

# THE ENIGMA OF DARK TOURISM: DECODING THE TOURIST GAZE WITH THE SOR MODEL

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## ABSTRACT

*The tourist gaze remains a significant notion in dark tourism. This study explores the phenomenon of tourist gaze within the context of dark tourism. It aims to comprehend that how visitors at dark tourism destinations interact with their environment, psyche, and observed actions. This study is based on qualitative thematic analysis along with the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model as a theoretical framework. Themes about stimulus, organism, and response levels within the S-O-R paradigm are revealed through thematic analysis. Tourists are triggered by a variety of cultural, social, environmental, physical, and personal stimuli that affect their emotions, thoughts, and actions. This study is one of the first in dark tourism to critically examine the period from the evolution of the tourist gaze to the present and offers useful information to various stakeholders interested in dark tourism market.*

**Keywords:** Dark Tourism, Tourist Gaze, S-O-R Framework, Qualitative Research, Thematic Analysis.

## INTRODUCTION

The term “tourist gaze” was coined by Urry after Foucault's medical gaze concept evolved in academia. It describes how visitors perceive the people and places emphasizing the visual aspect of their experiences (Urry, 1992).

The goal of this research is to identify key characteristics of dark destination based on visitors' accounts via gaze as authors are interested to hear directly from visitors about what they observe and how they share their experiences. Therefore, thematic analysis is used of 32 visitors of dark sites in North India. This work contributes into two- Initially expands on previous criticism of tourist gaze and later, it supports the notion that tourism gaze is integral part of visitors' life and experiences in dark tourism context. The authors address this gap by conducting qualitative personal interviews on tourist gaze within the context of Northern India's dark tourism. Further, the authors found dominant themes using thematic analysis with the S-O-R framework- which describes the push caused by outer factors (outer stimulus). These factors report psychological shifts in tourists divided into four themes (the organism). Eventually, the organism reported actual changes divided into three themes (the response). This study has inspired from some studies based on S-O-R framework (Pandita et al., 2021). This study not only provides an inductive outlook of qualitative study or explores the tourist gaze by conducting personal interviews but also provides effective knowledge. Moreover, the authors present a comprehensive account of the tourist gaze in the context of dark tourism through the lens of S-O-R model.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Tourist Gaze

Urry's tourist gaze discussion, established during the 1990s, concentrates on clarifying

how visitors feel at a location via their psychological visuals. Researchers have extensively studied the tourist gaze and divided it into three-tourist-initiated gaze (Yu & Xu, 2018), host-initiated gaze (Wassler & Kirillova, 2019), and mutual gaze (Monterrubio, 2019). Further, when the gaze' object is a place called tourist-initiated gaze. Researchers focused on tourist gaze in the past to find the tourist experiences. Host-guest encounters dominate the gaze literature in spite of its multifaceted nature (Samarathunga & Cheng, 2021). Tourists' gaze may be shaped not only by pre-visit information but also by their actions throughout the journey like before-during-after visits. However, previous studies concentrated exclusively on tourists' gaze during certain phases of the visit (Yu & Xu, 2018). However, Urry addressed the underlying idea of the tourist gaze as well as investigated how the tourist gaze is changing today (Li et al., 2022). A lack of clear definition has led to diverse interpretations of this concept (Samarathunga & Cheng, 2021). Numerous agree that the tourist gaze is firmly established from a Western perspective and cannot be applied in a non-western context (Li et al., 2019).

### **S-O-R Model**

Woodworth, (1929) proposed stimulus-organism-model that builds on the basic model of stimulus-response model by (Pavlov, 2010). S-O-R model includes three constructs: stimulus, organism, response as indicated in Figure 1 that has derived the final "behavioural outcome" of a phenomenon. Skinner, (1935) defined stimulus and reaction as "parts of behaviour and environment" as unexpected environmental can impact affective and psychological stability of people, leading to behavioural changes (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982). The S-O-R model explains how environmental stimuli (stimulus) activate emotions (organism) leading to specific behaviour (response) (Baber & Baber, 2023). Tourism researchers employs the S-O-R framework based on environmental psychology theory, to analyse how the surroundings and media impact people's interest in visiting tourist destinations (Jacoby, 2002). The S-O-R model can connect external environmental elements to an individual's internal state and reaction behaviour (Jiang & Phoong, 2024). In the S-O-R concept, "S" stands for the stimulus that influences customer's perceptions and decision making (Chen et al., 2020). "O" refers to an individual's internal mechanism that connects environmental stimuli to their behaviours and responses (Jiang & Phoong, 2024). Various factors such as place attractiveness (Yin et al., 2020), flow (An et al., 2021), enjoyment (Wu & Lai, 2022) are commonly used to study tourist behaviour. Finally, "R" stands for behavioural or intentional response received after stimulus and organism.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The authors adopted a thematic analysis approach via semi-structured personal interviews that is considered suitable for exploring the genuineness of the tourist gaze. Thematic analysis assists researchers offer knowledge and responses for study questions through recognizing trends and outcomes associated with special categories (Gupta et al., 2024). This study has been designed to capture the views of the tourists visiting North Indian sites. Author conducted semi-structured personal interviews as these are guided, directed, aimed, and open-ended interactions by the interviewers and participants (Roulston and Choi, 2018).

32 interviews were conducted at different sites in North India. The authors used purposive sampling to choose tourists and individually probed tourists' viewpoints. Further, participants were liberated for opinions, sentiments, and experiences, which enabled precisely recording interviews. The interviewer concentrated on what was pushing tourists to visit and the Authors witnessed recurring answers after the 28th and quit at the 32nd interview owing to saturation Interview questions aimed at capturing the interviewee's perspective along with

tourists' experiences and expectations on different aspects of during visit. The interviews included 27 questions to ensure all perspectives were covered.

## Validity

The present study adopts the checklist of EQUATOR research- in which the instructions are given for assessing primarily qualitative articles. Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ) is a 32-items schedule for interviews (Tong et al., 2007). The procedures implemented to enhance the reliability for this qualitative study encompassed data triangulation along with data analysis performed by various researchers.

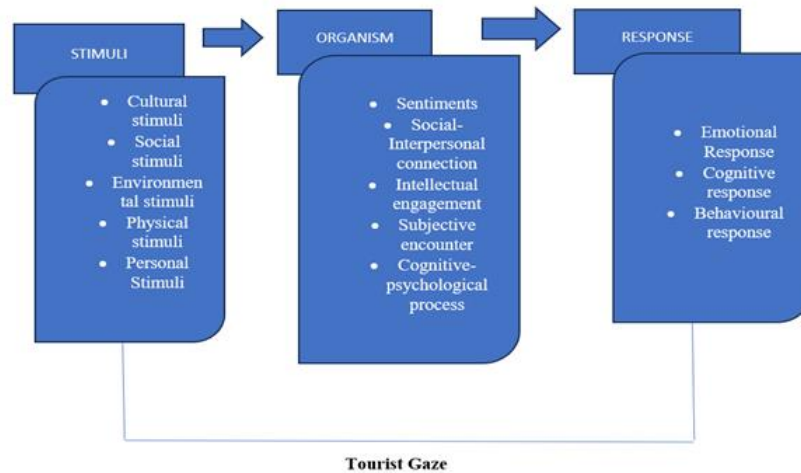
## Data Analysis

Interview transcriptions are examined using coding procedures outlined in the literature (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Authors assessed each interview via NVivo14 including open, axial, and selective coding. During open coding, authors went through the raw data line by line, identified lines, and labelled essential words in NVivo (Ersoy & Ehtiyar, 2022). Subsequently, each labelled word was determined and given a conceptual name, and codes. Afterward, associated ideas were grouped into multiple classifications. Further, first-level coding generated 56 codes by authors then recoded into 28 second order (sub) themes in NVivo 14. Second-order themes organized data into a more meaningful and understandable structure. The second-order codes then resulted in 11 primary themes. Each interview was attended by two to ensure the reliability of the data in terms of a precise understanding of what was meant and the researchers thoroughly and independently assessed their conclusions, maintaining honesty (De Beurs et al., 2019).

## Significance of Responses

This analysis is divided into thirteen themes across three components of the S-O-R framework. Figure 1 illustrates the whole picture of the tourist gaze in North Indian dark tourism. Further, the authors agree that five themes- Cultural, Social, Environmental, Physical, and Personal stimuli- have been found to be stimuli for tourists (S). Tourists reveal major psychological shifts (O) due to such shifts, classified into five themes- Sentiments, Social-Interpersonal connection, Intellectual engagement, Subjective encounter, and Cognitive-psychological process. Finally, tourists exhibit three responses (R)- Cognitive (to improve their intellectual efficiency), Emotional (to improve their attachment), and Behavioural response (to fill the gap between imagination and reality).

The arrows (Fig 1) indicate that Stimulus leads towards organisms and it leads to a response in tourists. Thus, the authors observed that outer modifications at the S stage triggered quick mental shifts at the O stage, resulting in behavioural modifications at the R stage. In the following parts, the authors depict how external factors do not just create thoughts and emotions but also change the behaviour of tourists. Based on this rationale, the authors further discuss the themes.



**FIGURE 1**  
**A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR TOURIST GAZE IN DARK TOURISM USING SOR**

**Stimulus Level:** The first theme explains numerous external factors that trigger tourists to feel and serve as stimuli. Stimuli refers to external aspects that significantly impacts customer's internal states including visual, aural, and tactile cues (Bagozzi, 1986).

**Cultural stimuli:** Tourism grew a crucial cultural connection among places and individuals (Richards, 2020). The following text explains the culture as a trigger for tourists.

It is observed in this text that tourists enjoy experiencing culture through sites that might be missed if they are not present physically. Cultural factors have played as a trigger in tourists to visit or experience sites physically. Further, it can be interpreted that not just physical building but cultural factors play a significant role in visiting the dark tourism sites.

**Social stimuli:** Surprisingly, authors discovered that because of social pressure, tourists were compelled to visit these sites. Other tourists, meanwhile, heard these sites on social media and in social gatherings of tourists.

**Environmental stimuli:** The third theme was linked to climate, the authors named environmental stimuli which explain environmental transformations that individuals felt before visiting. The subsequent cites illustrate the reasons caused by such shifts.

**Physical stimuli:** Collectively, participants highlighted that architectural structures, ancient ruins, and historical sites contributed to the physical stimuli. Some physical activities like mountain hiking, or adventure activity attracted some tourists to visit here.

**Personal stimuli:** Some tourists were motivated by a wish for self-discovery while others wanted to achieve a milestone by visiting here. The authors concluded this theme by mentioning how personal tastes and preferences for travel can influence travel decisions.

### ORGANISM LEVEL

Since it was witnessed in the earlier part, some stimuli resulted in various changes in tourists as tourists have not only faced personal but social, cultural, environmental, and physical. Therefore, the authors focus on the themes of organisms that aim to capture the essence of flexible psychological procedures. Some researchers consider an organism as a mix of emotional and cognitive states (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982). Some argue that an organism combines

cognitive, emotional, and physiological elements (Mehrabian, 1974).

### **Sentiments**

This theme was tied to admiration, amazement, nostalgia, and appreciation. All these emotions/sentiments bring fulfilment and memories related to traveling and serve a vital part in influencing views and educating future travel decisions.

### **Social-Interpersonal Connection**

The authors discovered that the most common connection in participants' accounts was social-interpersonal and explained that connections are ties that people develop with other fellow tourists, and dark sites while visiting. These links substantially improve the whole pleasure and diversity of the visit.

### **Intellectual Engagement**

Authors observed that intellectual engagement not only improves visitor travel encounters, but also helps to promote a more sustainable and responsible form of tourism by encouraging cultural understanding, respect, and awareness.

### **Subjective Encounter**

Authors observed in a nutshell that subjective encounters concentrate on intimate and psychological elements of traveling, highlighting various ways people connect with and comprehend their time in dark destinations. It focuses on the sentimental, sensory, and visual elements of a trip, demonstrating the tourist's unique viewpoints, sentiments, and responses. Subjective encounters enhance the tourist's general personal happiness and contentment.

### **Response Level**

Throughout the entire dark tourism visit in North India, internal shifts portrayed by organism themes ultimately led to manifest in their actions. Authors divide these behaviours into three distinct overarching themes- Emotional, cognitive, and behavioural response.

### **Emotional Response**

After the visit, tourists reported developing several new habits like knowing the meaning of life and death, taking care of their loved ones, and remaining grateful. It is critical to understand that emotional responses to dark tourism are extremely personal and can vary greatly.

### **Cognitive Response**

Authors discovered that it is essential to remember that cognitive reactions in dark tourism sites are multifaceted and intertwined with sentimental and behavioural components. Visitors can participate in an array of mental activities as they consider the historical significance and implications of the dark tourism site. Along with such examples, tourists were talked about perceiving intellectual knowledge related to dark tourism sites that were more in line with the cognitive response towards North Indian dark sites.

## Behavioural Response

Authors have observed by transcripts that current behaviour is frequently shaped by multiple variables, such as individual traits, cultural origins, and the setting of the dark tourism site. It is essential to acknowledge that how people act in dark tourism may differ substantially, and moral issues play a vital part in assessing the suitability of the visitors' behaviours.

## Discussions and Implications

The authors identified that tourists' actions were changed cognitively, emotionally, and behaviourally, therefore, developed the three themes Emotional response, Cognitive response, and Behavioural response. The authors suggest that this study serves as a foundation for understanding how tourists coped with the stressors of tourist gaze in North Indian dark tourism.

Research on the tourist gaze in dark tourism can provide valuable insights for a variety of people and organizations, as well as help to improve the comprehension of the behaviour of tourists and the general administration of places linked to loss, pain, and tragedy. Below are a few important advantages of tourist gaze studies in the context of dark tourism.

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