

Miguel Belo / Nuno Gustavo

# Participant Satisfaction in Dark Immersive Theatre Experiences: Exploring Challenges and Catalysts

## Abstract

The term 'immersive theatre' has become popular to describe a growing trend in contemporary performances. In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the popularity of Dark Immersive Theatre Experiences (DITE), which combine immersive theatre and darkness. As a result, it has become more important for practitioners and the scientific community to understand the factors that enhance or limit participants' satisfaction. In this study, a qualitative approach was used to identify five critical obstacles to participant satisfaction: the size of the audience, downtime occurrences, the attitude of other participants, unclear instructions, and the conceptual framework of the experiences. Additionally, five key catalysts that enhance participant satisfaction were found: the intensity of darkness, sensations of achievement, the ambience surrounding the experience, the incorporation of theatrical elements, and the presence of game elements. This research provides valuable insights for DITE managers and other practitioners to develop successful future experiences.

**Keywords:** dark immersive theatre experiences (DITE), immersive theatre, dark tourism, satisfaction, Portugal

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the term 'immersive theatre' has become widely adopted to describe a growing trend in contemporary performances (White, 2012). This new trend involves breaking the so-called fourth wall, i.e. an imaginary barrier that separates the audience from the performers, and instead using expansive environments, mobile audiences, and audience participation. Immersive theatre places the audience members at the heart of the experience, allowing them to embark on a personal journey shaped by their choices (Alston, 2019). This creates a unique and engaging world with heightened intensity and immersion that allows participants to transcend the role of mere observer and assume an active role (Belo & Gustavo, 2023a).

Over the past 25 years, DITE has gained popularity, particularly since the start of the 2010s. DITE can be described as a type of entertainment that involves voluntary participation and combines immersive theatre with the themes, effects, and premises associated with darkness. This form of entertainment has gained a global audience and captivates them with new experiences (Belo & Gustavo, 2023b).

Belo and Gustavo (2024) conducted a study to identify the items that predict participants' satisfaction with DITE based on their underlying motivations. However, to our knowledge, there has been no qualitative exploration of participants' satisfaction during DITE. Therefore, this study employs a qualitative approach to examine participants' satisfaction during DITE, specifically assessing its main challenges and strategies.

---

**Miguel Belo**, PhD, Corresponding Author, Estoril Higher Institute for Tourism and Hotel Studies (ESHTE); Centre for Tourism Research, Development, and Innovation (CiTUR), Estoril, Portugal; ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7840-5994>; e-mail: miguel.belo@eshte.pt

**Nuno Gustavo**, PhD, Estoril Higher Institute for Tourism and Hotel Studies (ESHTE); Centre for Tourism Research, Development, and Innovation (CiTUR), Estoril, Portugal; ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7621-1096>; e-mail: nuno.gustavo@eshte.pt

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. The fundamentals of immersive theatre

The emergence of immersive theatre models has led to the widespread use of the term 'immersive' to describe a growing trend in contemporary performances. However, what seems to define an experience as immersive is its characteristics, not its typology (Alston, 2019). Immersive experiences are highly adaptable and flexible, and each attribute shapes the experience's overall impact, with effects that vary from participant to participant (Biggin, 2016).

Although identifying the main elements that define an immersive theatre experience poses challenges, the existing literature seems to agree on a set of characteristics, including immersion, co-creation, mobility, narrative characteristics, site-specificity, expansive environments, multisensory dimension, interplay between performer and participant, and individualism.

The term immersion implies the ability to engage participants deeply, submerging them in an alternative temporal and spatial reality (Hogarth et al., 2018). However, participants do not become immediately absorbed upon entering an immersive space. Participant immersion is simultaneously a distinguishing factor and a critical challenge in immersive productions. Total presence within the moment is essential to immersive contexts, which must induce a sense of immersion that compels participants to temporarily set aside issues beyond the limits of the experience itself, maintaining a state of alertness, engagement, immersion, and readiness for intense involvement (Alston, 2016a; Biggin, 2017).

Immersive experiences place participants at the heart of the experience, making them co-creators of the narrative (White, 2012). In immersive experiences, participants can accumulate the role of mere observers to the role of active participants. Those who wish to do so become co-creators of the overall experience, even contributing to the definition of specific outcomes (Turnbull, 2016). As a result, active participants may assume a hyper-self-role characterized by laughter, coughing, sniffing, sweating, contorting, fidgeting, murmuring, whispering, grinding, screaming, and crying (Bayly, 2011).

Moreover, immersive productions have revolutionized the role of the audience by allowing individuals to freely navigate the scenario away from the designated and distant seats usually associated with conventional theatre events (Wiseman et al., 2017). By doing so, immersive experiences intend to stimulate spatial exploration and participants' engagement with the narrative. Movement is driven by the opportunity to pursue characters, witness or engage with unfolding scenes, or even the risk of potentially missing essential scenes. Participants can redirect their path if they become disinterested (Turnbull, 2016).

The narrative in immersive theatre, which can be realistic, surreal, or both, but it must always be coherent with the central theme and the environment. Coherently creating an alternative world seems critical, containing multiple and interconnected storylines that come together in the narrative (Machon, 2016). Another central aspect is spatial narratives, rather than linear narratives, implying that the narrative is dispersed throughout the performance space, often co-occurring and in a loop (Wiseman et al., 2017). Consequently, there is no singular central narrative; instead, it is a collection of narratives dispersed across the space, with each narrative displaying its atmosphere (Machon, 2016).

Immersive experiences are typically site-specific, meaning that the location shapes the design of the overall experience. Immersive spaces are often characterized by their large-scale nature, including maze-like structures, multiple floors, numerous rooms, and long, narrow corridors. Each division is thoroughly described and decorated to maintain coherence within the overall narrative and has its environment. The spaces for immersive theatre are diverse, ranging from old warehouses, public buildings, abandoned factories, vacant schools, or slaughterhouses to tents, railway stations, wine cellars, shipping containers, mobile or vehicles, and temporary

structures purposefully built for a particular experience. Likewise, familiar everyday spaces such as public parking lots, bars, or city streets can also be utilized as immersive theatre settings (Alston, 2016a; Hogarth et al., 2018).

The level of immersion experienced by participants is often contingent on the forms and levels of interaction with space (Alston, 2016b). Through carefully constructing expansive environments and installations, the space should evoke emotional responses from participants, employing subtle and creative techniques (Alston, 2019; Biggin, 2017).

Different senses like touch, sound, and smell are used daily in immersive environments to increase participants' involvement (Wiseman et al., 2017). This inclusion aims to minimize distractions and create a more intense experience. For instance, interacting with performers, following them, or dancing establishes a sensory dynamic that elevates participants' responses and interpretations (White, 2012). The relationship between performers and participants is crucial in immersive productions. It is characterized as a responsive and dialogic collaboration involving verbal or non-verbal interactions between two individuals to co-create a shared experience. This collaboration implies trust, commitment, and willingness from both sides (Hogarth et al., 2018).

The immersive theatre has gained popularity due to its ability to provide unique and personalized experiences (Biggin, 2017). It allows participants to engage in an experience that feels new and tailored to their choices. This sense of choice empowers participants and gives them the feeling of actively creating a personal and one-of-a-kind experience (Turnbull, 2016).

## 2.2. The bond between immersive theatre and dark tourism

Dark tourism is a unique subcategory of tourism that aims to create experiences that evoke emotional responses related to violence or distressing situations outside the realm of typical forms of entertainment (Rivera-Eraso et al., 2023; Shekhar & Valeri, 2022). Ashworth (2008, p. 234) defines dark tourism as "where the tourist's experience is essentially composed of 'dark' emotions such as pain, death, horror or sadness, many of which result from the infliction of violence that are not usually associated with a voluntary entertainment experience". As such, it is crucial to understand why people seek out dark experiences for voluntary entertainment.

Dark tourism encompasses a range of subcategories rather than a single term covering them all (Light, 2017). One such subcategory is DITE, a form of immersive theatre that incorporates darkness and themes of fear. By combining these elements, DITE offers an innovative and thrilling experience for participants seeking new forms of entertainment (Belo & Gustavo, 2024). DITE is unique among other forms of dark entertainment because it focuses on psychological horror and non-simulated fear (Clasen et al., 2019). Participants often describe a state of nervous excitement, as they are unsure of what will happen next, which adds to the intensity of the experience (Brigante & Elger, 2020).

In recent years, immersive entertainment has gained significant recognition and popularity, as evidenced by the market's growth. The "Immersive Entertainment Industry Annual Report" estimated the U.S. market at \$10 billion, with a remarkable 116% growth and 775 new businesses. In the United Kingdom, the "Immersive Economy in the UK 2019" report identified 4,500 organizations, with 58% reporting increased revenues (Brigante & Elger, 2020). This suggests DITE are a global phenomenon, with notable productions in London, the U.S., China, Australia, and Europe, such as Punchdrunk's "Sleep No More" (over 2.3 million visitors), Punchdrunk's "The Drowned Man" (over 170,000 visitors) or Broad Encounters' "A Midnight Visit" (the longest-standing theatre season in Australia) (Belo & Gustavo, 2020). Governments have also recognized the potential of these markets, with the British government investing £2 million in projects within this domain (JTB Tourism Research & Consulting, 2022).

Brigante and Elger (2020) surveyed North American individuals who were fans of immersive entertainment experiences and found a strong interest in dark themes when engaging in immersive theatre experiences,

precisely mystery, drama, and horror. Furthermore, this study emphasizes the importance of developing strategies focused on tourists, as a substantial proportion of self-identified fans of the immersive entertainment industry are occasional or frequent travellers who actively seek out immersive experiences.

As Bennett (2005) pointed out, the relationship between the tourism industry, Broadway, and the West End has long been evident. Tourism has become one of the world's biggest revenue generators. Diving theatre contributes to a destination's signification in urbanity, cultural capital, public life of art and pleasure, and economics and competitiveness. Therefore, theatre and tourism scholars must recognize that the tourist audience is substantial for contemporary theatre, as it brings much to theatre's viability in the increased global entertainment economy.

### 3. Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative research methodology that involved conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews. The participants in this study were consumers of DITE who either reported being on travel or expressed an interest in travelling specifically to participate in such experiences. The data collection process occurred at DITE in Portugal: 'Muzeum' and 'O Matadouro' (The Slaughterhouse). Interviews were conducted at 'Muzeum' between January and February 2020, while data collection for 'O Matadouro' occurred in January and February 2021. The interviews ranged from 35 to 55 minutes, and the subsequent transcription facilitated further analysis.

'Muzeum' was in a former agricultural school with nine distinct rooms, each offering its unique atmosphere, narrative, and actors. Admission to 'Muzeum' was restricted to individuals aged 18 and above, with ticket prices ranging from €20 to €30. In 'O Matadouro' ('The Slaughterhouse'), participants were immersed in the storyline of a dysfunctional, patriarchal, and religious family that owned a slaughterhouse. The age requirement for participation was 16 years, with admission tickets priced at €16.

The interviews consisted of four primary questions. The first question was intended to break the ice and invite participants to share their first experience in DITE. The second question aimed to help participants remember the experience in detail, encouraging them to provide a comprehensive description. The third question focused on identifying any obstacles faced during the experience, while the fourth question was designed to identify the key factors that enhanced the experience.

After transcribing the interviews, a thematic approach was used to analyze the content (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The process involved an inductive coding method guided by the interpretation of the substance. Depending on the nature of the transcription's content, the entire sentence, paragraph, or a set of paragraphs was taken as the analytical unit (Wang et al., 2019). The focus was identifying the most shared challenges and factors that led to participants' overall satisfaction during DITE. This focus led to creation of a coding sheet, which provided a framework for the analysis process and made it easy to move between the data at every stage. The coding process was repeated until a saturation point was reached, which was determined through careful observation of the emergence of novel patterns (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). To ensure rigour, both authors participated in analyzing the data through a back-and-forth coding and brainstorming process. The iterative coding process continued between the two authors until both were satisfied that the key themes had been captured accurately, indicating a robust and trustworthy research process.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Sociodemographic information

Table 1 presents participants' essential sociodemographic characteristics of this study's participants. The study comprised a total of 19 participants, out of which 13 were females and 6 were males. The participants ranged from 20 to 60 years, with most participants (15) between the ages of 20 and 39.

**Table 1**  
*Sociodemographic information of participants*

ID	Gender	Age group (in years)
M1	Male	20-29
F1	Female	20-29
M2	Male	40-49
F2	Female	20-29
M3	Male	50-59
F3	Female	40-49
M4	Male	30-39
F4	Female	30-39
M5	Male	20-29
F5	Female	30-39
F6	Female	20-29
M6	Male	30-39
F7	Female	50-59
F8	Female	20-29
F9	Female	30-39
F10	Female	30-39
F11	Female	30-39
F12	Female	20-29
F13	Female	20-29

## 4.2. Assessment of challenges for satisfaction

### 4.2.1. Excessive size of the audience

The findings of this study suggest that the enjoyment of DITE is affected by the size of the audience. When there are too many participants, it creates several challenges that can reduce the levels of immersion and intimacy. Once the audience size exceeds a certain threshold, chaotic situations can emerge, interrupting the intimacy of the experience.

There were too many people. With so many people, I could not even enter all the rooms. I thought it was an incredible idea, but the number of people who came made it poorly executed. (Interviewee F2)

### 4.2.2. Downtimes

Periods of downtime, where the action temporarily pauses, have been identified as a significant factor that disrupts immersion. When participants experience downtime, their attention may shift away, causing their minds to wander beyond the boundaries of the experience.

If you're standing still, you're thinking, "Okay. I did this. I did that. I did another thing. Tomorrow, I must do something I don't know what to do. And this block of time overall... you just come out of it. And you can't avoid it because you're standing still. (Interviewee F12)

### 4.2.3. Attitude of other participants

During DITE, the attitudes of other participants have been identified as a significant factor that limits complete immersion. Some interviewees have described scenarios where other participants displayed a dismissive or nonchalant attitude towards the experience, which can lead to a decrease in their level of immersion.

Another point that I didn't like, but it wasn't related to the organization, was how they [other participants in the group] saw things. Especially the couple with me inside the

barn and even my friend who suddenly downplayed it and didn't immerse themselves in that world. Sure, they were actors; yes, this is fiction. But hey, since we're here... let's embrace the theme! (Interviewee F5)

#### 4.2.4. *Unclear instructions*

The lack of understanding of participants' roles was a significant factor that limited satisfaction during DITE. Participants reported disorientation and confusion at certain moments, which can lead to a sense of detachment from the experience.

Yeah, just exploring, trying to understand, see what was happening, and all that. We even commented like, "Are we supposed to bring something? Are we supposed to find something?" Because initially, they didn't tell us anything. (Interviewee F6)

#### 4.2.5. *Conceptual positioning of the experiences*

During the interviews, it was revealed that some participants participated in DITE without fully understanding what to expect. This lack of clear understanding can lead to participants having preconceived notions or incorrect expectations about the nature and objectives of the experience. Such mismatches between expectation and reality can cause confusion, disappointment, or dissatisfaction. Therefore, defining DITE's concept precisely is crucial to help participants better understand the experience.

I thought I would enter a house of horror, like those houses they had at a fairground, where people would jump out and scare you. I thought it would be a more essential thing, you know. (Interviewee M6)

### 4.3. Assessment of catalysts for satisfaction

#### 4.3.1. *Dark intensity*

The study results emphasize the importance of dark intensity in creating satisfying participant experiences. The study highlighted that elements such as adrenaline rushes, intense emotions, immersion, fear, and suspense are crucial in achieving this.

Participants enjoyed adrenaline rushes associated with intense bodily reactions, moments of speed and heightened intensity. These elements increased the intensity and enhanced the participants' engagement with the overall experiences.

I acted like a kid as if I were hooked on a role-playing game, running frantically. (Interviewee M6)

Participants expressed a desire for solid emotional experiences, including fear and suspense.

In the end, I felt a tremendous sense of euphoria. You feel like you've run a race, and all you want to do is keep running because your adrenaline is pumping. (Interviewee F13)

The critical aspect of immersion, i.e., being transported into a different world, was emphasized.

It is indeed a unique moment, the time we spent there. Everything else is left at the door. (Interviewee M5)

Fear and suspense are fundamental components that reinforce the sense of anticipation, uncertainty, and tension, adding excitement to the overall experience.

Please note, I am afraid. But I also enjoy being made to feel that fear. There were times when I remember feeling a rapid heartbeat, my heart racing, and thinking that I was

utterly vulnerable all around me. It's not like I'm an emotions maniac, but I mean, occasionally, I like to unclog the veins. (Interviewee F10)

#### 4.3.2. *Sensations of achievement*

Facing personal fears, embracing vulnerabilities, or pushing oneself beyond the comfort zone can result in a sense of accomplishment, fulfilment, and empowerment.

I understood immersive theatre like this: "Okay, there are characters here who try to create some psychological pressure, some fear." But honestly, I always thought: "They can't hurt me. They can't hurt me." And I think that's how I managed to experience the whole thing in a more fulfilling way because I thought to myself: "Okay. I did it. I managed to test myself." (Interviewee F10)

After participating in a DITE, interviewees of this study reported an increased sense of coping skills when dealing with darkness.

I could stay strong when the characters interacted with me directly and approached me. So, I think in the end, I thought to myself, "Wow, I'm no longer a beginner. I'm no longer a novice. I'm already at a slightly higher level." (Interviewee F10)

#### 4.3.3. *The atmosphere of the experience*

During the interviews, the participants highlighted the significance of the environment that contributes to the realism of the experience. This environment includes various elements such as sensory factors, physical space, decoration, props, and location.

The interviewees also emphasized the importance of creating an atmosphere of high tension throughout the experience to evoke feelings of suspense, uncertainty, and intensity.

I believe there can't be relaxation in an experience like this. It's from the very beginning. It's always rigid until the end. Rigid until the end. There's no room for smiles here. (M2)

During the experience, participants enjoyed a variety of sensory elements such as sound effects, lighting, smell, and other techniques to create a more immersive atmosphere.

Colder rooms, air conditioning running in an icy cold room, a person enters and feels shivers, or entering a boiling room, a person starts sweating and feels uncomfortable. Because all of this has to affect a person. Discomfort. A person must feel awkward. (Interviewee M2)

The physical space, including its layout, architecture, design, decoration, and props, was emphasized as a crucial element for creating a realistic experience.

The decoration was spectacular. The rules were painted in red on the walls. (...) The decoration in the bathroom was super scary, full of blood and such. That part with the white sheets, and suddenly that performer dressed all in black appears... spectacular! Oh! I almost forgot the best part! [laughs] The bus. It's all dark... beautiful—such incredible creativity. I had never experienced anything like it. (Interviewee F10)

The location of the experience plays a significant role in creating a unique atmosphere.

The location is a bit scary. The fact that it is isolated and at night creates a little nervousness. It's fantastic. (Interviewee F4)

#### 4.3.4. *Theatrical elements*

The credibility of DITE is established by the cast's talent, a captivating plot, and theatrical elements to deliver a compelling experience.

If the actor is terrible, you don't believe what he's saying or doing. It wouldn't even be worth going. (Interviewee F4)

#### 4.3.5. *Game elements*

The interviewees acknowledged that game elements and the presence of darkness worked in synergy to expose participants to dark stimuli and intensify the overall experience. Including challenges, puzzles, and tasks within the expertise, participants were allowed to engage with it actively, leading to increased exposure and a heightened sense of vulnerability.

I think that with the game, it becomes more fun. It's less about watching the movie and more about belonging to it. So, I think it's more enjoyable to be in the film. (Interviewee F8)

## 5. Conclusion

The present study aimed to identify the main factors influencing participant satisfaction in DITE. The research found that five main obstacles hinder participant satisfaction: the large size of the audience, downtimes, the attitude of other participants, unclear instructions, and the conceptual positioning of DITE. On the other hand, the research identified five main catalysts that enhance participant satisfaction: elements associated with dark intensity, a sense of achievement, the atmosphere of the experience, theatrical elements, and game elements.

Regarding the main obstacles, a large audience size represents an essential barrier to satisfaction, as it can result in chaotic situations and feelings of confusion that weaken the intimacy of the experience and break the immersion. Therefore, reducing the number of participants is crucial to ensure that participants are fully present in the moment. Otherwise, the efforts made by DITE creators to provide a sense of delivering various individual narratives and constructing a complex, coherent, and integrated narrative are compromised.

When examining the main obstacles that limit participants' satisfaction during DITE, it was found that an excessive audience size represents an essential barrier to satisfaction. This is because it can lead to chaotic situations and feelings of confusion, which weaken the intimacy of the experience and break the immersion. Therefore, reducing the number of participants seems crucial to ensure they are fully present. Otherwise, the efforts made by DITE creators to provide a sense of delivering various individual narratives and constructing a complex, coherent, and integrated narrative are compromised (Biggin, 2017; Machon, 2016).

Participants in a study emphasized the importance of feeling fully immersed in an immersive experience from the moment they enter space. Downtimes, or periods of inactivity, were pointed out as a significant inhibitor of satisfaction as they can disrupt the flow of the narrative. When downtimes occur, participants' attention drifts away from the boundaries of the experience, which contradicts one of the fundamentals of immersive experiences. This fundamental relates to the experience's ability to engage participants profoundly (White, 2012). Therefore, creators of immersive experiences should design them in such a way that all periods of inactivity are removed. This will prevent participants' attention from drifting away. To maintain a sense of flow in the experience, inactive periods should be replaced with subtle transitions (Alston, 2016a). These transitions should aim to transport participants while allowing them to stay fully present and connected within the self-created world (Hogarth et al., 2018).

When participating in an immersive experience, the level of engagement can decrease if individuals around do not value the knowledge and show a disinterested attitude. This can reduce the overall energy level of the

activity. To avoid this issue before the event, effective communication that emphasizes the significance of maintaining a supportive and collaborative atmosphere and encourages active engagement can help create a sense of community among participants. This, in turn, can help to minimize dismissive behaviours during the experience (Turnbull, 2016).

The meaning of immersive experiences is not well-defined (Alston, 2016b), with different immersive productions having varied and sometimes opposing characteristics (Biggin, 2017). Although this flexibility and versatility contribute to the popularity of immersive experiences (White, 2012), it also presents challenges for managers of such experiences, particularly in managing expectations. Effective communication before the event that accurately describes the nature, objectives, and critical features of the experience, along with clear instructions about participants' roles and any specific guidelines to be followed during the experience, can help to reduce disorientation and confusion. In addition, creators of immersive experiences are advised to include orientation or briefing moments within the immersive narrative to reinforce critical aspects.

Our research has shown that incorporating dark elements into the design of immersive experiences is essential for increasing participant satisfaction. These elements include inducing fear, evoking strong emotions, promoting an environment of suspense, and creating adrenaline rushes. Participants reported feeling more engaged and satisfied when they experienced these elements, which kept them alert and ready for intense involvement. Therefore, the creators of DITE should focus on providing and combining these elements to enhance the overall intensity and create a more gratifying experience for participants (Alston, 2016a).

The environment in which an experience occurs plays a vital role in shaping the overall experience. Several factors, such as the creation of an intense atmosphere, the inclusion of a multi-sensory dimension, the careful design of the physical space, the strategic use of decoration and props, the selection of location, and scheduling the experience during nighttime all contribute to transporting and immersing participants into a captivating and coherent self-created world (Hogarth et al., 2018).

Participants exploring rooms with reduced lighting are encouraged to interact with their surroundings through their remaining senses, such as hearing, touch, and smell. This sensory shift facilitates deeper engagement and concentration as participants become aware of subtle sounds, physical sensations, and atmospheric elements coherent with the heightened emotional response that darkness intends to evoke (White, 2012).

DITE managers should include challenges of different natures that push participants beyond their comfort zones to ensure an enriching and transformative journey of self-discovery. When participants achieve a sense of accomplishment, as occurred in this study, they describe feelings of personal growth and empowerment. This relates to the ability of immersive experiences to place participants at the centre of the experience, provide productions that participants felt they had never experienced before, and emphasize the feeling of participating in a personal and utterly personalized experience powered by the sense of choice (Biggin, 2017).

The success of DITE, a theatrical experience, depends significantly on its cast and plot. Without both elements, the experience is not considered credible. In an interview, the performers' expertise in portraying the characters, meeting the scene's requirements, and understanding the audience was emphasized as crucial to establishing a deeper connection with the actor (Turnbull, 2016). Additionally, if the plot is not engaging, the audience's interest and attention are lost quickly. The narrative can take various routes, but the creators must ensure that their decisions align with the environment and the world they have created (Machon, 2016).

This study recognizes the positive impact of incorporating game elements that subtly encourage participants to expose themselves to dark stimuli and engage with the experience (Alston, 2019). By including game components, participants are invited to interact with their surroundings through subtle cues, such as exploring the space to search for clues or solving puzzles in dark rooms, which adds excitement, suspense, and interactivity (Wiseman et al., 2017).

In summary, this study's findings suggest a connection between immersive experiences and darkness. These factors intensify the overall experience, increase sensory engagement, and heighten emotional responses.

As with any other study, this study also has limitations. It should be noted that these findings are only applicable to DITE. Each DITE has unique characteristics, themes, and operational strategies that can significantly impact participant experiences and outcomes. Therefore, it is crucial to be cautious when interpreting the results in other similar contexts.

Future studies should aim to examine a broader range of dark experiences to develop a more nuanced and robust theoretical framework within the field of dark tourism. This expanded knowledge base would enable the identification of overarching trends, factors, and motivations that shape visitor experiences and inform the design and management of future immersive dark tourism productions. Researchers can replicate this study by collecting data from DITE in other countries. This study can be used as a steppingstone for addressing the main factors that enhance or inhibit participants' satisfaction during the experience of dark tourism. This will help identify and compare the main strengths and opportunities for improvement.

---

## Acknowledgement

This research was supported by Portuguese national funds through FCT Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (FCT, I.P.) under the Grant BD/2020.08323, and within the project reference UID/B/04470/2020.

## References

- Alston, A. (2016a). *Beyond immersive theatre* (1st ed.). Palgrave Macmillan London. <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-48044-6>
- Alston, A. (2016b). The promise of experience: Immersive theatre in the experience economy. In J. Frieze (Ed.), *Reframing immersive theatre: The politics and pragmatics of participatory performance* (1st ed., pp. 243-264). Palgrave Macmillan London. [https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-36604-7\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-36604-7_1)
- Alston, A. (2019). Immersive theatre in austerity Britain: Les Enfants Terribles' riot in the Saatchi Gallery and the liquidation of differencEngine. *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 29(3), 238-255. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2019.1615904>
- Ashworth, G. (2008). The memorialisation of violence and tragedy: Human trauma as heritage. In B. Graham & P. Howard (Eds.), *The Routledge research companion to heritage and identity* (1st ed., pp. 231-244). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315613031>
- Bayly, S. (2011). *A pathognomy of performance* (1st ed.). Palgrave Macmillan London. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230306936>
- Belo, M., & Gustavo, N. (2020). The potential of dark, immersive theatre experiences as a tourism product: The case of the Lisbon Metropolitan Area. In L. Calisto, L. Carvalho, & N. Gustavo (Eds.), *Strategic business models to support demand, supply, and destination management in the tourism and hospitality industry* (1st ed., pp. 70-89). IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-5225-9936-4.ch004>
- Belo, M., & Gustavo, N. (2023a). The importance-performance analysis model of dark, immersive theatre experiences. *Journal of Tourism & Development*, 44, 235-254. <https://doi.org/10.34624/rtd.v44i0.30276>
- Belo, M., & Gustavo, N. (2023b). Managing positive and negative emotions in dark tourism: Implications from dark immersive theatre experiences. *Journal of Tourism & Development*, 41, 231-245. <https://doi.org/10.34624/rtd.v41i0.30234>
- Belo, M., & Gustavo, N. (2024). Managing motivations and satisfaction in dark immersive theatre experiences. *European Journal of Tourism Research*, 37, Article 3709. <https://doi.org/10.54055/ejtr.v37i.3417>
- Bennett, S. (2005). Theatre/Tourism. *Theatre Journal*, 57(3), 407-428. <https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2005.0087>

- Biggin, R. (2017). *Immersive theatre and audience experience: Space, game and story in the work of Punchdrunk* (1st ed.). Palgrave Macmillan Cham. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-62039-8>
- Brigante, R., & Elger, S. (2020). 2020 *Immersive entertainment industry annual report*. <https://everythingimmersive.com/storage/website-files/documents/2020%20Immersive%20Entertainment%20Industry%20Annual%20Report.pdf>
- Clasen, M., Andersen, M., & Schjoedt, U. (2019). Adrenaline junkies and white-knucklers: A quantitative study of fear management in haunted house visitors. *Poetics*, 73, 61-71. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2019.01.002>
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452230153>
- Hogarth, S., Bramley, E., & Howson-Griffiths, T. (2018) Immersive worlds: An exploration into how performers facilitate the three worlds in an immersive performance. *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, 9(2), 189-202, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2018.1450780>
- JTB Tourism Research & Consulting. (2022, January 19). Walking 15,000 steps during one show. *JTB Tourism Research & Consulting*. <https://www.tourism.jp/en/tourism-database/insights/2022/01/sleep-no-more/>
- Light, D. (2017). Progress in dark tourism and thanatourism research: An uneasy relationship with heritage tourism. *Tourism Management*, 61, 275-301. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2017.01.011>
- Machon, J. (2016). Watching, attending, sense-making: Spectatorship in immersive theatres. *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, 4(1), 34-48. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jcde-2016-0004>
- Rivera-Eraso, A., van der Woude, D., Sandoval-Escobar, M., & Ariza-Salazar, J. (2023). The roles of purchase intentions and social media in dark tourism. *Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal*, 71(2), 316-330. <https://doi.org/10.37741/t.71.2.6>
- Shekhar, S., & Valeri, M. (2022). Evolving themes in dark tourism research: A review study. *Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal*, 70(4), 624-641. <https://doi.org/10.37741/t.70.4.6>
- Turnbull, O. (2016). It's all about you: Immersive theatre and social networking. *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, 4(1), 150-163. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jcde-2016-0012>
- Wang, S., Hung, K., & Huang, W. (2019). Motivations for entrepreneurship in the tourism and hospitality sector: A social cognitive theory perspective. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 78, 78-88. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2018.11.018>
- Wiseman, S., van der Linden, K., Spiers, A., & Oshodi, M. (2017). Control and being controlled. In *Proceedings of the 2017 conference on designing interactive systems - DIS '17* (pp. 3-14). Association for Computing Machinery. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3064663.3064694>
- White, G. (2012). On immersive theatre. *Theatre Research International*, 37, 221-235. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307883312000880>

Submitted: June 23, 2023

Revised: April 05, 2024

Accepted: May 14, 2024