

Reflections of battlefield tourist experiences associated with Vietnam War sites: an
analysis of travel blogs

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyse online travel blogs in order to gain an understanding of the reflections held by battlefield tourists in Vietnam. A qualitative approach utilising thematic analysis was conducted on 20 travel blogs. The findings suggest that tourists can have a deeply reflective experience at sites of past warfare, which includes cognitive dissonance to the war narrative.

Tourist experiences in Vietnam presented a connection to the dead (mortality mediation), and a connection to the living (local people). These outcomes led to the overall understanding of battlefield experiences in Vietnam: The meaning of life and humanity through connecting with people, and the passing of time through the writing of history.

Key words: dark tourism, battlefield tourism, Vietnam War, tourist experience, mortality mediation, life affirmation, meaning of life, interpretation.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to gain an understanding of the personal reflections held by tourists after experiencing a site of warfare in Vietnam. The aim of this study takes into account the current understandings of dark tourism, including Stone's (2012) theory that tourists can symbolically connect with the dead, and also construct their own meanings of mortality. This is where a gap in the literature exists, as the concept of dark tourism and mortality mediation has not been applied to battlefield tourism sites relating to recent wars, such as Vietnam where survivors are alive today. To effectively discover the personal reflections of tourists, a qualitative approach is required; one which assumes that meaning is constructed by the travellers. This is imperative as the central focus is to gain an understanding of the emotions, experiences, reflections and meanings of battlefield tourists.

Dark tourism attractions vary from locations of war and conflict, places of human incarceration, natural disasters and lighter attractions such as haunted houses (Timothy, 2011). Dark tourism itself is a broad concept; essentially it is an umbrella term which contains various specific forms of dark tourism. Identified forms of dark tourism include holocaust tourism (Ashworth, 2002), genocide tourism (Beech, 2009) and battlefield/warfare tourism (Ryan, 2007; Smith, 1996). Battlefield tourism relates to the

visitation by tourists to battlefields where wars have or are being fought (Seaton, 1999; Baldwin & Sharpley, 2009). Warfare tourism is a wider term; this encompasses battlefield tours, war memorials and museums, cemeteries, battle re-enactments and the visitation to active 'hot' war zones (Dunkley et al., 2011). This paper relates to tourism to heritage sites with a controversial history (Hartmann, 2014), specifically to battlefield and warfare attractions in Vietnam, which were a result of the Vietnam War (1956-1975), also referred to as the Second Indochina War and known in Vietnam as the American War.

Literature Review

Thanatourism, which is part of the broader phenomenon of dark tourism, relates to the combination of death and tourism. In recent times various academics have contributed to the understanding of this concept. Seaton (1996, p. 240) takes the view that thanatourism is not a modern phenomenon, but one that dates back to the Middle Ages and defined the concept as "travel to a location wholly, or partially, motivated by the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death". In contrast, Lennon and Foley (2000, p. 11) describe dark tourism as "an intimation of post-modernity". This perspective implies that it is modern technology which acts as a medium in generating interest in morbid 'dark' attractions. The theory suggests that when a tragic event takes

place it will become “embedded in mass consciousness” via popular culture and the media (Lennon & Foley, 2000, p. 10). Adding to the conceptualisation of dark tourism, Stone (2012) asserts that there is a deeper philosophical reasoning behind the interest in dark experiences. His theory looks at the secular nature of modern Western society and how ordinary death is often hidden from everyday life, while the shocking deaths of the other are constantly presented to us through the media. As a result, dark tourism can provide a way for tourists to discover their own meanings of life and death. Dark experiences, according to Stone (2012) and Walter (2009), can also include mortality mediation, which involves a mediating relationship between the living and the dead.

Stone and Sharpley (2008) have explored the relationship between Western society’s perspectives on mortality and the potential for dark tourism to enable tourists to confront the issue of death. Stone (2012) states that dark tourism can act as a mediator between life and death. Those who desire an encounter with the dead can utilise dark tourism as a way to link themselves with the dead, in addition to this the tourist is able to construct their own meanings of mortality. Mediating with the dead is described by Stone (2012) as the transfer of information about those who have died to tourists. Walter (2009) theorised that relationships with the dead can be achieved through mediating institutions, such as interpretation, remembrance, education, entertainment and memento mori (reminders of death). Stone (2006) notes that not all dark tourism

sites are considered equal as they will vary depending of their 'level of darkness.' Sites that have formally witnessed death are deemed darker than sites that are merely associated with death. Darker sites also have greater political influence, are more educative in their presentation, are considered more authentic and likely to have occurred in more recent times (Stone, 2006). The factor of time is relevant to the Vietnam case study as the Vietnam War is regarded as a recent war, with survivors still alive today.

In regards to dark tourism, Miles (2014) found that tourist experiences at historic battlefields in the United Kingdom were considered casual in nature, and were likely to have been affected by the commercialisation of the sites due to their historic timeline. He stated that these attributes were likely to have rendered the sites lighter in nature. As a result, Miles (2014, p. 134) concluded that "thanatopsis (contemplation upon death) is a rare feature of tourist visits" to battlefields in the United Kingdom and believes that care should be taken regarding the description of the 'dark tourist' in tourism terminology. Visitors to UK battlefields tended to view the sites as heritage tourism, rather than dark tourism. Miles (2014) notes that to achieve thanatopsis a deep engagement is likely to be a requirement of the experience, as few visitors discussed having a profound connection with the battlefields in regards to a dark experience.

Sites that are associated with warfare have attracted visitors for over a thousand years (Baldwin & Sharpley, 2009). War is considered by Smith (1996) to be a deeply imbedded human activity, and as a result she suggests that war related tourist attractions may be one of the largest single tourism categories. War as an attraction can present certain challenges that other more traditional attractions do not face. Henderson (2000) explored this issue when investigating the concept of war as a tourist attraction in Vietnam. She found that tourists have different perceptions and managing these perceptions can be challenging. When presenting sensitive topics that involve death and warfare, care is needed to achieve a desirable balance between education and entertainment.

Visitor interest in Vietnam War sites could potentially be related to Lennon and Foley's (2000, p. 3 & 10) theory that fascination in dark tourism is due to it being "a product of the circumstances of the late modern world". The events of the Vietnam War may be "embedded" in our "mass consciousness through popular culture and media". Popular culture can have an influence on tourist perceptions. A study conducted by Alneng (2002) noted that Western tourists in Vietnam often referred to Hollywood movies as their source of knowledge on the Vietnam War. At times this led to feelings of dismissal towards authentic war cemeteries as they were viewed as government propaganda (Alneng, 2002). For younger travellers their interest may be sparked by

popular movies, books and documentaries, while for older travellers the Vietnam War may be within living memory. However another reason for visiting Vietnam could be based on the growth in the Vietnamese tourism industry (Suntikul, 2010). International tourists who have no national connection to the Vietnam War may simply be seeking historic sites along with many other traditional tourist activities. Research by Thi Le and Pearce (2011, p. 461) suggests that battlefield tourism enthusiasts in Vietnam could be referred to as “battlefield visitors for a day”, as the majority of these tourists have not travelled to Vietnam specifically to visit battlefields.

Vietnam War and battlefields as a case study

The Vietnam War occurred from 1956 to 1975, and was based on the differing ideologies of North and South Vietnam (communism and non-communism). As the conflict grew the US feared that a defeated South Vietnam would have a ‘domino effect’ on much of South East Asia. If Vietnam were to fall to communism there would be a likelihood of it spreading, this being the domino effect (Isserman, 2010). As an attempt to prevent this from occurring the US offered military advice to South Vietnam, however as the conflict grew the US eventually deployed active combat troops. At this time North Vietnam was attaining assistance from China and the Soviet Union (Hosch,

2010), thus the Vietnam War has also been labelled a proxy ‘Cold War’ between the US and communism.

The Vietnam War has been selected as a case study due to the small amount of battlefield tourism literature published on Vietnam. In addition to this, Vietnam as a tourist destination is growing in popularity due to the *doi moi* regime change in 1986 (Suntikul, 2010). This change in governmental approach has seen a decline in communism and a move towards a free market economy which has opened the country to foreign investment. With growing tourist numbers it is important to understand how these tourists experience and comprehend certain sites. Total international arrivals to Vietnam in 2014 reached approximately 7.8 million, an increase of over 4 percent from the previous year (VNAT, 2015).

Contested sites, particularly war attractions, are not immune from government manipulation in regards to the presentation and interpretation of the site. Leopold (2007) advocates the maintenance of accuracy at war heritage sites, stating that displays should be presented in an unbiased manner and should aim to show evidence of an objective picture of war. Vietnam can be a challenging case for international tourists, as soldiers from the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN – South Vietnamese) did have some of their monuments and cemeteries dismantled at the end of the war

(Schwenkel, 2009). This can result in a distrust of what is presented to tourists in Vietnam. Elements of the Vietnam War are still considered controversial, this is due to the political reasons for Western involvement in the war, the use of the draft in the US and Australia and the military strategies that were utilised during the war, such as the bombing campaigns and the application of the herbicide Agent Orange (Karnow, 1997). There are also issues with how war sites are presented to tourists. Atrocities committed by North Vietnamese soldiers have often been excluded from war interpretation. As a way to normalise the diplomatic relationship between Vietnam and the US, the 'Exhibition House of American and Chinese War Crimes' was eventually renamed to 'The War Remnants Museum' (Laderman, 2009).

Method

This study utilises a qualitative research strategy. The main justification for this choice is that the overall aim of this study is to take an in-depth investigation into the individual experiences and reflections of battlefield tourists. A qualitative approach to research can centre on the emotions and experiences of research subjects (Altinay & Paraskevas, 2008), thus this approach is the most appropriate in gaining an understanding of tourists' reflections at battlefield sites in Vietnam. Data collection was achieved by means of unobtrusive internet research (Netnography) (Kozinets, 2002)

looking at social media and the world of online travel blogging. This form of netnography takes on the ‘lurker format’ which is of a covert, passive observer and is the most popular form used (Mkono, 2013). This approach relies on the bloggers to provide an account of their experience and enables a greater understanding of the phenomenon being studied. As stated by Denzin and Lincoln (2000) the objective of qualitative research is to understand the meanings of human thought and behaviour by describing the human experience.

The research methodology employed in this study is that of narrative inquiry and the approach used to conduct narrative analysis is thematic analysis. Narrative inquiry provides an insight into the thoughts and interpretations of research subjects and is a popular form of methodology when conducting analyses of travel blogs (Banyai & Glover, 2012). Thematic analysis requires participation and interpretation from the researcher (Guest et al., 2011), and involves the analysis of data to discover emerging themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It works by identifying codes from the bloggers’ narratives (blog entries) which are then used to form themes. Constructed themes are then employed to form higher level concepts. Themes that are considered important should be related to the research objective and also hold a pattern in terms of response or meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Unobtrusive measures use non-reactive sources, meaning that reactive measurement effects that can occur between the researcher and participant are eliminated (Gray, 2009). Unobtrusive research techniques are based on investigating the physical traces that people leave behind (Lee, 2000). In the case of this study the ‘physical traces’ of evidence are the blog entries made by tourists. The growth and popularity of social media has enabled travellers to willingly share their travels and adventures with other people in a “virtual tourist community” (Volo, 2012, p. 149). Blogs allow internet users to generate their own content by publishing text, uploading photos, videos, using hyperlinks and posting comments (Liao et al., 2013). Blogs are catching the interest of qualitative researchers since they provide a backstage opportunity in accessing the thoughts and feelings of the public (Chenail, 2011). Unobtrusive internet research also provides relative anonymity for the blogger (Hookway, 2008), which Johnston (2013) suggests is a method of data collection that is sympathetic to the research subject. When researching sensitive topics such as death, it is important to utilise measures that may help overcome the reluctance to discuss death.

Tourism experiences that are included in this paper relate to war tourism attractions found at sites connected to the Vietnam War. This includes monuments, cemeteries, museums, battlefields, tunnels and memorials. Searching for appropriate blogs involved using specific and relatable search terms in the internet search engine Google. It also

included searching specific travel blog websites which enable the user to search by means of geographical location (country and city). Blogs that were selected for analysis had to provide some form of personal reflection, not just an informative description of their holiday. The data collection process was carried out until saturation point was achieved. The selected 20 blogs represent 20 different individuals (Table 1), some who travelled solo and others who travelled with a partner or small group. Due to the nature of unobtrusive blog research it is not possible to know the ages of the bloggers, and it must also be noted that pseudonyms have been assigned. The time scale of the blog publication dates range from 2004 to 2014, presenting a ten year time span. Due to the nature of the topic, a varied time scale does not greatly affect the reflections held by the bloggers as this study is dealing with a past event, although it is possible that interpretation can change over time.

Table 1 Blogger profile

Gender	
Male	10
Female	9
Couple	1
Total	20
Nationality	
American	10
British	6
Vietnamese	1
Australian	1
New Zealander	1
Czech	1
Total	20

The data analysis process followed the key steps of thematic analysis outlined by Attride-Sterling (2001) and Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved looking for code words ('proud' 'grief' 'shame') which would enable the construction of emerging themes. Initial themes could then be sorted into 'main' themes and 'sub-themes'. Connections were made between themes based on context and subject matter. Once main themes were established, the overarching concepts could be finalised. Web diagrams and thematic networks were devised to achieve this. Figure 1 outlines the results of the thematic analysis.

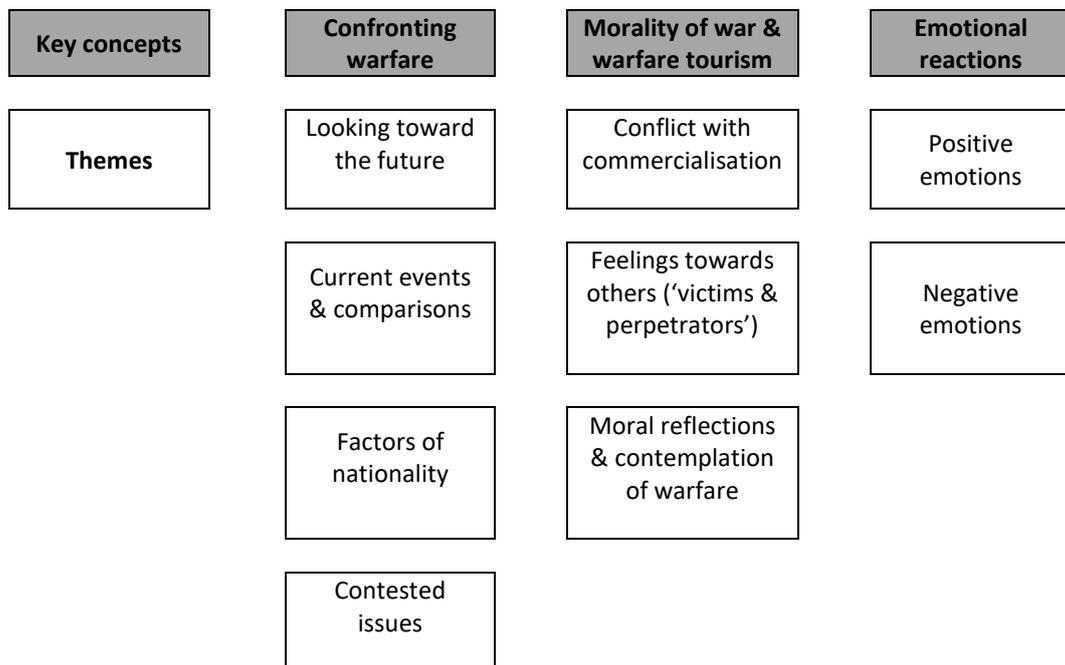


Figure 1: Thematic analysis of warfare tourism experiences in Vietnam

The bloggers visited a range of war sites in Vietnam, including the War Remnants Museum, the Cu Chi Tunnels, May Lai Memorial, Vinh Moc Tunnels, the former Khe Sanh Combat Base (KSCB), the former De-Militarised Zone (DMZ) and various war cemeteries found throughout Vietnam. There were several bloggers who did not have a key national connection to the Vietnam War (i.e. bloggers from the United Kingdom and the Czech Republic).

Findings and discussion

Through the process of thematic analysis three key concepts emerged (seen in Figure 1). These are: Confronting warfare, morality of war and warfare tourism, and emotional reactions. Confronting warfare relates to how the bloggers reflected on issues of the Vietnam War, this includes matters involving nationality and contested issues, i.e. feelings of guilt or shame experienced by US bloggers and contested feelings towards the war narrative. Morality of war and warfare tourism deals with the moral issues when reflecting on a site of past warfare, this includes conflicts with the commercialisation of war sites and the contemplation of warfare itself. The third concept labelled emotional reactions concerns the emotive feelings expressed by the bloggers; this involves both positive and negative emotions regarding their experiences. When these three notions are viewed as a whole they lead to an overall concept of the

contemplation of life and death (war and peace). From this point experiences can be separated into mortality mediation, which can be contested and the ability to connect with the living (seen in Figure 2).

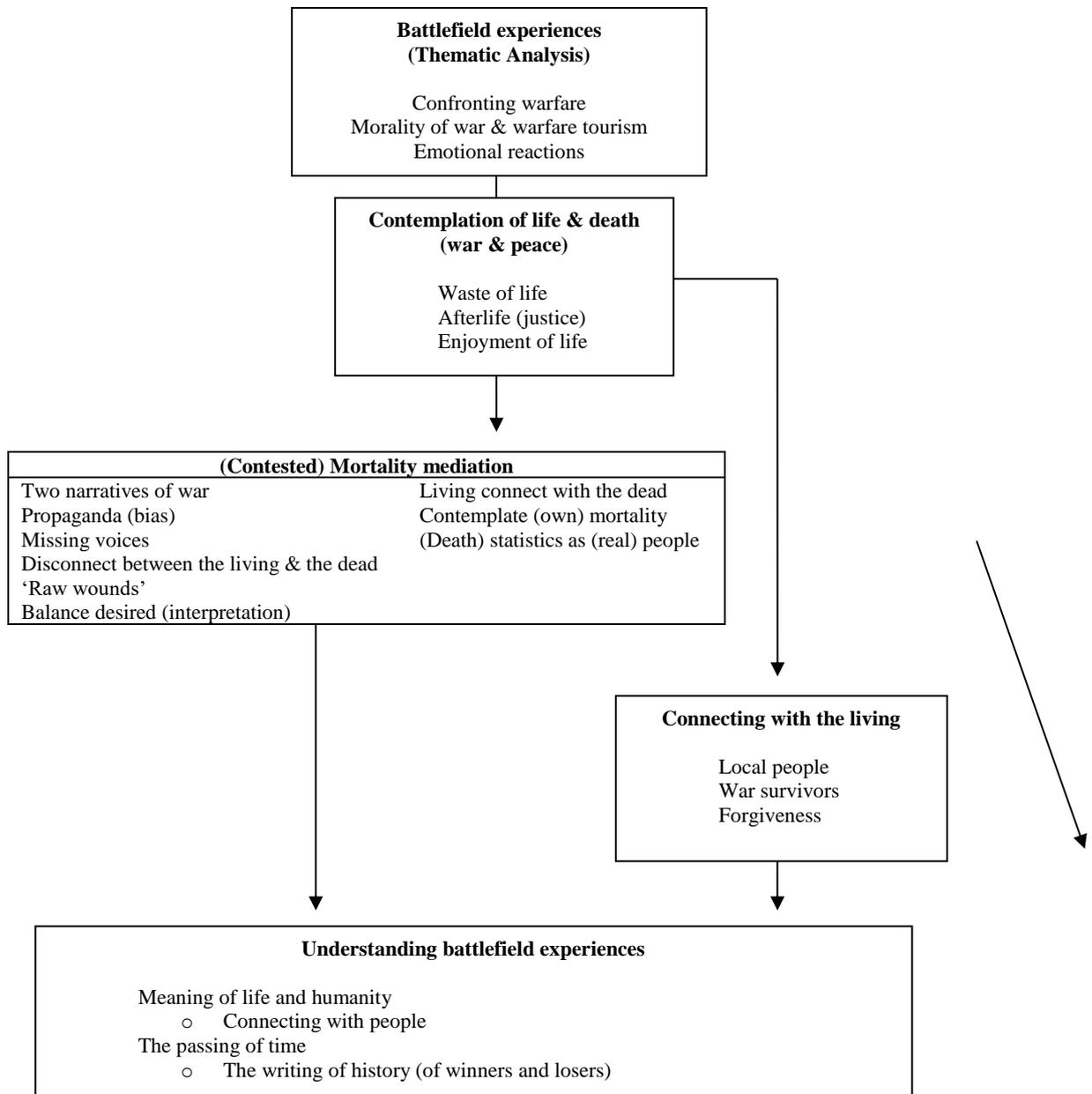


Figure 2: Theoretical model of battlefield experiences (case study of Vietnam)

Contemplation of life and death (war and peace)

The contemplation of life and death centred on the personal belief in life after death, and the concept of justice in the afterlife. For one US blogger, visiting the War Remnants Museum was an emotional experience as she was confronted with graphic images of the victims of war. This encounter led her to reflect on her personal belief in God and that justice would be served in the afterlife.

I am glad that I believe in a God of Justice-that people pay for their mistakes, and a God of love-that He loves all His children. (Michelle – USA)

Reflection also extended to the enjoyment of life and the idea that it is better to move on from the events of the past and to not seek revenge against others. A UK blogger felt that this was an important message she learnt from a local Vietnamese tour guide while visiting the Cu Chi Tunnels. She reflected that it is wiser to not dwell on the events of the past, but to focus on enjoying life in the present.

He explained that being happy and enjoying life [is] true revenge [...] The Vietnamese people have left the past in the past and have got on with their independence and have rebuilt their communities [...] I think we all could learn from the Vietnamese and just get on with life and enjoy it. (Mary – UK)

This concept is related to Stone's (2009) assertion that dark tourism (battlefield tourism) may have more in relation to life and the living, than to the dead, as it teaches the living

an important message on life. The thoughts and reflections of the bloggers extended beyond the Vietnam/American War narrative. The difference between these narratives is reflected in the expression of either the “fall of Saigon” (Western/South Vietnamese viewpoint) or the “liberation of Saigon” (North Vietnamese viewpoint). Contemplative thoughts on life and death (war and peace) had the potential to lead to mediating factors which enabled the bloggers to experience (contested) mortality mediation.

(Contested) mortality mediation

While engaging in a deeper contemplation of life and death the opportunity arose for bloggers to experience mortality mediation, at times this could be contested. Mortality mediation translated into three identifiable types: the living could connect with the dead, the living contemplate their own mortality, and the living are able to view death statistics as real people.

Contested mortality mediation occurred when bloggers experienced cognitive dissonance with the American War narrative that is presented to tourists in Vietnam. Being confronted with a different (non-Western) narrative of war was difficult for some bloggers to accept, which was especially the case when only one narrative was presented. This led to accusations of propaganda and bias, and the suggestion that

‘victors write the history.’ Feelings of anger and dissonance aimed at the interpretation of the war narrative were mainly expressed by American and British bloggers. While visiting the War Remnants Museum, one US blogger expressed her feelings at the presentation of the war narrative, describing it as “*pure propaganda.*” She went on to state:

Once I grasped this the entire museum experience became less emotional and more academic. (Maria – USA)

This expression highlights how the mortality mediation process can fail to occur, as the connection to the dead is prevented or reduced, i.e. the transfer of information about the dead is not fully taken in. Bloggers also shared sentiments that the Vietnam War is still ‘raw’ and with time more stories may be added to the American War narrative.

It seems to me that the wounds of the Vietnam (or American) War are still very fresh despite the decades that have passed. I hope as time begins to heal them we can all learn from a more balanced, two sided story of a war gone horribly wrong; and that we can move forward into the future and learn from the mistakes that were clearly made. (Nicole – USA)

The narrative of war at the War Remnants Museum frequently provoked dissonant feelings, and as a result the narrative of the dead could be overlooked. There is a desire for “*a more balanced*” interpretation of the war expressed by the bloggers.

...there's never any mention of the defeat of the South Vietnamese who fought and suffered more losses. (Paul – UK)

The downside of the museum is that it only tells the story from one point of view, it doesn't give enough information about how the US got involved and no stories from the US side. I think for a museum to be truly effective it needs to tell both sides of a story. (Mary – UK)

A result of this dissonance is that the focus is taken off the dead and is centred on the narrative of war. Consequently, a disconnection is formed and the contested experience acts as a barrier between the living and the dead. This reduces the opportunity to learn about the dead and also feelings of empathy given to the dead.

Connecting with the living

Since the Vietnam War is still within living memory the bloggers were able to form a connection with the living (locals). This factor can make the battlefield experience more emotionally challenging than battlefields that are not within living memory, as the tourist is able to see the physical effects of war on the human body and in the interactions with local people. Due to first and second generation memory (Walter, 2009) the environment of Vietnam can be confronting for international tourists, however it can also present an opportunity for meaningful interactions with those who share their stories. In contrast to the contested issues experienced by the bloggers, there

were also various meaningful connections made between people of different backgrounds.

The concepts of forgiveness and humanity were apparent in the friendly greeting a US blogger received from a local Vietnamese family. This interaction occurred at the site of the My Lai Massacre, and thus the blogger was surprised and reassured by their welcoming response to him and their lack of bitterness held against him due to his nationality.

I hesitated. Considering where I was standing it was the first time I was tempted to say I was Canadian, but I said "US." What happened next surprised me. The family surrounded me, shaking my hand and asking to take photos together. We were standing at the site of the worst American massacre of the war and they were greeting me like a long-lost friend. (Charles – USA)

This interaction highlights the potential emotional depth of a battlefield experience in Vietnam. Due to the bloggers' nationality he may have been experiencing bad active history. This term, conceptualised by Poria (2001, 2007), occurs when past actions undertaken by one's own social group produces negative feelings in the individual. The blogger appears to show apprehension in stating his nationality as he does not know how he will be received by the Vietnamese people. This blogger received a positive reception. A friendly interaction such as this highlights the ability to forgive. In addition, it also helps in the healing process that occurs between nations following war.

The same blogger reflected on another interaction he had regarding US-Vietnamese relations.

In halting English a local visitor asked where we were from. Upon hearing my response he stopped and said, "US-Vietnam friends" before going on his way. (Charles – USA)

Conversely, connections with the living did not always result in feelings of comfort and positivity. A US blogger was confronted with a challenging experience after he was left to reflect on his interaction with a living victim of Agent Orange. This chance encounter occurred at a local market after he had visited the War Remnants Museum. Being face to face with a victim of war was highly confronting and made him aware of the statistics he had previously read in the museum. This interaction exacerbated his feelings of bad active history and provided the blogger with a moment of self-reflection. Through self-reflection the blogger was able to visualise the entirety of the victims of the Vietnam War and expressed the opinion that people have turned a blind eye on the sufferers of Agent Orange.

I had just come across one of the 150,000 Vietnamese people who suffer birth defects - now into the third generation [...] I had tried to wrestle with that number in my mind for many years, but seeing this one young girl in front of my eyes, it helped me to understand the power of the tragedy... (Chris – USA)

By connecting with the living this blogger was able to see beyond the statistics of war presented in the War Remnants Museum; it presented him with the physical, real life consequences of war which cannot be passed off as propaganda. This interaction facilitated a human connection involving feelings of empathy and the need for justice for the ongoing victims of war. He further reflected on the enormity of those still suffering and the belief that awareness may lead to justice.

We should view it as an opportunity for self-reflection to consider that face to face with the number [150,000] as it relates to real living people with disorders too horrible to describe in writing, many of us just shake our heads, and others seem not to care too much at all [...] they continue to exist, even though we can't see or even imagine them. If we could, I think we might reach out a hand.
(Chris – USA)

Uncomfortable emotions involving bad active history can be felt through subsequent generations. This can produce the desire for justice when something is seen to be unjust. One US blogger expressed shame on behalf of her government at the lack of treatment for Agent Orange victims.

I've never felt so much shame for my government. While the government has compensated American soldiers exposed to Agent Orange [...] nothing has been done for the Vietnamese. (Amanda – USA)

Connections made between the living can also take place through the narratives of the dead. A New Zealand blogger who visited a war cemetery shared a deeply emotional

experience with his tour guide. The Vietnamese tour guide shared his personal stories of the war, including the loss of family members. When confronted with the grief expressed by the tour guide, the blogger found himself sharing his pain and articulated great empathy for him and his experiences.

*I see the tears well up in his eyes, and as we stand in this cemetery I can almost begin to feel the hurt and the sadness that he must feel, I say almost, but I am totally devastated. This war may have ended 40 years ago for Vietnamese people but it is still part of everyone's life in some way here, and the scars are still raw.
(Jonathan – NZ)*

This interaction illustrates how different battlefield experiences can be for tourists in Vietnam as they can be confronted not only with the physical effects of war, but also the ongoing emotional toll of war.

Conclusions

The meanings behind the emotions and reflections expressed by the bloggers reveal the profound outcomes of the battlefield experience, which is illustrated in the theoretical model – Understanding battlefield experiences (see Figure 2). These deeper understandings are reflected in the following two main outcomes.

The meaning of life and humanity – connecting with people

For some of the bloggers it was clear that they wanted to understand what happened during the war and why, and to see how the country is progressing today. However, their experiences often went beyond these more fundamental forms of engagement. As Prideaux (2007) states, taking part in battlefield tourism presents the opportunity to engage in a deeply meaningful experience. In several cases, bloggers were able to achieve this by contemplating on profound aspects of life and humanity. Contemplative thoughts included their own philosophical beliefs of warfare, the afterlife, justice and humanity. Bloggers also contemplated their own hypothetical actions in warfare and reflected on the human will to survive and overcome difficulties.

Being reminded of death can appear as something that may be unhelpful or even harmful to the self; however Ben-Ari (2011) states that people should be made aware of their mortality in order to find meaning in life. This reminder, however, should be moderated so that life can be lived in a meaningful way and not in fear of death. In this case, battlefield tourism can be viewed as a 'safe' reminder of death, as it is a form of death that the tourist is unlikely to personally experience, consequently they should not be overly fearful. This theory is connected to Stone's (2009, p. 33) belief that dark tourism can "minimise the intrinsic threat" of death, as we are unlikely to experience the

type of death that is presented at dark tourism attractions. Narratives of violent death lead a visitor to hope for a ‘good death,’ death that is natural and occurs at an advanced age. As a result, battlefield tourism experiences have the potential to help tourists find or develop meaning in life through the war dead. By connecting to the experiences of the dead, the living can view everyday life in a more meaningful way.

Contemplative thoughts on warfare, suffering and death led to distressing thoughts for many of the bloggers, however for others this helped to highlight the importance in treasuring life and one’s own privileged position in the world – living in a country without war on its own soil. This positive reaction to distressing content supports Ben-Ari’s (2011) theory that exposing people to death reminders can help individuals to view their own life in a more meaningful way. The battlefield tourist does not want to waste, or take for granted their opportunities on Earth as they can see how many people had their opportunities taken from them.

The passing of time – the writing of history

The other key outcome of the battlefield experience is related to the concept of the passing of time and the writing of history. Since the Vietnam War is relatively recent in history it is considered to have a heightened sense of ‘emotional sting’ (Ballantyne &

Uzzell, 1998). As a result the battlefields are darker in nature as memories of the war are still within first and second generation memory (Walter, 2009). This environment enables tourists to encounter local people who have lived through the war. When feelings of bad active history and dissonance to the war narrative are present, emotions can run high. Expressions of shame, guilt and anger demonstrate the intense and 'raw' environment that Vietnam can be for some tourists. Bloggers of different nationalities expressed a belief that time is needed for the wounds of the Vietnam War to heal, a sense that pain is still evident.

Several of the bloggers expressed feelings of dissonance to the 'American War' narrative in Vietnam, stating that it was one-sided, or reflecting government propaganda. This led to the feeling that 'objective truth' cannot be found in Vietnam. Schwenkel (2009) and Laderman (2013) agree that information presented in Vietnam, particularly in the War Remnants Museum, is selective, however both question why this museum is held to a higher standard than Western museums, as most museums are selective in how they interpret war history. Gatewood and Cameron (2004) note the commemoration of battlefields is not only about remembrance and education, but also about fuelling nationalistic feelings among visitors. In this regard, the battlefield landscape of Vietnam is no different to any other Western battlefield. Schwenkel (2009) and Laderman (2013) believe that the discomfort stems from the fact that a

Western (American) narrative is not at the forefront of the interpretation of war.

Western tourists may be, for the first time, encountering the 'other' side of the war narrative, and thus see it as 'wrong' or not the full truth. Schwenkel (2009) states that this feeling of dis-believing (viewed as propaganda) minimises the suffering of the Vietnamese, and reduces the accountability of the US government. This was reflected in the bloggers' disconnect with the dead. Overt feelings of empathy were overcome by expressions of anger and dissonance to the narrative of war.

According to Gillen (2014), the Vietnamese Government views tourism as a way to try and get the international community to understand the Party's perspective of the war. One of the aims of the 'American War' narrative is to show Vietnam as victorious and also to make the United States the 'Other' (Gillen, 2014). Western tourists are relatively used to Western narratives making different cultures the 'Other', therefore experiencing the situation in reverse may come as a shock. This form of encounter has the potential to open tourists' minds to different viewpoints, and to understand that other countries will present a different interpretation of war. Tamashiro (2014) states that tourists in Vietnam will accept, reinforce or challenge the narratives presented to them, and through the use of social media (blogging) these tourists will then construct their own interpretation of war, which will also be subject to personal bias, and the inclusion or exclusion of certain details.

Gillen (2014) notes that the Vietnamese government uses photos and statistics in the War Remnants Museum as proof of the atrocities committed by the US government. Nonetheless, several of the bloggers rejected this as 'expected' Party propaganda. According to Schwenkel (2009) this highlights the continued friction between Communism and non-Communism; with Westerners from democratic countries regarding State provided information as 'Communist propaganda.' This thought is indicative of how dissonant feelings create a barrier between the living and the dead. However, this does not mean that feelings of dissonance should be reduced. Truth in battlefield interpretation is subjective, and Ryan (2007) notes that seeking authenticity should not be the primary objective for tourists. Visitors should instead focus on how a site has been interpreted, and recognise that some aspects of history may be left out. Contested sites of warfare that produce a dissonant response push visitors to think about what they are viewing, and in Ryan's (2007) view this is an effective form of learning. For bloggers who desired an objective truth, and felt this was not present, experienced a disconnect between themselves and the war dead.

From analysing the bloggers' entries it is apparent that not all tourism pursuits are based on pure hedonism and shallow experiences. It is possible to see that such travel journeys can involve deeper experiences which have the ability to provoke reflection and contemplation. The bloggers' thoughts touched on aspects of humanity, life and

death, discovery, education, history, spirituality and philosophy. The act of travelling and the many circumstances that it can present to tourists has the potential to provide deeply meaningful moments, often unexpectedly. The act of travel itself has been viewed as a way to promote peace and global understanding (D'Amore, 1988). This theory states that tourism, as a peace-making activity, can enable people to see other cultures and learn to appreciate our similarities, rather than focus on our differences (Lisle, 2000). This outlook promotes the idea of the 'global village' which relates to the connections that people share with one another from all over the world (D'Amore, 1988). Highly meaningful and unexpected moments were noted by several of the bloggers. Both of these encounters were reflected in the interactions with local people. One encounter involved the US blogger who was greeted warmly by Vietnamese locals and the other included the US blogger who reflected deeply on his chance meeting with a young victim of Agent Orange. Moments such as this may not appear to be significant from the outside; however by sharing their thoughts with the online world it is possible to gain an insight into their personal journey. From this it is possible to see how deeply meaningful battlefield experiences can be to the individual, and to understand the level of engagement and reflection that is experienced by the tourist.

The final understanding of battlefield experiences achieved from this study comes down to the meaning of life and humanity, and the passing of time. These statements reflect

the deeper meanings behind battlefield tourism. Contemplative thoughts that were expressed by the bloggers extended beyond war and the battlefield. Their reflections included the enjoyment of life and the life affirming belief that they must treasure the opportunities that they have been given as others have not been as lucky. Aspects of humanity were also present, with the reflection on justice and the desire to correct the mistakes of the past. This was evident in the bloggers who felt that compensation should be provided to the victims of Agent Orange. Reflections such as this demonstrate how battlefield tourism experiences can connect tourists to aspects of humanity. Tourists are able to physically and emotionally connect to their environment and also to the people around them. Battlefield tourism provides an opportunity for people to connect with something potentially meaningful. Their journey takes them through the past which does involve the death and suffering of others (dark tourism), however it also helps the living to understand the past, the present and humanity itself. Battlefield tourism does involve confronting the dead, and it does challenge people with the uncomfortable acts of human behaviour, however in contrast, it also confronts tourists with some of the best attributes of human nature which includes the ability to forgive and move on from the past.

Taken as a whole, battlefield tourism exposes tourists to the raw nature of the world and how humans interact with one another based on our own experiences, perceptions and

beliefs. For some of these bloggers their journey in Vietnam would have been highly memorable and could potentially have a lasting impact on their own perspectives and beliefs of the world and people around them. As stated by D'Amore (1988) and Lisle (2000), tourism can act as the 'peace-industry' or 'peacemaker' whereby people realise that what unites us is more significant than what divides us. Genuine connections between people are likely to be memorable as the importance behind them is based in the philosophy of forgiveness and friendship. It is also evident that battlefield experiences are highly individual and that people react and interpret death on the battlefield very differently, and this includes the narratives of war. Being confronted with the outcomes and long term consequences of human behaviour presents complex emotional reactions. As such, battlefield tourism presents an opportunity for people to challenge their own thoughts on life and death.

As with all studies there are limitations. The main limitation to this research is that the majority of the bloggers come from a Western (English language) perspective. When looking at the bloggers' viewpoint of the war it is clear that many hold the Western perspective of the Vietnam War. The outcome of this is that the bloggers' reflections and experiences are relatively one-sided, and the opportunity to compare both narratives of war is lost (Vietnam/American War). Another limitation relates to the fact that the findings cannot produce broad generalisations about battlefield tourists, and that most

battlefield tourists may not blog about their experience. Nonetheless, this study does produce findings on the reflective experiences of the 20 bloggers who comprised this case study. It is recommended that future battlefield tourism studies include experiences and reflections from both sides of war so that contrasts and comparisons can be made between how different tourists perceive the presentation of war. It would be revealing to investigate how each side interprets certain narratives of war. By continuing to research battlefield tourism there will hopefully be a better understanding of how best to manage battlefield tourist experiences in the present and future.

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