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# **Motivations, behaviours and tourism practices** in **dark tourism** events: The case of **Heavy Metal festivals**

# **Motivações, comportamentos** e **práticas turísticas** em eventos de ***dark tourism***: O caso dos **festivais de *Heavy Metal***

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Abstract | Heavy Metal festivals as a niche tourism attraction have been developed, and to some extent, its growing popularity is linked to dark tourism. That merits a good amount of investment by destinations. This article intends to explore Heavy Metal festival participants' motivations, behaviours and tourism practices. The methodology comprised semi-structured interviews. The results showed that the main motivations for attending these festivals are music and socialisation. However, the emotional component consists of a vital part for the enjoyment of the experience, as participants seek increasingly authentic and intense sensations. This research provides both a theoretical contribution, by conceptualising Heavy Metal festivals as hybrid dark tourism experiences, and a practical contribution, by offering insights to enhance their appeal and support the diversification of specialised tourism experiences.

Keywords | dark tourism, *Heavy Metal* festivals, touristic experience, Portugal

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Resumo | Os festivais de *Heavy Metal* têm-se assumido, cada vez mais, como um nicho de grande potencial turístico no âmbito do *dark tourism* e que merece uma real aposta por parte dos destinos. Este artigo pretende explorar as motivações, comportamentos e práticas turísticas dos participantes de festivais de *Heavy Metal*. A metodologia utilizada assenta em entrevistas semiestruturadas, sendo que os resultados obtidos evidenciam como motivações centrais para a participação nestes festivais a música e a socialização. Contudo, a componente emocional também surge como imprescindível para o usufruto da experiência, uma vez que os participantes procuram sensações cada vez mais autênticas e intensas. Este estudo contribui, assim, para potenciar a atratividade dos festivais de *Heavy Metal,* tendo em vista a diversificação das experiências turísticas especializadas.

Palavras-chave | dark tourism, festivais de *Heavy Metal*, experiência turística, Portugal

## 1. Introduction

Tourism is an innovative sector in constant development. Over the past decades, tourism practices have become increasingly diversified, seeking to meet the expectations of ever more demanding tourists. The transformation of society and its elements has led to an increase in tourism demand, as well as the pursuit of higher quality, more authentic, and more diverse experiences (Han, 2022). The contemporary tourist experience goes far beyond the mere product or service, incorporating a wide range of sensations, emotions, and experiences, which are seen as essential for tourist satisfaction (Vieira, 2023).

In tourism, innovation seems to be possible through specialised or niche products (Hall & Williams, 2020). One of the niche markets that has gained increasing attention is dark tourism (Joaquim et al., 2019; Kiráľová & Šperková, 2024). Dark tourism is a practice that can be traced historically through many different modes of human travel which involve encounters with, and memorialisation of, death (Carrington, 2014). The attraction to such incidences where the suffering of others is commodified, mediated and transformed into a spectacle has been described by some scholars as dark tourism (Miller et al., 2017). Dark experiences provide tourists with enough freedom to explore a multiplicity of subjects and themes, attractive to specific audiences who value this freedom of consumption as well as the emotions that come from the experience (Stone, 2006). The consumption of dark themed

experiences is increasing, and people are more and more attracted to the morbid and the macabre (Korstanje, 2016). As such, since the 'tourist experience' becomes the most important aspect of dark tourism, it is very hard to classify the different subject experiences in an all-encompassing model (Korstanje, 2020).

According to Stone (2006), research on supply can only be conducted if tourist behaviours and motivations are considered. Furthermore, studies on these topics are still limited, especially regarding motivations for specific experiences and empirical studies overall (Iliev, 2021; Santos, 2020), although an increasing academic interest in this topic can be observed (Assylkhanova et al., 2024; Iliev, 2021; Kiráľová & Šperková, 2024). The concept of dark tourism has expanded and so has the range of motivations and practices linked to it. This lack of research is also observed in Heavy Metal, as most existing studies focus on the musical genre itself and its characteristics, giving little attention to related events, participants, and artists (Campos, 2015). To understand the phenomenon of dark tourism, it is crucial to analyse tourist motivations, as they can vary significantly depending on the context of the experience and from one individual to another (Stone, 2006).

Kruger and Saayman (2012) further explain that there is a lack of studies on the influence of musical genres on the behaviour and characteristics of participants in live music concerts and festivals, which is essential for understanding different participant segments and how to attract these niches by developing specialised tourist experiences focused on different groups and their particularities. Viegas (2022) adds that, in the national context, it would be important to focus on studying Heavy Metal festivals to understand their impact as a social and touristic phenomenon. Additionally, more studies focus on supply rather than demand and its motivations, which is also one of the reasons for the development of this investigation.

According to Getz (2010), the latest studies on festivals focus on themes such as their role in identity-building, their cultural, social, and touristic impacts, and festival experience's benefits. However, these studies generally do not focus on specific niches, addressing music festivals in a broad manner. Therefore, it is necessary to specialise in these studies to boost certain niches, contributing to the development of strategies to attract specific tourists to specific experiences. Honkanen and Luonila (2021) suggest that future studies on music festivals should focus on certain musical genres, particularly Heavy Metal, due to its potential as a tourism product and the unique characteristics of its participants. The artists themselves are essential to the festival experience, directly influencing the audience and their behaviours,

guiding their emotions through performances (Berkers & Michael, 2017). These festivals can be explored as authentic dark tourism experiences, as they sometimes include symbolic representations and simulations related to death, fear, suffering, or the macabre (Podoshen et al., 2018).

As far as we know, the motivations and behaviour of tourists participating in Heavy Metal festivals remain unclear. Given the variety of tourism experiences that can be consumed within the context of dark tourism and Portugal's potential to develop these, this article focuses on studying Heavy Metal festivals as dark experiences, aiming to explore and understand the motivations and behaviours of these festivals' participants, as well as their tourism practices, having in mind the local development.

This study contributes to the literature by providing both theoretical and practical advancements. From a theoretical perspective, it conceptualises Heavy Metal festivals as hybrid dark tourism experiences, integrating elements of entertainment, subcultural identity, and dark-themed symbolism within a single analytical framework. From a practical perspective, it offers insights into participants' motivations, behaviours, and tourism practices, contributing to the enhancement of these events' appeal and supporting the diversification and development of specialised tourism experiences.

## *2.* Heavy Metal festivals as Dark Tourism products

### 2.1. The relationship between Heavy Metal festivals and Dark Tourism

The concept of dark tourism is complex (Stone, 2013). The dark tourism experience is highly diverse, both in terms of motivations and practices (Stone, 2006). In fact, there is no universally recognised definition for the term dark tourism (Andreassen, 2021). One of the most common definitions in the literature was presented by Stone (2006, p. 146): "the act of travel to sites associated with death, suffering and the seemingly macabre," which may range from sites of murders and/or mass deaths, battlefields, cemeteries, tombs, churches, to houses where public figures died, among others (Kang et al., 2012). Various terms associated with dark tourism generally point to negative connotations. However, existing studies indicate that the consumption of experiences viewed as sinister or macabre is, in fact, associated with fun and entertainment (Belo & Gustavo, 2023). In addition, some studies even claim that negative dark tourism experiences, i.e., linked to negative emotions and events, can even contribute in a positive way for tourists' well-being and self-discovery (Zhuo et al., 2024).

The appeal of dark tourism is related, among other factors, to the multiplicity of feelings and emotions it evokes, such as excitement, fear, or sadness, which can be experienced almost simultaneously during these experiences, often connected to real or simulated events. Developing innovative and attractive products within the scope of dark tourism should aim to create multisensory experiences that actively engage consumers, helping them feel fully integrated into the tourism experience (Assylkhanova et al., 2024; Han, 2022; Wyatt et al., 2023). Tourists seeking these types of attractions tend to place greater importance on sensations than conventional tourists (Han, 2022). Accordingly, the dark tourist looks for subjective and authentic experiences (Joaquim et al., 2019). The pursuit of sensations such as fear, contact with death, suffering, and others brings individuals closer to these themes, contributing to their social normalisation. Thus, there is an increasing probability that dark tourism will become more mainstream in the future, attracting an ever-growing audience.

Regarding the available dark tourism supply, it is also possible to affirm that there is an increasing diversity (Stone, 2006; Wyatt et al., 2023), particularly concerning the attractions, products, services and experiences (Santos, 2020) in which the events are included. Within dark tourism's scope, for an event to be successful, it must have the ability to become memorable, only then can it repeatedly attract participants (Ashworth, 2008).

It is possible to study Heavy Metal festivals under the scope of dark tourism, as these events can be seen as *Lightest* dark tourism attractions (Stone, 2006). These festivals are entertainment experiences, involving socialisation in a simulated scenario. The performances grow strong emotions in the festival's participants, who often travel to attend the events and contribute to the local tourism development. Some festivals, especially Black Metal festivals, include a wide range of macabre scenarios, even related to death. This is more common in Norway, where some destinations are preferred by the so called *blackpackers*, who are dark tourists searching for specific experiences related to Black Metal rituals and events (Podoshen et al., 2015).

### 2.2. Motivations to participate in Heavy Metal festivals

Theorising dark tourism seems to be a complex task to perform (Korstanje, 2020). The supply's plurality and subjectivity require a particularised analysis, making it impossible to generalise the motivations associated with each type of dark tourism (Belo & Gustavo, 2024). Thus, motivations for engaging in dark tourism can vary greatly, depending on the type of

attraction and its respective intensity (Stone, 2006). Currently, a wide range of motivations can be identified, and often multiple motivations are associated with the same attraction, differing from tourist to tourist (Andreassen, 2021). Carrigan (2014) state that academic literature in this area remains eclectic and theoretically fragile and, consequently, the understanding of the phenomenon of dark tourism remains limited, as much of the initial work in dark tourism studies has been shaped by a sociological sensibility that tends to subdue cultural or anthropological difference. Miller et al. (2017) even claim that some forms of dark tourism, linked to the concept of phoenix tourism, can be seen as powerful tools for regional and destination development through tourism. The motivations in dark tourism can vary in intensity, once dark tourism attractions also represent a wide range of typologies and can be categorised according to different levels of intensity. From direct contact with dead, to pure entertainment, dark tourism motivations are countless and should be linked to specific experiences within the dark tourism niche (Iliev, 2021). According to Korstanje (2020)'s research, the tourist's experience might be the only relevant source of information to explain why dark tourism experiences' consumption is increasing. Therefore, there is no common motivation shared by all dark tourists; the emotions experienced during these encounters can also vary significantly, ranging from negative to positive (Cunha, 2022; Belo & Gustavo, 2023).

Music festivals in the context of dark tourism have unique characteristics, making the study of their motivations particularly relevant. Existing literature has identified several motivations to explain why people attend Heavy Metal festivals. One fundamental motivation is the musical characteristics, which serve as a primary condition for participation (André, 2017; Viegas, 2022). The pursuit of music is linked to an interest in experiencing performances by multiple bands of the same genre on the same day, seeing favourite artists, and discovering new ones (Bilimava, 2014).

Another essential motivation for attending Heavy Metal festivals is the intensity of emotions felt by the participants (Viegas, 2022). Emotions tend to be heightened at Heavy Metal festivals, where performances often reference death and violent themes, incorporating striking visual elements. These events allow participants to channel their most intense emotions through music (Yan et al., 2017). Although Heavy Metal's characteristics and sounds might suggest an association with violence, noise, and negative emotions, exposure to this musical genre can actually produce positive psychological effects. Participants often report feelings of

joy, empowerment, or peace during their exposure to this music genre (Podoshen et al., 2018; Powell et al., 2022). As noted by Olsen et al. (2022, p. 3), "[…] fans of heavy metal music with aggressive themes rarely experience anger or display aggression towards others after listening to this music but instead often report positive experiences of empowerment, joy, peacefulness, wonder, and social connectedness." Olsen et al. (2022) further report that there is no link between feelings of anger and the musical style. In fact, many fans interviewed in these studies stated that they felt calmer when listening to extreme music, describing positive emotions during the activity. Similarly, Viegas (2022, p. 19) confirmed the channeling of negative emotions through music, highlighting testimonies that emphasise feelings of "strength, empowerment, confidence, and self-esteem."

Socialisation, tied to a sense of belonging, is another significant motivation in this context (Viegas, 2022). Participants value spending time with friends, meeting and interacting with others who share similar musical tastes, and feeling part of the festival environment (Bilimava, 2014). These festivals often foster the creation or strengthening of a unique community (André, 2017). Attendees of such events frequently describe an overall atmosphere of friendship (Viegas, 2022). Key indicators of this sense of belonging include clothing styles, photographs taken with the festival's scenic elements, creative practices, and the relationships established among participants (Golz, 2022). Viegas (2022) notes that Heavy Metal fans often feel discriminated against and judged, particularly because of their clothing style. As a result, this sense of belonging to a community becomes especially significant within the Heavy Metal subculture.

Another motivation relates to the feeling of freedom, particularly regarding self-expression (André, 2017). Participation in these festivals is driven by the desire to undergo a personally meaningful experience (Kang et al., 2012). By attending a Heavy Metal festival, participants can embody a persona with a heightened sense of freedom, which is further amplified by the disregard for certain social norms of everyday life (Golz, 2022).

The feeling of escape is another key motivation, particularly in the search for a break from routine and a distraction from everyday problems (Golz, 2022). Finally, travel itself emerges as a significant factor in the motivations for attending Heavy Metal festivals. The journey to participate in a festival out of one's usual place of residence is often accompanied by an entire tourism experience (Bilimava, 2014).

With this in mind, it is possible to conclude that Heavy Metal festivals can be studied as dark tourism events, as an immersive dark tourism experience, like Dark Immersive Theatre Experiences, for instance (Belo & Gustavo, 2024), haunted mansions or Halloween celebrations. These events can be categorised as Dark Fun Factories, as they are created for entertainment purposes while containing macabre and obscure elements (Stone, 2006).

### 2.3. Heavy metal festival participants' behaviours

In terms of the behaviours of Heavy Metal festival participants, live concerts are events capable of stimulating intense emotions. Heavy metal concerts and festivals can lead audiences to a state of euphoria and ecstasy (André, 2017). These concerts can be described as a symbiosis between artists and audiences, embodying a subculture with its own values, characteristics, and language. During the performances, beyond the music and lyrics, the musicians' stage presence and theatrical displays play a crucial role. These are combined with stage aesthetics and elements, often associated with fearsome imagery. While certain behaviours exhibited by fans during concerts - such as mosh pits or walls of death - might appear violent, they are, in fact, symbols of unity, community, and cohesion within the subculture. These actions serve as effective rituals for emotional expression (Viegas, 2022). Olson et al. (2022) also found that Heavy Metal consumption is not linked to psychological issues or deviant behaviours. For instance, while illicit substance use may occur, it is lower when compared to other musical genres, such as punk or techno.

At Heavy Metal festivals, performances often include theatrical elements and representations reminiscent of authentic rituals (André, 2017). Podoshen et al. (2015) describe more extreme experiences, such as the use of blood, animal carcasses, and dark stage settings. These performances are compared to cult-like rituals, described as immersive experiences that transport the audience to another dimension. For example, Norway's Inferno Festival is likened to a dystopian ritual. Participants report that the festival challenges attendees to celebrate the macabre and death, providing an opportunity to reflect on the society they live in and on freedom of expression. These dark representations, combined with distorted music, participant appearances, and behaviours such as mosh pits and headbanging (Yan et al., 2017), contribute to the unique atmosphere. Some bands make concerted efforts to transform their performances into true death rituals, incorporating decaying animal parts, blood, and other elements, which are sometimes thrown into the audience. This creates a shared

ceremonial experience between the band and the crowd, surrounding participants with a macabre and sombre atmosphere capable of evoking powerful emotions (Podoshen, 2013).

Although certain behaviours, such as mosh pits, may convey an image of violence during performances (Podoshen et al., 2018), they are characterised by coordinated and controlled pushing and shoving. While this behaviour may appear violent, it is, in fact, both controlled and voluntary (Viegas, 2022). Often, participants struggle to articulate why they enjoy engaging in mosh pits, yet they emphasise the existence of rules of mutual respect and assistance. They view the activity as a way to channel and express more intense emotions (Bilimava, 2014).

This musical genre is often associated with aesthetic elements, as "skulls, monsters, and horror scenes, the illustrations on album covers and, consequently, the attire of headbangers often reference the devil, with inverted crosses and pentagrams" (Viegas, 2022, p. 135). However, this imagery is juxtaposed with a civilised, peaceful, and respectful environment (Honkanen & Luonila, 2021). Reports of disturbances are minimal, leading local communities to become increasingly open to hosting these festivals in their areas. The behaviour of metalheads is frequently described by residents as friendly, calm, and respectful (Podoshen, 2013).

### 2.4. Heavy metal festivals as tourism product and their benefits for local development

Events like Heavy Metal festivals stimulate a wide range of businesses, such as transportation, accommodation, food and beverage, and local commerce (Kruger & Saayman, 2012), by attracting tourists from other regions and countries (Moreno, 2024). Many Heavy Metal festivals, even large-scale ones, take place in remote areas where, at other times of the year, there is little to no flow of people or significant activities. As a result, these events serve as valuable tools for local tourism promotion (Simão, 2014). Heavy metal festivals positively contribute to the culture, tourism, and economic development of countries that invest in this niche, such as Finland, where Heavy Metal plays an important role in the country's international image (Gautam, 2020). This investment is not only based on the organisation, promotion, and marketing of the event itself, but also on the development of logistical infrastructures, such as accommodation and transportation, which enhance the festival's

potential (Bohn & Bernardi, 2022). Of course, nowadays, social media and digital promotion overall are crucial to ensure these festivals' growth (Moreno, 2024).

Heavy metal festivals attract tourists from all over the world. According to the Concerts-Metal website (n.d.), in 2023, at least 757 Heavy Metal festivals were held globally, with 89.7% of them taking place in Europe. Many of these festivals have been held for several years, or even decades, and several are large-scale events (Bilimava, 2014). This highlights the growing demand and the loyalty of the audience to the genre and its festivals. In a study conducted by Gautam (2020) on this phenomenon in Finland, the results showed that 28% of participants travel more than once a year to attend a Heavy Metal event, 32% travel annually, and 22% travel every two to three years. Additionally, 62% of participants reported taking advantage of their trip to engage in cultural and/or nature tourism activities, and 72% choose to stay in hotels or hostels. In Germany, a study by Bohn and Bernardi (2022) revealed the strong involvement of the local community in the preparation of Wacken Open Air festival, with residents decorating their homes and restaurants according to the festival's theme and warmly welcoming participants.

It is also increasingly common to see travel agencies and tour operators focusing on creating themed tours for Heavy Metal fans (e.g., Argon Events, London Rock Tours, Life's Metal Tours), as well as new tourist products specifically focused on this niche (e.g., Full Metal Holiday). Some regional tourism organisations (e.g., Visit Oslo) have also developed tourism supply in this area, such as providing tourist packages centered around the connection between blackpackers and Viking mythology.

In Portugal, the first Heavy Metal bands likely emerged in the late 1960s. However, it was during the 1970s, following the April 25th Revolution, that Rock and other forms of heavy music began to proliferate throughout the country. From the 1980s onward, the movement gained momentum and started developing a visual identity aligned with the style. In 1984, Portugal saw its first Heavy Metal festival, the Santo António dos Cavaleiros Heavy Metal Festival, and two years later, the Metal Stage was born in Amadora. By the end of the decade, over 60 heavy music bands had emerged, fostering the creation of a strong identity that led to the formation of a subculture. The first international Heavy Metal concert in the country took place in 1986 at Estádio da Luz. From the 1990s onward, the genre expanded significantly, with the organisation of various events such as Ilha do Ermal Festival, Penaguião Open Air, Say Yes to Life Festival, Mangualde Hard Metal Fest, and SWR Barroselas Metalfest (Dico,

2013). Today, the number of Heavy Metal concerts and festivals in Portugal is extensive, with over 300 Portuguese bands associated with the genre (Concerts-Metal, n.d.). However, it is estimated that only 80 to 90 of these bands remain active (Encyclopaedia Metallum, n.d.), alongside dozens of active festivals (Metal Imperium, 2023).

Most Heavy Metal events in Portugal are supported by local municipalities. Notable examples include Vilar de Mouros Festival, which, although not exclusively Heavy Metal, attracted around 70,000 participants in 2023 (Lusa, 2023a); SonicBlast Festival, which drew fans from various countries, including non-European nations such as Brazil, the United States, and Australia; and Vagos Metal Fest, which gathered approximately 20,000 attendees in 2022 (Lusa, 2023b), highlighting their significance to the communities where they are held. Amplifest, for instance, is also promoted by Turismo de Portugal (Amplifest, 2023). Other festivals incorporate a charitable aspect, such as Oeste Underground Fest, which supports Malveira volunteer firefighters (Dico, 2017), or Rock in Rio Febras, which profits benefit the local day center (Rock Rio Febras, n.d.).

A study conducted by Oliveira (2015) on Laurus Nobilis Festival, in Portugal, concluded that 30.3% of respondents chose local accommodations during their stay to attend the festival, while only 9.1% opted for hotels. According to the study, the event attracted 8,622 participants, generating direct benefits for the region estimated at around €120,000. The food and beverage services sector, along with the transport sector, were the main economic beneficiaries of the event. Accommodation providers reported reaching full capacity during the festival days, a rarity during other times of the year. Similarly, restaurants and bars experienced a significantly above average number of customers, with some reporting a tenfold increase in meals served compared to typical periods.

Another study conducted by Coelho (2015), which focused on SWR Barroselas Metalfest, suggests that the local population doubles during the event days, despite it taking place in April—unlike approximately 70% of Portuguese festivals, which are held during the summer season (Caetano, 2022). This contributes to mitigating seasonality in the region. In 2014, visitor spending, excluding ticket sales, resulted in a direct economic impact of over €51,000 in the region. The sales impact, driven by the tourism sector's multiplier effect, exceeded €87,000. The event not only energises the region during its duration—creating nearly 100 jobs—but also generates a significant volume of revenue, incomparable to other times of the year.

## 3. Methodology

This article aims to explore the motivations, behaviours, and tourism practices of Heavy Metal festival participants. To achieve this, it employs a qualitative methodology based on semi-structured interviews with individuals who have travelled outside their usual place of residence to attend a Heavy Metal festival. Interviews are considered the most suitable method for assessing the motivations, emotions, feelings, and experiences of participants - key variables in this research - as they allow for greater freedom in responses and the exploration of deeper, more personal topics (McGehee, 2012). This method excels not only in describing phenomena but also in uncovering their underlying reasons and delving deeper into them, addressing questions such as "why?" or "how?" (Bryman, 2012).

The snowball technique was used to recruit participants, starting with a small group of individuals who then mentioned others meeting the desired criteria (Bryman, 2012). This process was repeated until information saturation was reached. The interviews were conducted during June and July 2023, averaging 44 minutes in length, with durations ranging from 26 to 92 minutes. All interviews were fully transcribed and subsequently analysed. Initially, excerpts were categorised according to the study's themes using a color-coding system to facilitate result analysis. After completing this process for all interviews, they were reread and recategorised to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the results.

Regarding the interview structure, the first and second questions focus on participants' motivations, aiming to assess their reasons for attending Heavy Metal festivals and how these motivations relate to the emotions experienced during the events (Andersen et al., 2020; Berkers & Michael, 2017; Cunha, 2022; Kang et al., 2012; Podoshen et al., 2018; Powell et al., 2022; Viegas, 2022). The third, fourth, and fifth questions address participant behaviour, exploring their perceptions of the event environment and audience behaviours, whether these festivals offer greater freedom for self-expression, and how the bands influence audience behaviour (Podoshen et al., 2018; Barrière & Finkel, 2022; Golz, 2022; Powell et al., 2022). Finally, the sixth and seventh questions seek to understand which tourism products and services participants consume during their festival experiences (Stone, 2006; Yan et al., 2017; Santos, 2020; Cunha, 2022).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Participants' profile

This study considered a total of 15 interviewees for analysis, seven females and eight males, with an age range between 20 and 79 years old, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Sociodemographic profile of the study participants**

| ID | AGE GROUP |
|---|---|
| F1 | 50-59 |
| F2 | 20-29 |
| M1 | 20-29 |
| M2 | 20-29 |
| F3 | 50-59 |
| M3 | 50-59 |
| M4 | 70-79 |
| M5 | 50-59 |
| M6 | 30-39 |
| F4 | 40-49 |
| M7 | 50-59 |
| M8 | 20-29 |
| F5 | 50-59 |
| F6 | 30-39 |
| F7 | 20-29 |

Source: Authors' Elaboration

### 4.2. Motivations

One of the main objectives of this article was to assess the motivations for participating in Heavy Metal festivals. The results suggest that the primary motivation is related to the music, with the festival's lineup being a key factor in the decision-making process. Interviewee F2 admits that, despite attending Vagos Open Air every year, she did not attend the previous year due to not liking the bands announced, breaking a long-standing tradition. In this sense, greater importance is placed on the bands performing at the festival, as well as the opportunity to see multiple bands, as noted by interviewee M8:

> Of course, the number of bands and stages matter, even though you can't see all of them, but it's part of it, managing to see the bands you want to see. For me, having the opportunity to see a good number of bands (…) is fantastic.

In this context, participant M3 refers to the difference between two types of festivalgoers: those who purchase blind tickets, meaning they buy tickets without knowing which bands will perform, and those who wait until the lineup is complete before making their purchase decision. In the case of blind tickets, interviewee F7 mentions that sometimes the subgenres are even more important than knowing the specific bands: "(...) what matters is not just the bands, it's really the music (...)," indicating a willingness among participants to discover new bands within the subgenres they enjoy most. At the same time, given the growing number of Heavy Metal festivals in Portugal, participants are more thoughtful about which festivals they prefer to attend, as highlighted by participant M3, suggesting that the lineup can be a distinguishing factor in these cases.

Another widely mentioned motivation is socialisation. Participants seek not only to socialise with friends but also with the people they meet at the festival itself. Various attitudes toward socialisation are evident, ranging from participants who don't attend events without company, like participants M3 and M8, to those who prefer to go alone to fully experience the music, like interviewee M5: "I don’t like having company because it distracts me." For interviewee F6, socialisation is very important, as she feels that these festivals are excellent opportunities to meet people and make new friends, especially considering that, outside of these events, she sees herself as an introverted person and feels more comfortable doing so at festivals. Participant M1 emphasises this viewpoint, revealing that being in an environment where most people share similar tastes and common interests, something not often found outside festival and concert settings, is a key factor.

The atmosphere of these events is also particularly relevant for the socialisation of the interviewees, especially regarding the sense of belonging and community creation, close contact with the bands, freedom for self-expression, and the camping experience. Participant M1 recalls the first time he went to a festival alone: “(...) I felt like I was in my place, surrounded by people who might not think the same way I do, but at least they listened to the same music (...),” feeling like belonging to the event. Several interviewees mentioned that the intensity of the emotions experienced varies depending on the bands performing, with music

being the main motivation for attending Heavy Metal festivals, and this intensity can depend on proximity to the artists. The closer to the stage one is, the more intensely the show is experienced. Participant M5 adds that he is moved by the art and the music itself. The harmony between the audience during concerts, coming together to sing the same songs, reinforces the importance of the sense of community and music as a common and unifying element for those participating in these festivals. Interviewee F7 clearly expresses this idea, saying, “It gives me pleasure to look around and see the crowd excited (...) I feel it's contagious, I’m happy to see others enjoying themselves (...).”.

Different motivational factors related to emotional matters were mentioned. The feeling of excitement was the most reported by the interviewees, as it is a more common emotion from various perspectives. For example, some interviewees admit to becoming emotional and crying during concerts due to the intensity of the emotions experienced. Some of the expressions used point to a feeling of entering a different reality, almost like another dimension, with expressions such as "delirium," "monstrous," "explosive," "controlled aggression," and "ecstasy." Interviewee F3 compares Wacken Open Air festival to pilgrimages to Fátima: "(...) it's a similar experience in terms of emotional intensity”.

Regarding joy, it is sometimes felt in its fullest form, as reported by interviewee M2, who states that he feels immersed in deep and constant happiness throughout the entire experience, even though some of the music may evoke negative emotions. In addition, participant F7 says, “(...) this [Heavy Metal festivals] really contributes to my happiness and well-being”.

As for freedom, several interviewees mentioned feeling freer to dress as they like and to be themselves at festivals, as explained by interviewee M5: “(...) people wear what they wish they could wear every day, they take on the persona they would like to be.” On the other hand, interviewee F2 refers to Heavy Metal festivals as an opportunity to express oneself without prejudice: “(...) in real life, we probably have more social conventions and certain measures we impose on ourselves, and we end up holding back more, but when we get there, it’s total freedom.”.

Still within the context of freedom, several interviewees mentioned the channeling of negative emotions as a striking aspect. Interviewee M1 states,

> (...) from a certain age, I started looking for heavier, more intense things, with a certain aggression, but controlled, which allowed me to expel some of the more intense and aggressive feelings inside me.

They add that at festivals, "(...) it's always a very positive experience, always joyful, in a good mood, and it's great for distracting ourselves (...) it's almost like a zen moment, even if the music isn't." Interviewee F3 expands on this idea, saying, "(...) it's as if everything bad has passed, and all the negative things are behind me (...) a huge level of joy, but at the same time, a huge sense of peace (...)." Participant F6 confesses feeling "(...) a sense of relief, as if I had a huge weight on my shoulders in daily life, like carrying the world (...)," and adds that, when at the events, in addition to the relief, she feels happiness.

More than half of the participants in this study identify calmness as a prevailing feeling during Heavy Metal festivals. Participant F1 mentions feeling always comfortable at festivals, with one of the reasons for these feelings being the fact that it is an environment free of judgment.

Finally, self-expression was widely mentioned as one of the key characteristics of the Heavy Metal festival environment, with interviewees considering it essential for creating a judgment-free atmosphere.

### 4.3. Behaviours

The participants in this study described the audience at Heavy Metal festivals as respectful, friendly, sociable, polite, diverse, and kind, and the environment as safe, calm, peaceful, family-friendly, festive, convivial, clean, and civilised. Above all, according to the participants, there is a spirit of friendship, harmony, and sharing. Interviewee M2 describes Wacken Open Air as "(...) four days of hanging out with your eighty thousand best friends".

The presence of respect among participants was widely mentioned. For interviewee M2, the Heavy Metal audience is highly respectful because the metal community frequently attends concerts and festivals, making them more accustomed to this type of environment and better able to manage their emotions and behaviour. Interviewee M8 reinforces this perspective, stating that "it's something you don't find at festivals of other genres… People are always friendly, even in the mosh pit." The results also suggest a strong spirit of mutual support and camaraderie among participants. For example, participant F7 shared that people have made way for her to reach the front of the stage to see one of her favourite bands. In mosh pits, if someone falls, they are immediately helped up by other participants.

In the context of festivals associated with more extreme subgenres, participants reported observing more aggressive behaviour. However, as interviewee F7 explains: “(...) it’s not necessarily about hurting others, it’s about releasing energy.” Participant M1 agrees with this perspective: “(...) I’m pushing and shoving, but it’s all in a friendly way, without intending to hurt anyone. It’s an interesting sense of freedom that helps me release some energy.” This sense of freedom is also used by participant F2 to justify certain behaviours: “(...) maybe that’s why some people engage in more extreme behaviours there, because they see it as a total expression of freedom and end up doing more extreme things”.

Some Heavy Metal bands that play more extreme musical styles incorporate animal parts and blood into their performances. Interviewees M1 and F5 have witnessed such stage acts and felt the need to keep their distance. On the other hand, interviewee F7 shared that she allowed the blood to hit her, feeling immersed in the atmosphere, in an environment of ritual that does not repress or hide emotions and feelings.

Another element mentioned by some participants was alcohol, which was seen as a factor in reducing inhibitions but not leading to significant excesses or violence. Alcohol consumption is common at these events, helping to intensify emotions, as explained by participant F7.

It is also important to highlight the role of bands in influencing audience behaviour. Participant M1 suggests that more extreme bands tend to be more serious and colder, leading the audience to focus more on the stage, whereas more melodic bands are generally more empathetic and create a friendlier connection with the crowd. Most participants stated that the interaction between the band and the audience is very important, with particular emphasis on the vocalist, though interactions with other band members and among the band itself also influence the experience. Off-stage interaction, in a more intimate setting, is also relevant for many interviewees. However, a considerable number of participants value the band's stage presence and dedication to their performance more than direct interaction with the audience. Several interviewees mentioned that the emotions conveyed by the band are crucial to the audience’s enjoyment of the concert and that performances can significantly influence how the audience perceives the band.

### 4.4. Tourism Practices

In order to understand the tourism practices of participants in Heavy Metal festivals, there is a diversity of tourism services and products consumed. The participants in this study have a significant track record in this area. Interviewees F1 and F3 say they have travelled to Germany, Slovenia, Switzerland and Italy. Participant F3 has also taken a trip to Spain. Interviewee M4 has travelled to the United States of America and Spain. Participant M7 shares that he has travelled 200 kilometres to fulfil his wish to see two specific bands live at a Heavy Metal festival, highlighting the relevance of the line-up. Participant F5 has seen around ten concerts by her favourite band, in different countries. Interviewee F4 has chosen to attend festivals in Portugal.

As interviewee M8 says, "(...) there are two experiences: there is the festival experience and then the normal tourist experience during the day, doing normal tourist things". Interviewee F3 compares trips to festivals to "mini vacations". Interviewees M7, M8 and F5 shared that they plan their trips to the festival they're going to, in advance, in line with this idea of a mini vacation.

Although camping is an important element for many of the interviewees, the service most used by the participants in this study was accommodation. Most of the participants stayed in hotels close to the festival, mainly because of comfort. However, some participants preferred to stay in hostels or guesthouses, and others opted to rent private accommodation.

In terms of transportation, the majority prefer to use public transport, namely the bus or train. Some participants opted to hire a car for transportation to the venue and during the days of the festival. Others preferred the cab service. Interviewee F7 was the only participant to indicate renting a bicycle as a transportation option.

Life in the towns where the festivals are held is extremely dynamic during the days of the events. Participant M6 has witnessed full local cafés and restaurants during festival days. Interviewee M4 adds that accommodation and some products often sell out: "it's hard to get a room and sometimes in the cafés there's no beer left (...)". Interviewee F7 says that local cafés change their atmosphere to match the festival's theme, and that there are tourist activities promoted by the event. Participant M1 agrees that local commerce is boosted thanks to the festival. In the context of the importance of festivals for business, interviewee F2 adds that in Spain, during Resurrection Fest, there are spaces that display the seal: "(...) space certified by the festival (...)", as a way of attracting consumers. Wacken, which "(...) is nothing more than

a rural village with little traffic all year round (...),” becomes a busy and dynamic center, as interviewee F1 says,

> “[During the festival days], homes are all decorated with Wacken Open Air’s flags, people set tables in their garden, there are portable WC’s for those who get to the festival on foot (…). The whole village breathes Wacken Open Air’s essence during those days.”

In terms of complementary products, many of the interviewees mentioned enjoying restaurant services during their experience, with some even looking for gastronomic experiences and products from local and regional cuisine, as well as local craft beer, as participant F7 reports. Some of the participants are looking for tourist activities in the field of history and culture, while others are looking for nature tourism activities. Local commerce is also sought after, as well as sightseeing activities.

Interviewee M3 believes that the niche of Heavy Metal festivals deserves a better investment in terms of tourism in our country: “(...) I think it can be a very attractive niche market, metal (...) there should be more investment from the city councils, more support for these festivals, to attract more tourists (...)”. Regarding festivals abroad, interviewee F1 conveys a similar idea, confessing that if there had been structured programs with the festivals she had attended in other countries, she would have joined them.

## 5. Conclusion

### 5.1. Discussion

Music festivals are complete experiences, capable of translating into different meanings for those who enjoy them, depending on their characteristics, as well as the participants themselves (Crompton & McKay, 1997; Lee et al., 2002; Pegg & Patterson; 2010; Lawendowski & Besta, 2020). This study demonstrates that the meanings of Heavy Metal festivals and their characteristics constitute a wide range of options. If, on one hand, there are participants who refer to the events as spaces to feel safe, comfortable and free from judgment, on the other hand, there are participants who live the festivals more intensely, with the central goal of full happiness during the experience, which contributes to their well-being.

Although music is usually the main motivation for attending Heavy Metal festivals, the overall experience requires much more than this element to achieve success. Honkanen and Luonila (2021) highlight this issue, stating that participants are looking for an experience made up of several elements. In the case of Heavy Metal, there is a subculture made up of fans who are very loyal to the genre and who attach added importance to the sense of belonging and the sense of community that is very present in the atmosphere of these events.

In terms of motivations, the results obtained are in line with the categories proposed by Bilimava (2014). Music was the motivation most mentioned by the participants, followed by socialisation. The feeling of freedom was also widely mentioned by the interviewees, as well as escapism and, finally, travel, which is an important part of enjoying the overall experience.

Viegas (2022) showed that the emotional issue represents an important part of the participants' motivations, which was also confirmed by the results of this study. There are various factors that drive people to these events, including socialising with friends and meeting new people. The sense of community and belonging seem to play a central role for the Heavy Metal subculture in the context of festivals, expressing themselves through common interests, collective support for certain bands (Barrière & Finkel, 2022) and shared ideas, values and celebrations (Derret, 2003).

This research concluded that the emotions most felt during the experience of a Heavy Metal festival are positive, with joy and freedom standing out. Metalheads often register emotions such as peace, empowerment, confidence or joy, which are very positive emotions, during their participation in festivals (Belo & Gustavo, 2023; Perron-Brault et al., 2020; Olsen et al., 2022; Viegas, 2022). Also, in line with the research conducted by Viegas (2022), the emotions felt at Heavy Metal festivals are quite intense, including euphoria and ecstasy.

There is an atmosphere of companionship and relaxation at Heavy Metal festivals, which contrasts with the violence associated with the music genre, but is in line with studies carried out, notably by Powell et al. (2022), who concluded that exposure to Heavy Metal and participation in events related to the music genre do not lead to aggressive tendencies and violent behaviour in everyday life.

### 5.2. Limitations and future guidelines

In terms of limitations, as expected when speaking of a qualitative study, data interpretation is influenced by investigators’ perceptions and preconceptions, which can influence the study’s

conclusions. However, the data analysis consisted of a meticulous review process to minimise this effect.

This investigation resulted in many important contributions to literature regarding subcultures and niche tourism, by focusing on the existing gap when it comes to investigating Heavy Metal festivals in Portugal. Theoretically, it explores the relationship between music festivals and Dark Tourism, suggesting a hybrid typology, which combines musical entertainment and Dark Tourism related experiences.

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