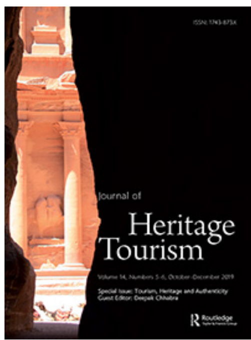

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‘The smell of death and the smell of life’: authenticity, anxiety and perceptions of death at Varanasi’s cremation grounds

Nitasha Sharma[a] and Jillian Rickly[b]

[a]Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen, Groningen, Netherlands; [b]Nottingham University Business School, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK

ABSTRACT
This paper contributes to an understanding of existential authenticity and existential anxiety in tourism studies through an investigation of tourists’ perceptions of death, the Self, and ‘others’ at the Hindu cremation grounds in Varanasi, India. Encounters with death at dark tourism sites serve as reminders of one’s own mortality affecting one’s attitude towards death, perception of self, and even challenging one’s personal values. Existentialists assert that anxiety is a condition of existential authenticity, and therefore moments of the existentially authentic experience are not always pleasurable. This paper argues that confrontation with death, as exemplified by the Aghori rituals and the cremation grounds in Varanasi, offers tourists an opportunity to examine the inevitability that life will end and to engage with this existential predicament and anxiety in an embodied sense, thereby pushing some of them towards life changes in the pursuit of existential authenticity.

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Existential authenticity; existential anxiety; dark tourism; death rituals

Introduction

The concept of authenticity in dark tourism has mostly been discussed from a destination perspective where degrees of authenticity are attributed to shades of ‘darkness’ (see Strange & Kempa, 2003). Among those few studies that go beyond a destination perspective to consider authenticity and visitor experience, Roberts (2018) observes that encounters at in-situ dark tourism sites with multisensory ‘rememberers’, or storytellers, are potentially self-actualizing and enhanced by attitudes of empathy. Indeed, Cohen (2011) contends that tourists may perceive an authentic or ‘self-actualization’ experience during the process of visiting dark tourism destinations. Conversely, however, Bruner (1991) and Galani-Moutafi (2000) posit that tourists’ desire for self-transformation through empathetic encounters with ‘authentic’ cultures is problematized at atrocity and genocide sites that memorialize the consequences of planned obliteration of cultures. Such sites can trigger emotional reactions, anxiety and moral panic (Biran, Liu, Li, & Eichhorn, 2014). Thus, these experiential challenges inspired Heuermann and Chhabbra (2014) to investigate the role of ethics in dark tourism management and marketing, suggesting that crafting an existentially authentic experience for visitors may support behavior associated with ethical consumption (Guignon, 1986; Wang, 1999) instead of voyeuristic or deviant behavior (Guignon, 1986).

Researchers have argued for a broadly experiential approach to dark tourism research via an integrated supply-demand perspective (Biran, Poria, & Oren, 2011). Yet, there is a dearth of studies

CONTACT Nitasha Sharma n.s.sharma@rug.nl, nitashasharma1000@gmail.com

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examining existential authenticity and anxiety at dark tourism sites. Despite the strong experiential nature of dark tourism and the way it relates to identity politics and inspires self-reflection, there is little empirical research that directly examines the association between existential authenticity and perception of death among tourists. Moreover, there are rich theoretical perspectives linking death-related thoughts, anxiety, and existential authenticity that have yet to be applied to the field. Existential authenticity is a particularly useful theoretical construct for understanding the relations of the embodied nature, identity politics, social relations, and being of tourists. Indeed, research suggests that despite its subjectivity, place matters for the experience of existential authenticity (Rickly-Boyd, 2013b), and that tourism can often function as a catalyst for making life changes post-travel in order to enact ideals of existential authenticity in everyday life (Brown, 2013). Further, an existentialist perspective has been enriched by research focused on the role of existential anxiety in tourism motivation and experience (Kirillova, Lehto, & Cai, 2016, 2017; Vidon & Rickly, 2018). Thus, this paper empirically examines some fundamental questions of dark tourism research, such as how gazing at the death of others paves the way for authentic experiences in cross-cultural tourism encounters. Based on primary data collected on tourists' perceptions of death and their motivations to encounter and experience death at the Hindu cremation grounds at Varanasi, India, a strong association is observed between tourists' fear of premature death and concerns for their own life choices related to existential authenticity and anxiety. This suggests existential authenticity as an underlying factor in tourists' motivations concerning dark tourism. Finally, the paper uncovers moments where existential authenticity clashes with personal values creating challenges to touristic experience that furthers existential anxiety.

Death, existential authenticity, and existential anxiety

The Otherness of death, 'the most powerful of all Others' owing to its universality, is 'the defining feature of thanatourism' (Seaton, 2009, p. 75). This universal otherness, according to Seaton (2009), creates an auratic quality at death tourism sites. Aura is inherently related to authenticity, argues Benjamin (2008), as an experiential quality that connects both ritual and tradition to conceptualizations of authenticity. Rickly-Boyd (2012a) extends the notion of aura to debates about authenticity and tourism, asserting that aura evidences the relationality of experiences of authenticity. In other words, authenticity 'can be simultaneously measured, experienced, and felt', as it is 'a register for the participation in a tradition (however mediated), its rituals (however secularized), and an experience of aura which is a result of this participation' (2012a, p. 284).

Research on the experiential aspects of authenticity has garnered considerable attention in the last decade. While Bruner (1991) describes tourists' desire for self-transformation through an encounter with 'authentic' cultures, more recently scholars examine the ways tourists understand authentic experiences and their own Being while on holiday (Belhassen, Caton, & Stewart, 2008; Brown, 2013; Buchmann, Moore, & Fisher, 2010; Kim & Jamal, 2007; Kirillova et al., 2016, 2017; Rickly-Boyd, 2012b, 2013b; Vidon & Rickly, 2018; Wang, 1999; Wassler & Kirillova, 2019). Existential authenticity refers to an experience that involves a sense of self identity activated by the liminality of tourism and informed by both interpersonal (family ties, communitas) and intrapersonal dimensions (bodily feelings, self-making) (Wang, 1999). Thus, Steiner and Reisinger (2006) advocate a Heideggerian existential authenticity perspective to explicate the moments of authentic Being that are fleeting and often spontaneous in tourism experiences. In particular, they assert that moments of existential authenticity are most possible when tourists themselves are in situations where they can focus on their own 'mineness' and 'resoluteness'. Further, Brown (2013) extends Heidegger's concept of *spielraum* and Sartre's notion of good faith to examine the ways tourism experiences can act as a catalyst for making lifestyle changes (see also Maoz, 2006).

Existential anxiety

The notion of anxiety is inseparable from existential authenticity because it arises from the presence of four existential concerns (death, alienation, freedom, and meaninglessness). As a result, anxiety is

fundamental to our existence as humans and has been the focus of existential thought for centuries, from Kierkegaard (1843/1986) to (Sartre, 1966). It arises when an individual's true self or ontological security is compromised and prompts her/him to reclaim the personal value system (Giddens, 1991; Heidegger, 1982), thereby aiding the process of becoming 'self.' Anxiety is the companion of authenticity as it attunes us to both nothingness and possibility (Todres & Galvin, 2010). According to Sartre (1966), coming to terms with the nothingness of life offers the realization that all meaning is made, which has the potential to inspire personal decisions towards authenticity.

In tourism studies, anxiety is discussed in relation to motivation (see Brown, 2013; Canavan, 2017; Kirillova et al., 2016; Shepherd, 2015; Vidon & Rickly, 2018). While Dann (1977) was among the first to note the implications of 'anomie' for touristic motivation, the concept received little attention until the last decade. Indeed, Vidon and Rickly (2018, p. 65) suggest 'alienation and anxiety act as important drivers in tourist motivation, spurring tourists on in their search for authentic experiences.' According to Kirillova et al. (2017) 'prompted by existential anxiety, individuals are forced to confront the truth about the chaotic nature of life and certainty of death.' (p. 13), thus resulting in specific tourism choices. As will be demonstrated, existential anxiety and one's perceptions of death have significant implications for dark tourism motivations and experience.

Being and death

The consciousness of one's death, the death of others, and the mode of existence, which form the core ideas of dark tourism, are thus also central to existential philosophy. Some existential philosophers maintain that the fear of death is simply a misinterpretation of the anxiety that one is not living life in accordance with personal values (Martin, Campbell, & Henry, 2004). Whereas Heidegger (1982) contended that the path to authentic living is the full acknowledgement of death, De Carvalho (2000) and Carstensen, Isaacowitz, and Charles (1999) suggest that a confrontation with death can be a vehicle to authentic becoming as individuals are made more self-aware of their limited time in the world. Martin et al. (2004) assert that when individuals think about their own death, they open up to a more evaluative mode of processing guided by their self-knowledge, and this results in a shift away from the pursuit of culturally derived goals toward the pursuit of personal ones.

According to Heidegger (1982), if we want to understand what it means to be an authentic human being, it is essential that we constantly project our lives onto the horizon of our death, referred to as 'being-towards-death.' The inauthentic Dasein understands the fact of death as an impersonal dying of other people. The phrase 'everybody dies' means 'somebody somewhere dies, but not me, I will die someday, but not now.' This is equivalent to running away from the true meaning of death and from the very essence of existence. Heidegger's conception of being-towards-death is non-relational in nature, suggesting that death cannot be experienced through the death of others, but only through one's self. Thus, facing one's own death is radically different from being concerned with the death of others. For Heidegger, the death of others is secondary to one's own death. One's own death means the end of possibilities, the total disintegration and the end of a person's world. The fear of one's own death comes from the fear of one's extinction as a human being, which therefore leads to death anxiety. However, Heidegger's interpretation of authenticity based on the personal consciousness of death as a precondition of authentic existence is problematic and controversial as it does not accommodate the potential role of the death of others.

Conversely, Levinas' ontological perspective of death offers a useful critique of Heidegger's non-relational death (Budriunaite, 2007). Instead, the death of the other is the essential death. Levinas prioritizes the fear of death of the other over the fear of one's own death. He writes,

> The death signified by the end could not measure the entire significance of death without becoming responsibility for another- by which one becomes oneself in reality: one becomes oneself through this untransferable, undelegatable responsibility. It is for the death of the other that I am responsible to the point of including myself in his death […] I am responsible for the other in that he is mortal. The death of the other: therein lies the first death. (Levinas, 1993, p. 43)

Accordingly, one's own death reveals itself only by coming into contact with the death of the other. He states, 'we encounter death in the face of the other.' This thinking about one's own death through the death of the other is 'the perception of death in the second person' (Jankélévitch, 1977). Death singularizes Dasein. Levinas opposes Heidegger's idea that death is always one's own by virtue of *mineness*; it is not outside one's self. Levinas further asserts that an encounter with death from outside Being is possible. The death of the Other frees me from anxiety, and 'it subjects me to a love as irrefragable as death' (Levinas, 1993, p. 47). Therefore, death is not separable from the relation with the Other. Fear for death is fear for the Other's death rather than my own, as opposed to Heideggerean ontology of death anxiety. According to Levinas, anxiety is not the fear of the finitude of life, but the realization that 'to-have-to-be is also to-have-to die' (Levinas, 1993, p. 47).

Research design

Geographic context

Varanasi, according to Hindu belief, is a holy city in India that attracts scores of both domestic and foreign tourists. Situated on the banks of the Ganga River, it is known as the 'Great Cremation Ground' (Eck, 1983, p. 30), 'Kashi, the luminous,' 'the Ancient Crossing,' or the 'Microcosm of the Universe' (Parry, 1994, p. 11). It is a religious site where life and death co-exist in public space. Although formally labeled as a Hindu pilgrimage destination, the city has several spaces of death. While Varanasi is also popular among tourists for its rich heritage, temples, music and educational institutes, this study focuses specifically on the dark tourism aspects of the city as a means to examine the relationality of perceptions of death to touristic motivations and experience, particularly existential anxiety and authenticity.

This study analyzes tourists' perceptions of two death-related rituals. The first, the Hindu death ritual, broadly involves burning the deceased over a funeral pyre. The second is a death-related ritual practiced by a group of ascetics, known as the *Aghoris*. This small sect of Hindu ascetics are rigid renouncers and worshippers of the Hindu deity, Shiva. Their rituals include performing austerities at the cremation ground, using skulls as food bowls, smearing one's body with ashes from the dead, coprophagy, necrophagy and meditating on top of corpses. For both, the cremation ground forms an integral part of the ritual space and involves a complex negotiation of sacred and profane. Moreover, both rituals spark an interest among international tourists, supported by several privately owned tour companies and operators who offer walking tours for tourists to witness the cremation grounds, popularly referred to as the 'Burning Ghats', and where they can also meet the Aghoris.

Methodology

This study employed a multi-method approach, which analyzed narratives collected through semi structured interviews, questionnaire-based survey and participant observation, as well as secondary sources of data including background information about the Aghoris, information on Hindu society, death rituals and tourism inflow and outflow in Varanasi. The fieldwork was carried out in May-August 2015 and December 2015– March 2016. During this time, two sub-groups were interviewed: the local people (performers) associated with death-related rituals and tourism (the Aghoris, the funerary workers and priests who perform death rituals at the cremation ground in Varanasi, local businessmen, tour operators and travel guides) and international tourists visiting the cremation grounds to witness these rituals.

Informal semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and transcribed into Microsoft Word and Excel for analysis. A survey was also used to apply the *Multidimensional Fear of Death Scale* to the tourists' experiences in Varanasi. Each interviewee also completed a questionnaire. Thus, a convenience sampling technique was used whereby the sampling population was present during field visits at the specific site. A total of 200 tourists were interviewed, out of which 120 questionnaires were considered for analysis based on completion of all the questions in the questionnaire.

Of the 120 survey participants, there were 62 women and 58 men. The respondents were international tourists predominantly from USA (16%), UK (19%), Australia (15%), Canada (9%) and the rest from countries such as the Netherlands, Germany, Argentina, Italy, Russia, Spain, France, Switzerland, Colombia and Turkey.

The *Multidimensional Fear of Death Scale* (MFODS) (Hoelter, 1979) was chosen as the measure of death anxiety. The scale was developed to investigate the forms of emotional reactions and subjective feelings related to fear of death. Unlike most popular measures of death attitudes, this scale is multidimensional, consisting of 42 variables and comprising eight subscales with different fields of fear of death. Fear of death is defined as 'an emotional reaction involving subjective feelings of unpleasantness and concern based on contemplation or anticipation of any of several facets related to death' (Hoelter, 1979, p. 996). The purpose of using the scale is to measure the general level of death anxiety amongst respondents and to provide a broad context when examining dark tourism experiences and notions of mortality. An assessment of death anxiety levels in the context of dark tourism indicates whether a tourist is fearful of death or not. It provides an idea of the source of fear and also indicates how this fear is related to personal, cultural and contextual factors. The findings suggest that tourists' motivations and experiences at Varanasi relate to several dimensions of existential authenticity and anxiety. However, as the sample was comprised of a diverse group of international tourists, finding may not be generalizable to all tourists that visit Varanasi and other dark tourism sites.

Authenticity and anxiety at Varanasi

Several thanatologists argue that death is a reality that Western society commonly tries to avoid (Becker, 1973/1997; Kubler-Ross, 1997; Yalom, 1980). Through this avoidance or denial of the reality of death, life is a false comfort and therefore inauthentic (May, 1977; Yalom, 1980). Thus, authentic living is the ability to live in congruence and in accordance with the realities of life (Suri & Pitchford, 2010). Similarly, the Aghori rituals can be described as exemplars of the acceptance of death as a vehicle of transcendence and transformation of the 'self' since they demonstrate the principle of non-duality – that there is no distinction between life and death (Suri & Pitchford, 2010, p. 132). According to Aghori philosophy, what prevents us from living authentically is the fear of death, and a confrontation with death paves the way for an authentic living (May, 1977). As such, dark tourism offers an avenue for engagement with death and has implications for theorizing existential authenticity and existential anxiety in tourism studies.

Bodily feelings

Based on Casey's (1996) writings, Feld and Basso (1996, p. 9), suggest that 'place is the most fundamental form of embodied experience – the site of a powerful fusion of self, space, and time.' Tourists derive meaning by participating in the site, the activities there and, through this, they understand both themselves and the landscape in different ways. Therefore, the 'lived experience' of an event or site informs its meaning. This includes the psychological motivations woven together with the body acting as a 'living envelope' of all our intentions (Bullington, 2013, p. 29). As such, the interpersonal dimension of existential authenticity involves attention to the body and the senses and emotions of dwelling in place (see Belhassen et al., 2008; Buchmann et al., 2010; Kim & Jamal, 2007; Rickly-Boyd, 2013b).

Tourists' narratives of Varanasi revealed how sensory perceptions play an inseparable role in understanding their experiences. At the cremation grounds, the smoke from the burning wood pyres overtakes every other smell. Most tourists are unable to describe this smell of death, which is a mix of the sandalwood or general wood, clarified butter or 'ghee' (that is used on the dead body), flowers, smoke, ash, incense sticks and that of the human flesh. The common description of the smell was 'engulfing', 'consuming', 'over-powering', and anything but pleasant, yet, also having

a sacred or an authentic character. One tourist described the persistent smell of ashes and the smoke from the cremation grounds as 'overwhelmingly sensual', 'deeply etched in his mind', and that moving away from the cremation ground made him 'understand the difference between the smell of death and the smell of life.' Thus, it is through the body and the body's interaction with Varanasi as place that basic ideas about life and death are affirmed. However, in relation to one's own relationship to and anxiety about death, notions of spirituality, religion, morals and ethics come into play.

Personal values and perceptions of death

Dark tourism, despite its typological, interpretative, political, and moral dilemmas has death – both real and representational – at its core. Thus, dark tourism sites, being emotionally charged spaces, are often referred to as places of symbolic and sacred consumption. However, as tourism spaces, different cultural values and norms interlace as both locals and tourists can be presented with trade-off scenarios. Some values are treated as absolute because they are rooted in individual's moral and ethical principles. As such, these are often non-negotiable and thus are protected from trade-offs with other values (Tanner & Medin, 2004; Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000).

It is observed from previous studies that attempts to protect sacred values from trade-offs against other values, particularly secular values, can be met with strong moral outrage or feelings of emotional distress (Tetlock, 2003). While social and self-imposed regulations contribute to defining and maintaining one's sacred values in moments of trade-offs, there are instances where, through a combination of ritualistic practices or by encountering the Other, an alternate or transformed self is constructed that is willing to trade-off these values. Indeed, the cremation grounds can transform tourists' self-perceptions and lead to a discovery of one's own unrealized perceptions about life and death. This is evidenced by narratives produced from tourists interviewed twice – once after their first encounters with the cremation grounds and then, again, after their second visits.

	After the 1st visit	After the 2nd visit
Tourist 1 (Female, 42, Mexico)	The Ghats was exciting especially the cremation grounds and I am looking forward to meet one of the Aghoris. I have heard so many interesting things about their rituals and this place from my friend.	To be honest, I don't understand what people find 'holy' in here. This is filthy, there is dirt and death everywhere and I didn't find any peace of mind. I have always been fascinated with Hinduism and I have read the Bhagavad Gita too. The Gita has awakened me spiritually but I don't think this place has anything spiritual or sacred about it. This place is dark and does not speak to me. I met an Aghori yesterday and I think what they do is wrong. I am disappointed with this place. I have booked my tickets today and I am leaving tomorrow.
Tourist 2 (Female, 49, USA)	I have been to Tibet and I have seen the sky burial rituals there. I am not affected by the rituals here but I have heard that they are capable of evoking some strong feelings.	Now that I think of it, I think I am impressed by the death rituals here. When my father died, the funeral home used cosmetics to make him look alive and I could barely recognize him. I think this whole process of embalming takes away the sacredness or authenticity of death. Now all I remember of my father is this altered face with make-up on it. I wish I could remember his last appearance as somebody who he actually was. Considering that, I think the Hindu ritual of burning the dead immediately in its natural form without any embalming involved is a better way to go. There is no artificiality involved. I will make sure I tell my kids to cremate me in this manner.

Following her second visit, Tourist 1 experienced a change in perception of the cremation ground and the overall place. While she seemed to be excited after the first visit, the second visit where she met an Aghori was more confrontational. She struggled to trade-off her sacred values regarding the

purity of life and death for the 'dirt and death' she perceived at Varanasi and responded with strong moral outrage when the Aghori death-related rituals challenged her self-perception. On the other hand, Tourist 2 was willing to trade-off her previously held values upon witnessing the death rituals in Varanasi leading to a transformed self with an alternate perception of life and death.

The death rituals provide tourists a reflexive opportunity for self-evaluation and recognition that would not have been generated in their everyday lives. Such moments can be described as 'epiphanies.' Denzin (1984) defines such experiences as interactional moments that leave a mark on individuals' lives and have the potential to create transformational experiences. '[S]uch experiences alter how persons define themselves and their relations with the Other; they alter the fundamental meaning structures in a person's life and act as a catalyst for creating new perceptions of self-identity' (1984, pp. 34–39). Thus, epiphanies and self-discovery moments are often observed in tourism experiences and linked to existential authenticity (Brown, 2013).

Death anxiety and self-identity

According to Wearing, McDonald, and Ankor (2016), the concept of existential authenticity could be used to understand a tourist's shift in consciousness and self-identity through the subjective experience of an epiphany. Further, Ankor and Wearing (2013) identify the elements of freedom, anxiety, oneness/connectedness and the Other as contributing experiences that challenge self-identity. These elements can also be identified in the narratives of tourists at Varanasi. The Aghori lifestyle, their philosophy of breaking social hierarchy, norms and taboos and engagement with the concept of death seem offensive, immoral and even hold little spiritual value to most. Yet, for some, this anxiety and discomfort upon encountering the death-related rituals is transformed into learning, creativity, understanding, and accepting of other ways of life, which connects them to the social, cultural, and physical environment in unique and intimate ways. It is in the experience of anxiety stemming from the decision to place oneself in the unknown that one is able to recognize the isolation of the self (Heidegger, 1982) and, through this existential anxiety, change and grow because such feelings are 'a mode of our conscious existence, one of the ways in which consciousness understands […] its Being-in-the world' (Sartre, 1939, p. 61).

Aghoris exemplify a devotion to the numinous and their monistic or non-dualistic approach to life forms an integral idea of existential authenticity. The word Aghor actually denotes a spiritual stage, or a state of nondiscrimination that is free of hatred, fear and aversion. A person can attain this stage irrespective of any sect or religion to which he/she belongs. It is the foremost mental level of spirituality, and after attaining it a person escapes the cycle of life and death and merges completely into the supreme power that has created the universe. The Aghor philosophy is not specifically bound to Hinduism, but is the state of supreme non-discrimination rooted in non-duality, i.e. there is no distinction between the sacred and the profane or the pure and the impure. Non-duality arises from eternal wisdom inherent in the soul and is the root of liberating knowledge and leading an authentic life. It is knowledge that bestows freedom from the cycle of rebirth. The path of non-discrimination entails becoming indifferent to eating habits, dress, lifestyle, social divisions such as caste and physical appearance. According to the principle of non-duality, everything is but a different manifestation of the same supreme power. Therefore, according to the Aghor tradition, either everything or nothing is sacred. This cognition is the attainment of the Aghora state of consciousness. In the context of tourism in Varanasi, the rawness, forthrightness, and the elements of death and cannibalism in the Aghori rituals adds to the authenticity of the experience for tourists. There is an absence of clearly defined roles and forms of behavior and an opportunity to allow for changes in self-identity by embracing the principle of non-duality. For example, one woman from Canada who adopted the Aghor path 10 years ago said,

> A lot of people have different perceptions of the Aghor initiatory rites. Of course you have to do certain things that might seem filthy to the society, but the power to do so comes from *sadhana* (spiritual practice). Don't

> people eat chicken which is dead or vegetables which are lifeless … everything that we eat is dead, then why differentiate? It is not compulsory to eat the dead but it is a ritual to remind who we are, that everything is equal, from an ant to a dead branch. I don't have anything to show to the world. I live in the shadows and I am comfortable in this. My path might appear dark to the world but I see all the colors here. I have tried being in the light before but this path liberates me.

For the tourists who accept the Aghor lifestyle, death represents a release from the shackles of social institutions and structures. For them, the death-related rituals are the only medium of transcending the world of illusion (Svoboda, 2007). Thus, according to Suri and Pitchford (2010), the corpse upon which the Aghori meditates is a symbol of his own body and necrophagy is a symbol of the transcendence of his lower self and a realization of the greater, all pervading Self. In contrast to people from Western cultures, the Aghoris can be described as exemplars of the acceptance of death as a vehicle of transcendence and transformation of the 'self.' The Aghor philosophy is biased towards individualism and presents a non-conventional approach where the individual can follow an alternate non-dualistic path to salvation, a path where life and death are not separate realities. The freedom of realizing the self's identity with the absolute by embracing the profane through rituals and by transcending social taboos is the realization of non-duality (*advaita*). Thus, in confronting death and the perceived profanity of the Aghoris engagement with death on all scales, provides tourists an opportunity to face not only their fears of death, but also more broadly, their ideals of life, their own lives, and sense of self within their chosen lifestyles. Dark tourism in Varanasi thereby extends arguments about tourism as a catalyst for existential authenticity (Brown, 2013) and evidences the role of existential anxiety in these touristic motivations and experiences (Kirillova et al., 2017; Vidon & Rickly, 2018).

Furthermore, the results of the *Multidimensional Fear of Death Scale* (MFODS) (Hoelter, 1979), as applied in the questionnaire in Varanasi, revealed that these tourists scored high on the subscale *fear of premature death*. In other words, a high fear of death is associated with inability to lead an authentic life and fostered an intention to visit tourism sites related to death. According to Baumeister (1991), the meaning of life can be evaluated in terms of four needs for meaning: purpose (or purposiveness), value, efficacy (control), and self-worth. Since death marks the possibility of disallowing any possibility of undertaking life projects, individuals tend to fear it. However, a confrontation with death in dark tourism makes the individual come to terms with the finitude of life. He further states that death tends to dispel our 'myths of higher meaning' (p. 58) and our awareness of mortality helps to realize that it does not matter if we lived or not. On similar lines, Sartre (1966) also asserted that reflection on death is reflection on the meaninglessness of existence. However, such a nihilistic belief or annihilatory aspect of death is mitigated by meaning-making, or 'imposing meanings on death' (Baumeister, p. 286). This paves the way for 'search of meaning' theories on self-actualization. Neimeyer and Chapman (1980) also provided a positive interpretation of Sartre's thought, suggests conversely that a person who has realized his or her life goals is, to a large extent, less likely to be anxious about death than one whose life projects remain incomplete. Therefore, dark tourism can offer a potentially transformative experience to the tourists by providing an encounter with death and its representation in diverse forms.

Communitas and the death of 'others'

Comparing tourism with pilgrimage, Turner (1973) noted that beyond the normative bonds of home, classlessness ensues and relationships develop based on common humanity, forming what he refers to as *communitas*. He argued that liminality leads to communitas, which is a 'social bond' occurring between those who share a liminal experience. A sense of *communitas* is demonstrated by different groups of tourists in multiple ways with respect to the death-related rituals in Varanasi. Tourists who are interested in the Aghori rituals and spiritual learning can visit the Aghor ashrams or the cremation grounds at the riverbank in pursuit of knowledge, and groups are often seen bonding, interacting, assisting one another, collectively participating in rituals and

at times, even maintaining secrecy about the rituals. Irrespective of cultural, economic, and social differences, there is an ambience of acceptance of others and their beliefs. Further, the Aghor philosophy of practicing non-duality that advocates embracing everything in this universe without any class, boundary, or social identity, is reflective of a *communitas* in itself.

There is a growing conviction that individuals are not concerned about the death of others with whom no racial kinship, no linguistic, religious, or economic interests are shared. This is a point of concern in dark tourism in general, and Varanasi as well, where international tourists encounter the death of people who are racially dissimilar. However, Lingis (1994) in his book, *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common,* writes about the mortality that unites all people. He argues the other shows a cultural coding and the feelings of the other mask a structure of hierarchies, the rites of passage of a culture, the polarization of ideologies (Lingis, 1994, p. 25). He reveals that what concerns us in the other is precisely his or her otherness, which appeals to us and contests us face to face. Indeed, one tourist used this encounter with the death of 'others' to reevaluate his understanding of and relationship to death.

> It was so - normal, in this city. No one was crying, sad or phased by the cremations. I really appreciated this accepting view of death (at least this is how I perceived it) - in America it is NOT taken lightly and people dwell for long periods of time - I can imagine perhaps this is because of different views of life after death in Hindu vs Christian religion? I do not identify as a Christian, but it seems to be that "heaven" is obtainable but the living are disconnected from it. So when someone passes, it is more painful, there is more loss. There is less of a connection on a spiritual level to the dead. (Male, mid 40s, USA)

Lingis' approach, to some extent, explains how the death of 'brown' bodies at the cremation ground in Varanasi is capable of evoking an interest among the 'white' tourists as well as challenging their emotions. To perceive the other in the midst of the equivalence and interchangeability of path, is to see one-self bound to one's own place and tasks (p. 170). He states:

> it is the wall of one's own death that circumscribes the zone of possibilities that are possible for oneself and separates them from those that are for others. Another death circumscribes the expanse of possibilities that are possible for the other. In his deferral of his or her death in relationship to one's own, the other is different. The mortality of the other concerns me. Not only in that it is the sense of his mortality that makes me see him as different, destined for a zone of tasks circumscribed by the death coming singularly for him. Such that, as Heidegger says, the best thing I can do for the other if I care about him is to free him for his tasks and his dying, by resolutely pursuing my own. But the tasks that are my own are projected into the world by his passage to his death. I find the shape of my own destiny in the outline of enterprises that the others traced in the world but did not have the time or the power to realize. (p. 171)

Indeed, as this tourist notes, in the presence of death it is nearly impossible to separate oneself from others. Death evokes a visceral reaction, even for those who are unfamiliar with the deceased.

> It was very strange to see something so intimate being so public, to share the pain of their families, I looked at the elder son of one of the dead's body and he was in so much pain, yet he didn't cry and he released his dad into the elements again, it was very powerful. It makes me feel sad thinking about how family members react when a person is gone. (Female, 38, Australia)

Yet, interestingly, in the entanglements of cultural values and personal views on death and afterlife, the body is palpably present – one's own body and the bodies of others, living and dead. Lingis (1994) posits that reconciling the consciousness of one's mortality and the mortality of the other is dependent on the corporeality of the dead body, the body as the locus of meaning. The fear of the annihilation of another's body is inseparable from the fear of annihilation of my own body. Accordingly, the fear of one's own death may evoke the fear of the death of somebody else. It offers the realization, albeit from the perspective of post-nihilist pragmatism, that after the death of meaning all that remains is the body. Thus, returning to the theme of bodily feelings, discussed above, it is possible to understand the existential weight that comes with tourists' remarks on the persistent smell of ashes and smoke at the cremation grounds that signify 'the difference between the smell of death and the smell of life.'

Conclusion

This paper contributes to an understanding of existential authenticity and existential anxiety in tourism studies through an investigation of tourists' perceptions of death, the Self, and 'others' at the cremation grounds in Varanasi. It also supports arguments of tourism as a catalyst for existential authenticity (Brown, 2013; Maoz, 2006), suggesting that dark tourism is capable of transforming tourists' perceptions about death, engaging tourists' existential anxiety, and leading to an emerging self. Representations of death at dark tourism sites serve as reminders of one's own mortality affecting one's attitude towards death, perception of self, and therefore attitude about lifestyle choices. In particular, this was observed as moments of revelation of hidden perceptions about life and death wherein the notion of freedom and social norms were challenged through face-to-face encounters with the Otherness of death. These encounters produce experiences, rooted in epiphany, where the transformation of self has the potential to take place.

Both Heidegger (1982) and Sartre (1966) posit anxiety as a condition of existential authenticity, suggesting that being in the moment of the existentially authentic experience is not always pleasurable (see also Vidon & Rickly, 2018). For tourists confronted with death and in the presence of Hindu death rituals, particularly Aghori practices, existential anxiety and fear of death was also accompanied by moral outrage by some. This does not imply that the notion of existential authenticity indicates a moral or ethical distinction, which is something even Heidegger denies. The Heideggerean notion of authenticity is an entirely non-evaluative and descriptive mode of Dasein's being where there is no fixed moral structure on how to live our lives, but rather the possibility of moral perspectives emerges from the basis of Dasein's universal ontological structures (White, 2005). Thus, the findings of this research suggest that anxiety serves as a reminder when a perceived sense of self is challenged prompting one to reclaim her/his personal value system (Heidegger, 1982). These findings thereby lend support to the growing body of literature in tourism that recognizes the dialectical of authenticity, alienation (Rickly-Boyd, 2013a) and the anxiety that accompanies the process of realizing 'self' (Brown, 2013; Kirillova et al., 2017; Shepherd, 2015; Vidon & Rickly, 2018; Wassler & Kirillova, 2019).

Finally, although the findings of this study are in partial agreement with Heidegger regarding the prioritization of fear of one's own death over the death of others, there is also a sense of communitas observed among certain tourists with respect to the perception of death of others (Levinas, 1993, p. 47). As supported by Lingis (1994) argument, the two fears can co-exist. Thus, confrontation with death, as exemplified by the Aghori rituals and the cremation grounds in Varanasi, offers tourists an opportunity to examine the inevitability that life will end and to engage with this existential predicament and anxiety in an embodied sense, thereby pushing some of them towards life changes in the pursuit of existential authenticity.

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Notes on contributors

Nitasha Sharma is a Research Fellow at the Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen, Netherlands. Her research broadly examines the multiple and contested representations of South Asia through projects situated in critical tourism studies and global environmental change. She is interested in dark tourism; authenticity in tourist motivation and experiences; morality and ethical issues in tourism; tourist psychology and consumer behavior, rituals and sacred spaces and the role of power relations in tourism encounters within different political, economic and cultural contexts.

Jillian Rickly is an Associate Professor of Tourism Marketing and Management in the Nottingham University Business School at The University of Nottingham. She is a tourism geographer with interests in authenticity/alienation in tourism motivation and experience, the ethics of sustainability, and mobilities and wellbeing. Her research sits, most

broadly, in the areas of geohumanities and mobilities, with more specific interests that weave together environmental perceptions; authenticity and alienation in travel motivation and experience; identity and bio-politics; and performance theories.

ORCID

Jillian Rickly http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2150-3294

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