


Social Representations of War Tourism: A Case of Ukraine

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Abstract

War tourism is a scarcely researched topic, although the presence of spectators in war zones is attested throughout history. In addition to visiting sites of past conflict, “hot” war tourism in active war zones is on the rise. This study looks at how “war tourism” is represented within an online community of (aspiring) war tourists, taking the case of the recent conflict in Ukraine. Social Representations Theory is applied through a Topic Modeling Approach for this purpose. Findings show that war tourism is represented through “hot war travel,” “combat volunteering,” “non-combat volunteering,” and “virtual war travel.” This suggests a complicated relationship between war tourism, volunteering, and voyeurism in a new form of “hybrid war tourism” in online and offline realms. Future research should aim at a deeper understanding of these concepts and the complex links between them.

Keywords

war tourism, Ukraine, social representations, volunteering, topic modeling

Introduction

At first glimpse, the term “war tourism” may appear as an oxymoron, as tourism is believed to thrive in peaceful places (Hall et al., 2004). War tourism has often been associated with dark tourism, through being motivated by an encounter with death (Seaton, 1996; Sharpley, 2006). This is not a historical rarity, as tourists visited the battle of Waterloo as well as the American Civil War’s Battle of Bull Run (Seaton, 1999).

Previous definitions of war tourism refer to attractions that use war as a basis for their service and allow for some time to pass after conflict - so that the destination has returned to some type of normality and the immediate danger of live combat is removed. In this sense, the sites have gone “cold” since there is no active danger or conflict (Pierkarz, 2007, p.154).

“Hot war tourism,” on the other hand, refers to travel to an unstable environment characterized by the presence of high individual risks and where visitors experience the thrills of war first-hand as the ultimate adventure, risking their limbs and property (Pierkarz, 2007). Although few people wish to experience war first-hand (Tarlow, 2005, p. 52), the practice of travelling to areas of active conflict is growing (Lisle, 2016).

Literature on war tourism has discussed tourism as a means of peace and solidarity (e.g., Butler & Suntikul, 2013; Dolnicar & McCabe, 2022) and memory (e.g., Carbone, 2022; Fyall et al., 2006). However, there is little research about individuals who seek the thrills of active war sites.

Researchers in other domains have theorized that these trips are driven by ideology and facilitated through organizational and inter-organizational mobility structures; tourism literature does not give deeper insights (Jung, 2016).

Whilst it may be assumed that these “hot war tourists” are likely war volunteers and motivated by combat and related humanitarian motives (e.g., Brin, 2006; Yar & Tzanelli, 2019), Lisle (2004, 2007) has also raised concerns that there might be an element of voyeurism in people willing to travel to war zones. This might suggest that war could be observed through a tourist gaze as a “spectacle behind bars” (Urry, 1990), the consequences of which carry a wide range of individual, social and political risks rather than just tourism as a vector of solidarity (Dolnicar & McCabe, 2022). The growth of interest in “hot war sites” therefore raises questions about how war tourism is considered by potential war tourists.

To explore this issue, we adopt Social Representations Theory (SRT) to understand how a community interested in war tourism represents war tourism, taking the case of the

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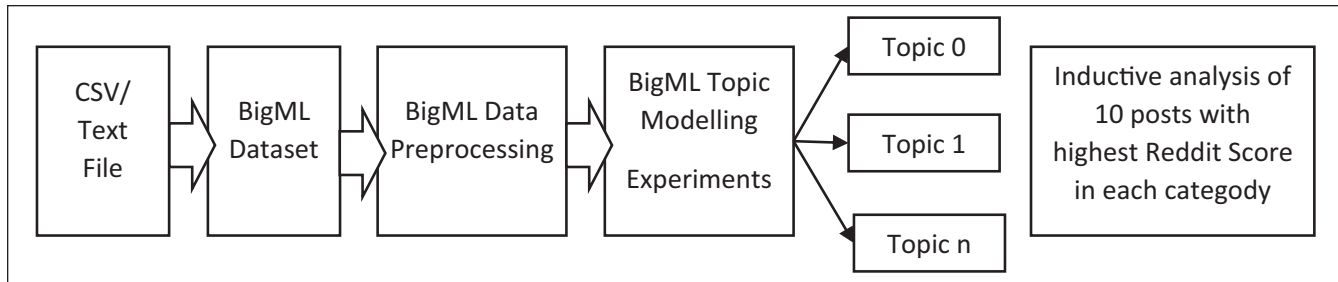


Figure 1. Quantitative and qualitative text analysis.

recent conflict in Ukraine. SRT was developed by Serge Moscovici in the 1960s and concerns representations which create social and collective realities within communities by giving meanings to social phenomena (Moscovici, 1961). In tourism studies, SRT has been applied to a wide range of contexts, using a similarly wide range of methodological tools (Wassler et al., 2019). This study will use SRT as a framework for identifying social representations of war tourism through a topic-modeling approach. However, this approach requires an understanding of the chosen case of tourism in a currently active war zone.

The 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict highlights a particularly interesting case, when, on February 27th, 2022, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky issued a call to non-nationals of Ukraine “wishing to join the resistance against the Russian occupiers” to “come to our State and join the ranks of the territorial defense forces.” 20,000 volunteers answered the call within 2 weeks, joining a separate unit called the “International Brigade of the Territorial Defense of Ukraine” (Zaretsky, 2022, p. 2). Media outlets have labeled the volunteers a “legion of the damned” and an army of “misfits, veterans, and war tourists” (Milburn, 2022). These volunteers are also not classified as foreign fighters, as they are not paid and, in most cases, fit into the definition of “hot war tourists.” In a recent study, Mowat (2022) highlights that, in the case of the Ukraine war, tourists are not generally foreign fighters but, through war, tourism runs into a risk of becoming involved in a conflict.

In war-torn Ukraine, tourism numbers have decreased by 26% from the previous year since the start of the war, although domestic tourism seems to be rebounding (Bhunia, 2022a). However, although reliable statistics are not available since the conflict started, there are several indicators that international tourism has never fully stopped in the country. For example, Ukrainian authorities have recently urged foreign tourists not to visit the country at this time. The State Agency for Tourism Development of Ukraine mentioned that the “once-safe country” could currently not guarantee the safety of tourists (Bhunia, 2022b). A search on Booking.com and Airbnb showed (notwithstanding disclaimers on personal risk and safety) almost 1,000 hospitality structures available in Kyiv alone for the end of September 2022. Travel blogs also show entries for tourists who have

recently visited Ukraine, reporting “Most hotels and some daytime bars operate as normal. Numerous websites offer affordable rooms and flats across the city. Restaurants are open again.” (Umland, 2022, p. 1). This raises several questions about the current situation in Ukraine and confirms a unique case study to understand how war tourism is represented by the war tourist population. Therefore, this letter contributes as follows to theory and practice.

Through understanding social representations of war tourism within these communities, it is hoped that this study can open doors for related critical research, which, to date, is scarce in the tourism field.

Methods

Currently, very little work has examined the role of online communication forums in accessing opportunities, informing, and supporting war tourists and/or volunteers (van Zyl et al., 2015). Accordingly, SRT is used a theoretical backdrop for this study. For empirical work, SRT has used a wide range of approaches (Wassler et al., 2019). This study has built on previous research that utilized digital data to uncover representations (van Zyl et al., 2015) and adopted a topic-modeling approach to identify related social representations.

Topic modeling was first used to identify latent patterns in the text by modeling a group of documents (text segments) as mixtures of topics composed of groups of words (Figure 1), combining quantitative and qualitative data analysis (Blei et al., 2003). This approach has been used to examine digital text from websites, reviews and social media (Park et al., 2020). Whilst research has identified the propensity for tourists to engage in risky activities in the physical and virtual domain (Yar & Tzanelli, 2019), very little research has examined online engagement by prospective war tourists, which this study examines.

Data were obtained from the Subreddit forum “volunteers for Ukraine,” which was started on February 25th, 2022. The forum totaled some 44,500 members on March 13th 2022 (<https://www.reddit.com/r/VolunteersForUkraine/wiki/index/resources>). On Reddit, users can create posts or comments in response to posts or other comments. We obtained all posts from inception until March 13th, 2022, that is, a total of 10,100 posts within the Subreddit.

Table 1. Topic Modeling Analysis.

Model	Max no. of topics	Max n-grams	Number of words per topic	Specified words excluded	Non-dictionary words excluded	Non-language characters excluded	Numeric digits excluded	Single tokens excluded
1	Auto	Bigram	10	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
2	Auto	Bigram	20	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
3	15	Trigram	10	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
4	15	Trigram	20	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

Table 2. Social Representations of War Tourism Generated from LDA.

Physical							Virtual	
Hot war travel		Combat volunteering			Non-combat volunteering		Voyeur	Volunteer
Logistics and resources	Barriers and challenges	Equipment and resources	Conflict zone skills	Combat requirements	Non-combat-medical	Barriers	Online information sharing	Sponsorship
Plane ticket	Caution	Body armor	Military truck drivers' training	Military experience	Medical experience	Speak English	Government websites	Donate money
Cold-weather gear	Language skills	Plate carrier	Active duty	Combat-experienced	Medical supplies	Speak Ukrainian	Russian troll	Ukrainian refugees
Sleeping bag	Basic medical	Medical supplies	Military background	Firearm experience	Combat medic	Medical training	Report war crimes	Ukrainian consulate
Physically fit	Language barrier	Night vision	Law enforcement	Foreign fighters	Combat zone combat experience	Foreign volunteers	fake news	Foreign volunteers
Border crossing	War zone	Basic training	Prior service	Foreign legion	Helping people	Foreign volunteers	Russian skill	

Text pre-processing and Topic Modeling were done using the platform Bigml (bigml.com). In pre-processing, numerical characters and special characters, such as emojis, were removed and non-dictionary words were excluded. Four topic-modeling analyses were then conducted on the text (Table 1).

Analysis 3 produced interpretable topics which were then used for qualitative text analysis. Within each topic, the 10 posts with the highest engagement score (based on the total number of upvotes and downvotes) were examined, inductively coded and then analyzed to identify additional perspectives on the interests and rationales of hot war tourists.

Findings

Through topic modeling, several social representations of war tourism within the war tourist community were identified. War tourism was represented as (1) hot war travel (2) combat volunteering, (3) non-combat volunteering and (4) virtual war travel. Table 2 provides detailed descriptions of the subset of identified representations generated from LDA. The naming of each was based on the keywords with the highest TF-IDF scores detected.

War Tourism as “Hot War Travel”

The first representation of war tourism is “hot war travel,” and related topics were logistics, resources, barriers and challenges that war tourists might experience. These ranged from transport issues, such as plane tickets to language skills and barriers—issues not unfamiliar in other types of tourism.

This first representation reflects largely what Piekarz (2007) defines as “hot war tourism,” as an adventure holiday. The adventurous nature of war tourism was highlighted by the forum members via their assertion that physical fitness and sleeping bags would be needed. However, this representation did not highlight any type of combat involvement and largely corresponds to Lisle (2004, 2007) notion of voyeuristic activities in war zones, indicating interest in this type of tourism in Ukraine.

War Tourism as “Combat Volunteering”

The second representation of war tourism is “combat volunteering” and related topics were equipment and resources, combat zone skills and combat requirements. Topics emerged related to basic equipment needed for war but issues such as past fighting experience were also discussed.

Members expect physical engagement in combat activities. These types of war tourists were concerned with practical issues, such as equipment and skills needed in a combat zone. This type of representation sought the highest level of physical involvement and was often highlighted by posters with (supposed) combat experience. This representation follows the notion of Brin (2006) and Yar and Tzanelli (2019) that travel to war zones is often motivated by a desire to engage in combat. This could be related to experiencing thrills (Piekarz, 2007) but also to solidarity for Ukraine (Dolnicar & McCabe, 2022). This builds on a long history of volunteer fighters who leave their home countries to participate in a conflict in another country. These fighters do not have citizenship, familial or ethnolinguistic ties, are not active members of the military and are unpaid (Sakiev, 2020). Participants who claimed to have combat experience applied this knowledge to set expectations for war tourists who may not have served in these areas. There were statements of caution linked to both the physical (“... Red Dawnesque fantasy draws folks to fight”) and online setting (Table 2). Interestingly, this representation seemingly violates Reddit’s content policies on facilitating illegal or prohibited transactions (<https://www.redditinc.com/policies/content-policy>).

War Tourism as “Non-Combat Volunteering”

The third representation of war tourism is “non-combat volunteering” and related topics were equipment and resources, combat zone skills and combat requirements. Topics were mostly medical-related. Interestingly, barriers such as language and medical training were discussed when representing war tourism as non-combat volunteering.

Beyond observation, tourists may seek to participate and join organizations that seek to provide aid to victims of conflict (Brin, 2006). As the findings show, in addition to combat, members in the forum discussed humanitarian as well as fundraising actions, which have been identified in previous research (Brin, 2006; Yar & Tzanelli, 2019). This role may also overlap with the combat role as they both require physical travel; furthermore, the idea of providing medical support to combatants was also raised. The humanitarian role also sought to provide medical supplies, which is an element of support.

War Tourism as “Virtual War Travel”

The fourth social representation of war tourism is “virtual war travel.” This was mostly related to providing information online or to financial sponsorship for Ukrainian efforts, although there was also a voyeuristic aspect to it.

This could range anywhere from countering propaganda “fake news” and “Russian trolls and shills” to donating money and providing helpful information for Ukrainian refugees. The presence of hybrid war activities, such as campaigning for sanctions’ enforcement in the online spaces

frequented by users, has lowered the barrier to observation and participation. This suggests that hot war tourists may have modalities other than physical travel for obtaining the personal transformation sought from visiting war zones. This goes beyond Jung’s (2016) assertion that war tourism necessarily implies physical risk and presence at a war site and recaptures the idea that there is indeed an element of danger from afar (Lisle, 2004, 2007). Participation in the online volunteer forum can be seen as a de-risked way to meet expectations that match the roles of war tourists to active war zones previously identified, that is, combat and humanitarian-related motives (Brin, 2006; Yar & Tzanelli, 2019).

Discussion and Future Research Agenda

This study applied SRT as a conceptual framework to investigate social representations of war tourism through a topic-modeling approach. Four representations of war tourism have emerged, as shown above, which lead to several points of discussion. Through the identified social representations of war tourism, this research suggests that we may need to extend the definition of war tourism.

When talking about hot war tourism in particular, our current conceptualizations indicate that visitors seek the danger of an active war zone (Piekarz, 2007), which will be a minority of tourists who seek specific thrills that cannot be obtained by other means (Lisle, 2007). The first social representation of war tourism identified (hot war travel), shows that war tourism as a form of voyeurism certainly exists as an interest in related groups of potential travelers. This is also confirmed by Umland’s (2022) first-hand testimony of tourist facilities in parts of Ukraine working to almost normal capacity, which further confirms this assumption.

The two social representations related to combat and non-combat volunteering also highlight that war tourism is often represented as volunteering. This was suggested in previous literature by Brin (2006) and Yar and Tzanelli (2019), among others, and certainly holds true in the current context and also points to Jung’s (2016) assertion that war trips are often bound by ideology.

The final social representation related to a virtual dimension in war tourism has, on the other hand, not been widely covered in literature. Our findings thus show that it is important to note that conceptualizations of warfare have expanded to incorporate the online domain and raise points of discussion between the relationship of war tourism to hybrid warfare, making virtual war tourism a potential tool for this. The modern military idea of hybrid warfare emerged in the 2000s when the number of actors and actions of war expanded physically and virtually (Carment & Belo, 2018). Hybrid warfare increases both the scale and complexity of conflict. As a highly mediatized and social media influence, tourism and war tourism may also involve interests in activities beyond travel and gain a new virtual dimension in addition to voyeurism and traditional volunteering. This leads to

several theoretical and conceptual implications for further research.

Our findings suggest that a broader reality of war tourism as “hybrid war tourism” is emerging, encompassing both physical and virtual representations. These modes go beyond the activities of volunteering and voyeurism to incorporate promotion and misinformation countering potentially. For example, participants in the forum are actively engaged in creating narratives and supporting via virtual means where possible. These are deliberate actions that require effort, which suggests that they are not merely passive consumers or online spectators. Activities, such as sharing, commenting, promoting or down-voting, shape the information environment experienced by others. In this way, participants are shaping perceptions and possibly motivating actions beyond the consumption of media. The definition of hot war tourism, therefore, needs to be expanded to incorporate these hybrid activities; that is, active participation via virtual, as well as physical means.

Through the social representations identified, this study also confirms a relationship between war tourism and combat and non-combat volunteering. This is in line with the assumptions of motivations related to combat and humanitarian-related motives (e.g., Brin, 2006; Yar & Tzanelli, 2019) and ideology (Jung, 2016). Future research needs to understand the relationship between volunteering and travel to war zones.

As a result, future research should also look at the relationship between war tourism and mobilization. Mowat (2022) mentioned that non-volunteering forms of war tourism can potentially lead to mobilization and active participation in combat and non-combat activities. In terms of the virtual community study in this research, several clues on this emerge. Engagement with a forum may be a form of mobilization in itself, providing an opportunity to explore and learn before pursuing more involved physical and virtual activities. This relationship needs to be better understood.

In this case, since Ukraine is supported by most western powers, it is relatively safe for Western non-Russian individuals to participate in online forums without any risk to reputation, future travel, security and without any fear of investigation by the authorities. As a volunteer site, the Reddit forum did not cater for travelers specifically but potential travelers would view the site as part of their information search. In fact, this was true within all of our representations identified. Future research should study how these searches influence travel choices, opportunities and eventual actualization of war tourism.

The active role of communities in representing war tourism and the complex interplay of voyeurism, volunteering and hybrid modalities of particularly hot war tourism also relate to practical logistics. Our findings have shown that community members often seek advice on hot war tourism, such as legal issues. It needs to be mentioned further that travel to a conflict as a volunteer or paid foreign fighter is illegal in many countries (Leduc, 2021). However, in

practice, UK and Australian returning fighters from Ukraine in recent years have not faced prosecution (Blackbourn, 2021). From a tourist viewpoint, it needs to be understood how this often illegal form of travel is facilitated logistically, be it through transport, accommodation and/or tours operators. Research rarely deals with illegal forms of travel and this gap should be bridged by scholars willing to undertake this ethically challenging task in investigating legal issues related to war tourism and the legal risks war tourists are willing to take.

Subsequently, investigating new modalities of war tourism and a broadened perspective on social media’s role on mobilization and creations of representations may facilitate an expansion of research. Past research in war tourism has underlined the importance of solidarity (Dolnicar & McCabe, 2022) and support and memory (Carbone, 2022). The participation of potential travelers in creating these narratives about military activity, in part by representations, should be investigated. This research suggests that even potential war tourists play an active role in representing war tourism, where they do not merely consume media but create representations via interaction, counter potential misinformation and support the mobilization of people and resources. Further research needs to understand how war tourists and different representations “move” within these spaces.

Future studies also need to look at deeper mechanisms of propaganda in these forums, potentially transforming onlookers into active participants in war. The increased involvement of tourists in war activity can bring risk. National governments and other agencies responsible for the safety of online users and citizens at large will need to be aware that these forums do not become a pathway for radicalization and are kept strictly monitored to avoid the encouragement of dangerous travel behavior and associated actions (Carthy et al., 2020). State and security actors may need to understand how war tourists can be “used” for political purposes and active engagement, transforming potential voyeurs into active actors in a war zone.

An additional issue is that online platforms may need to adapt editorial policies to monitor the nature of hybrid warfare activities occurring among their users. Since these environments host users from multiple countries, conflict between users can occur and may influence others. Future research needs to engage in ensuring individual, social, and political safety by understanding the complex and ever-changing world of war tourism, where online and offline engagement and voyeurism interact on increasingly complex levels.

There are also potential future methodological contributions. SRT is agnostic and enables the application of a wide range of methodologies. A significant amount of research in this area has been quantitative. The migration of communication to digital platforms provides opportunities for discovery of representations as well as the nature of participants in the process. The digital data shared via online platforms supports identification of representations, using machine

learning techniques and network analysis applied in previous research. While these approaches can and should be supplemented with inductive or deductive analysis, as is the case in this study, the use of machine learning on text, images, audio or video shared on social media platforms can provide perspectives on representations based on a corpus, not just a small sample of digital data. For platforms in which data is publicly available, such as Twitter and Reddit, this may uncover a wider range of representations than traditional quantitative research. The use of these approaches can also enable the examination of representations as they evolve over time. SRT seeks to identify shared perspectives and the use of digital data may be able to identify the influence exerted by particular stakeholders due to their relational influence on social media. A related stream of research can identify the influence of non-human actors, such as bots and other automated accounts, on development of social representations in these spaces using approaches drawn from social network analysis. Finally, since participants in the forum have identified misinformation and mis (social) representations of war tourism in this specific research, it opens the door for a new stream of research on war tourism in the online realm, particularly related to issues such as (mis)representations, mobilizations, and (mis)information shared.

In conclusion, this paper presents an expanded perspective on war tourism based on the examination of online narratives. It suggests that we need to rethink our current work to include virtual elements that are not bound by geography which, however, can shape perceptions and mobilize resources. As such, the political actions of tourists go beyond demonstrating solidarity via visiting and information sharing, which should be examined by researchers, practitioners and policymakers. Additionally, future research is needed on the voyeuristic aspect of hot war tourism and its relationships to active engagement of mobilization, extending the definition and scope of research even further.


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