shock or disturb. Violent ‘entities’ are sometimes incorporated into the shared imaginaries of the Backrooms, described as mysterious creatures who prey on trippers as they navigate their surroundings:

At least one person I met saw their own bloody death by a violent entity and took steps to prevent it. I’d recommend following his plan unless you want to end up a desiccated skeleton lying in a pile of dirt.

Transcendence downward is evidenced here through a “‘post-metaphysical’ survivalist stance” (Žižek, 2002, p.90) where navel-gazing about the metaphysics of the Backrooms is overturned by blunt, autotelic appeals to surviving their horrors. Instead of reflecting on the deeper significance of suffering or the humility that accompanies witnessing another’s bloody death, trippers “reject all ‘higher’ goals” (Žižek, 2002, p.88), choosing instead to lose themselves in “artificially excited/aroused minor pleasures” manifesting as brutal fantasies that promise a return to some “pure” state.

Transcendence downward is also evidenced by a rejection of the heroism traditionally celebrated throughout real-world dark tourism sites. Whereas the 9/11 Museum & Memorial spotlights self-denying acts of bravery amongst first responders much like concentration camp tours underscore the human kindness of liberators, a legend trip to the Backrooms can be marked by cruel cynicism, what Žižek (2008a, p.300) calls an “attitude of radical self-instrumentalization”. Trippers champion cruelty over kindness when encountering others wandering the mysterious Backrooms: “*In this world, it's kill or be killed*” and “*NO MERCY*”. Furthermore, where questions are raised about who might be spared or shown mercy, some trippers respond with an alarmingly callous and contemptuous attitude toward children, reflected in posts such as: “*Depending on the age of the child it will start crying and*

then get murdered almost instantly”; “Screw children they are little deamons, kill the child”; and “why is everyone having a big discussion. The child will fucking die”.

More disturbingly, some trippers revel in the obscenity of infants being disfigured or eaten by entities lurking in the Backrooms: *“The entities would babysit, they’d sit on the baby until it’s skull is crushed. Then they’d deform it into one of them”*; and *“You ever eaten child meat before? No way they pass up an opportunity like that”*.

In everyday life, tarrying with cruelty toward vulnerable groups such as children remains taboo and unsayable because our symbolic order – constituted by laws, ethics, and social norms – punctuates reality with compassion, sensitivity, and care. However, the Backrooms exist in parallel or excess of that order, allowing visitors to momentarily suspend universal ethical commandments and advocate for an indifference to suffering that would be unacceptable elsewhere. The result, unlike the catharsis achieved through witnessing transcendental heroism at liberated concentration camps or avenged sites of terrorism, is a transcendence downward into “a slimy obscene domain” (Žižek 2008a, p.87) characterised by things we hope to never see in reality or dare to mention offline.

5.0 CONCLUSION & DISCUSSION

Taking a Žižekian cultural-psychoanalytic approach, we have discussed online legend-tripping as grounded in a dark touristic pursuit of locations beyond the reach of conventional travel where the very essence and structure of reality is subverted. Unlike Freudian-Lacanian approaches which centre on the nebulousness of personal desire and unconscious irrationalities (Buda, 2015; Knudsen et al., 2016), a Žižekian twist on psychoanalysis pushed us to shift the focus outward, away from the psychic disturbances of individuals toward the instability of our collective symbolic order. Žižek’s concept of ontological incompleteness has enabled us to show how the internet-mediated exploration of destinations that are ostensibly unknown, uncolonised, and unsymbolisable represent a new para-terrestrial frontier for dark tourism research.

In scaffolding an understanding of these destinations and their touristic appeal, we have identified three of their main features: temporal suspension, ‘good’ alienation, and transcendence downward. Bringing these features together, we define para-terrestrial dark tourism as travel motivated by an interest in disorder that resists full symbolisation and relies upon legend ecologies to visit, share, and creatively engage with spaces outside of ordinary time, elevating uncertainty above the need for answers, and enabling enjoyment to be found in the obscene and absurd.

Importantly, para-terrestrial dark tourism operates as a symbolic or affective *adjacency* to terrestrial dark tourism rather than a direct substitute or surrogate. While physical sites linked to historical death, entombment, and persecution carry a distinct moral and material gravity, online legend ecologies offer unsettling speculative interactions with counter-historical mysteries that both fascinate and reject closure. In mapping out this new concept, our analysis speaks to the ever-changing landscape of dark tourism at the intersection of the internet, digital consumption, and capitalism (James et al., 2024).

As our primary theoretical contribution, we offer a more radical reading of how the internet functions as a destination in and of itself, revealing how the platforms where online legend-trippers interact become participatory, self-contained fora rather than simply extensions or simulations of real-world sites. In contrast to social media postings which tourists may use to support their terrestrial encounters at dark locations (Hodalska, 2017) or that tourism managers rely upon to promote those locations (Bolan & Simone-Chateris, 2018), virtual ‘non-places’ become sources of touristic attraction in their own right. Recognising this expanded view of dark tourism in online contexts alters our understanding of destination by moving it from a geographically fixed endpoint to a more malleable, creative, and digitally constructed experience.

Whilst treating the internet as a legitimate context for dark touristic study has been initiated by others, our emphasis on para-terrestrial legend ecologies expands the conceptual scope of dark tourism further. Unlike Denham (2023) who draws upon the ‘r/watchpeople die’ forum where Reddit users share images of real-life deaths, Lonergan (2020) who discusses shock websites featuring violent pornography, or Lynes & Wragg (2024) who account for virtual warehouse tours of symbolically violent corporations, our engagement with online legend-tripping shifts the focus from encounters with ‘real’ and symbolic violence to the pre-symbolic and ontologically incomplete. Although those previous studies expanded conventional dark tourism by allowing for the exploration of digital sites beyond the physical, they nonetheless perpetuate an assumption that dark tourism is about contending with *real* misery, trauma, or violence, albeit through a screen. In contrast, para-terrestrial dark tourism offers an imaginative means of engaging with speculative suffering.

Whether para-terrestrial spaces ever could – or indeed should – be commercialised raises important considerations. Whilst entrepreneurially curating stories at built environments can engender visitor footfall, funding through heritage grants, and mainstream legitimacy (Goulding et al., 2018), the legend ecologies which underpin para-terrestrial spaces tend to lack the historical veracity and physical infrastructures for such enterprise to occur. Our findings indicate that the appeal of para-terrestrial spaces derives from a non-rationalised, decentralised, and ontologically incomplete ethos that is anathema to curatorial management or sanitisation.

As we have observed with contributors to r/backrooms advocating for the remorseless destruction of infants, online legend-tripping is more explicit, apathetic, less controllable, and thus contrasts with the principled, optimistic futures that theorists had previously imagined for dark tourism (see Stone, 2009a, 2012). Controversially, this might provoke practitioners to reassess whether resolution and education should always be at the heart of designing dark tourism products. Taking a Žižekian approach enables practitioners to consider a nascent touristic interest in transgressive, improvisational encounters where certain traumatic elements are left without explanation or moral judgement, preserving the sense of unsettledness that makes these dark spaces compelling.

This presents a secondary theoretical contribution of our work. Rather than reiterating assumptions that ethical reflections are implicit to dark tourism, we offer a more critical perspective that foregrounds its gleeful amorality. While Stone (2009a) advocates for dark tourism sites as potential sandpits for moral reckoning and instruction – “new moral spaces” (p.68) – suggesting “dark tourism may not only act as a guardian of history in heritage terms, but also as a moral guardian of a contemporary society” (p.72), our study reveals that online

legend-tripping thrives precisely because of its *lack* of moral contemplation. Places such as the Backrooms negate the pressures placed upon visitors to appropriately reflect when confronting death or atrocity.

The lesson for dark tourism researchers is that beyond the materiality, commemorative work, and staging practices used to reconstruct pasts and “imitate reality” (Goulding et al., 2018, p.33), greater analytical sensitivity must be given to the immaterial, incoherent, and fictive. Para-terrestrial dark tourism, bereft of historical veracity and geographic emplacement, allows researchers to move beyond frameworks that emphasise meaning and commemoration, and instead attune to the ways that contemporary tourism may involve encounters with meaninglessness, groundlessness, and symbolic failure.

With no objective atrocity to remember or ‘real’ victims to mourn, there is no moral obligation to reflect. Legend ecologies demonstrate what happens when the didactic, commemorative, and reflective aspects of dark tourism are hollowed out, leaving behind an affective confrontation with the abject and the amoral.

5.1 Limitations & future research

While this paper has responded to calls for further utilising netnographic methods in tourism research (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024), our study relied on just one online platform, Reddit, presenting an opportunity for future researchers to investigate how content-sharing practices across other platforms might contribute to or diversify para-terrestrial dark tourism. As the virtualisation of dark tourism evolves with increasingly complex sociotechnical innovations such as AR, VR, MR, and AI-generated content, text-based communications such as online forums may become less relevant to the production of para-terrestrial spaces. This presents a valuable opportunity to adapt netnographic methodologies to better account for the non-discursive and multisensory aspects of digital and immersive technologies reshaping how we engage with tourism in all its forms. Empirical research may also examine how online legend-trippers respond to managerial attempts to commodify their legend ecologies through paywalls or the co-optation of content for offline entertainments and physical tourism attractions.

Lastly, there is rich scope for future research to identify and categorise the diverse ways that tourists visit and participate in fantastical non-places other than the kind we explored in this paper. Further theorisation is welcomed to determine whether a sub-spectrum of para-terrestrial dark tourism exists and where pre-symbolic environments beyond internet-mediated kinds might be charted on it.

6.0 REFERENCES

Andéhn, M., Hietanen, J., & Wickström, A. (2024). Becoming Red-Pilled: Affective production in online countercultural collectives. *New Media & Society*,14614448241305420.

Augé, M. (2020). *Non-places: An introduction to supermodernity*. London: Verso.

- Bleakley, P. (2023). Panic, pizza and mainstreaming the alt-right: A social media analysis of Pizzagate and the rise of the QAnon conspiracy. *Current Sociology*, 71(3),509–525.
- Bolan, P. & Simone-Chateris, M. (2018). Shining a digital light on the dark: Harnessing online media to improve the dark tourism experience. In P. Stone, R. Hartmann, T. Seaton, R. Sharpley, & L. White (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Dark Tourism Studies* (pp.727–746). London: Palgrave.
- Buda, M.D & McIntosh, J.A. (2013). Dark tourism and voyeurism: Tourist arrested for “spying” in Iran. *Culture. Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 7(3), 214–226.
- Brooks, C., & Souldard, J. (2022). Contested authentication: The impact of event cancellation on transformative experiences, existential authenticity at burning man. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 95,103412.
- Buda, D.M. (2015). The death drive in tourism studies. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 50, 39–51.
- Denham, J. (2023). The staycation: home. In: A. Lynes, C. Kelly, & J. Treadwell (Eds.), *50 Dark Destinations: Crime and Contemporary Tourism* (pp.230-234). Bristol: Policy Press.
- Edwards, E.D. (2020). Morbid curiosity, popular media, and thanatourism. *Australian Journal of Parapsychology*, 20(2),113–138.
- Farkić, J., & Kennell, J. (2021). Consuming dark sites via street art: Murals at Chernobyl. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 90,103256.
- Foley, M., & Lennon, J.J. (1996). JFK and dark tourism: A fascination with assassination. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 2(4),198–211.
- Gerrig, R.J. (1993). *Experiencing narrative worlds: On the psychological activities of reading*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Goulding, C. (2024). Mellostalgia: looking forward to looking back. *Consumption Markets & Culture*, 27(3),269–283.
- Goulding, C., & Pressey, A. (2023). A palimpsestic analysis of atmospheres at dark tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 101,103577.
- Goulding, C., Saren, M., & Pressey, A. (2018). ‘Presence’ and ‘absence’ in themed heritage. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 71,25-38.
- Greenshields, W. (2023). Another Alternative Reality? Exploring the Backrooms with Žižek. *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, 17(1),1–27.
- Hodalska, M. (2017). Selfies at horror sites: Dark tourism, ghoulish souvenirs and digital narcissism. *Zeszyty Prasoznawcze*, 2(230),405–423.
- Holloway, J. (2010). Legend-tripping in spooky spaces: Ghost tourism and infrastructures of enchantment. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 28(4),618–637.

- Huxley, A. (1999). *Moksha: Aldous Huxley's classic writings on psychedelics and the visionary experience*. Rochester: Part Street Press.
- Internet Archive. (2024). Original Backrooms Full Photo Set. Retrieved from <https://archive.org/details/backrooms-photos/807OREGON/DSC00161.jpg>. Accessed March 10, 2025.
- Ironside, R., & Smith, F. (2025). Destabilising the home: place making, dark tourism and the spectral. *Tourism Geographies*, 27(1),68–84.
- James, S., Cronin, J., & Patterson, A. (2024). “If you like your history horrible”: The obscene supplementarity of thanatourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 106,103749.
- Jenkins, H. (2002). Interactive audiences? In: D. Harries (Ed.), *The New Media Book* (pp.157-170). London: British Film Institute.
- Kinsella, M. (2011). *Legend-tripping online: Supernatural folklore and the search for Ong's Hat*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Knudsen, D.C., Rickly, J.M., & Vidon, E.S. (2016). The fantasy of authenticity: Touring with Lacan. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 58, 33-45.
- Kozinets, R.V. (2020). *Netnography: The Essential Guide to Qualitative Social Media Research (3rd ed.)*. London: Sage.
- Kozinets, R.V., & Gretzel, U. (2024). Netnography evolved: New contexts, scope, procedures and sensibilities. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 104,103693.
- Krečič, J., & Žižek, S. (2016). Ugly, creepy, disgusting, and other modes of abjection. *Critical Inquiry*, 43(1),60-83.
- Lonergan, M.D. (2020). Hard-on of darkness: gore and shock websites as the dark tourism of digital space. *Porn Studies*, 7(4),454-458.
- Lynes, A., & Wragg, E. (2024). “Smile for the camera”: Online warehouse tours as a form of dark tourism within the era of late capitalism. *Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 24(4),615629.
- Mkono, M., & Markwell, K. (2014). The application of netnography in tourism studies. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 48,289-291.
- Raymen, T. (2023). Whitney Plantation: New Orleans, Louisiana, USA. In: A. Lynes, C. Kelly, & J. Treadwell (Eds.), *50 Dark Destinations: Crime and Contemporary Tourism* (pp.14-23). Bristol: Policy Press.
- Sharpley, R., & Stone, P.R. (2009). Representing the Macabre: Interpretation, kitschification and authenticity. In R. Sharpley, & P.R. Stone (Eds.), *The darker side of travel: The theory and practice of dark tourism* (pp.109–128). Bristol: Channel View Publications.
- Spiggle, S. (1994). Analysis and interpretation of qualitative data in consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 21(3),491-503.

- Stone, P.R. (2006). A dark tourism spectrum: Towards a typology of death and macabre related tourist sites, attractions and exhibitions. *Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal*, 54(2),145-160.
- Stone, P.R. (2009a). Dark Tourism: Morality and New Moral Spaces. In R. Sharpley, & P.R. Stone (Eds.), *The darker side of travel: The theory and practice of dark tourism* (pp.56-72). Bristol: Channel View.
- Stone, P.R. (2009b). Its a bloody guide: fun, fear and a lighter side of dark tourism at the Dungeon visitor attractions, UK. In R. Sharpley, & P.R. Stone (Eds.), *The darker side of travel: The theory and practice of dark tourism* (pp.167-185). Bristol: Channel View.
- Stone, P.R. (2012). Dark tourism and significant other death: Towards a model of mortality mediation. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 39(3),1565-1587.
- Vidon, E.S., & Rickly, J.M. (2018). Alienation and anxiety in tourism motivation. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 69, 65-75.
- Wiggins, B.E. (2025). The backrooms and liminal spaces: Explorations of a digital urban legend. *New Media & Society*, 27(8), 4729-4747.
- Winlow, S. (2023). Magaluf: Majorca. In A. Lynes, C. Kelly, & J. Treadwell (Eds.), *50 Dark Destinations: Crime and contemporary tourism* (pp. 147–152). Policy Press.
- Žižek, S. (1998). *The Interpassive Subject*. Centre Georges Pampidou, Traverses. Retrieved from: <https://www.lacan.com/zizek-pompidou.htm> Accessed March 11,2025.
- Žižek, S. (2002). *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. London: Verso.
- Žižek, S. (2006). *The Parallax View*. London: MIT Press.
- Žižek, S. (2008a). *The Plague of Fantasies*. London: Verso.
- Žižek, S. (2008b). *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso.
- Žižek, S. (2012). *Less than nothing*. London: Verso.
- Žižek, S. (2022). *Surplus-enjoyment*. London: Bloomsbury