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HIST 677 Digital History Methods

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Social Media and Its Role in Holocaust Remembrance

The Case of Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin and Its Representation on Social Media

Abstract

This article examines the role of social media users in Holocaust remembrance by analyzing Instagram (IG), TripAdvisor, Yelp, Flickr, and WordPress images, captions, hashtags, comments, and reflections from 2017 to 2019, that were “location-tagged” at the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin, Germany. By examining these public social media posts, my goal is to find out more about the way people discuss the memorial, their experiences, and the topic of the Holocaust at large. I aim to explore what people choose to post from their visit and what the social media interaction then looks like as a result. This paper also hopes to begin piecing together the possible decision-making process behind the visitors’ posts: from choosing to be in the picture, appearing in a certain way, to possibly editing and then posting it. The ultimate goal is to facilitate a larger discussion about the impact of social media users on the representation of the Holocaust.

KEYWORDS: Holocaust, Remembrance, Social Media, Instagram, TripAdvisor, WordPress

How the Project Began

In 2016, I attended Lessons and Legacies Conference dedicated to “Relevance and Challenges in the Digital Age.”¹ One of the more controversial conversations involved some visitors of Holocaust memorial sites having their self-portraits or “selfies” posted on social media. A year later this topic resurfaced, but this time among general public when an Israeli-German

¹ “Relevance and Challenges in the Digital Age.” Lessons and Legacies Conference 2016. Holocaust Educational Foundation at Northwestern University. <https://www.hef.northwestern.edu/lessons-and-legacies-conference/past-conferences/>

writer Shahak Shapira published pictures of tourists at Berlin’s Holocaust memorial on the website that he designed and audaciously named “Yolocaust”: a combination of the popular social media hashtag YOLO – “You Only Live Once” – and the Holocaust.² Shapira uploaded publicly-shared photos he deemed disrespectful to teach young visitors a lesson. Shapira stripped away the background of the memorial and replaced it with bodies of the victims. The photoshopped images quickly became popular or went viral, sparking outrage. Some expressed their anger at those young people in the pictures for disrespecting the memorial site, others criticized Shapira for tempering with the archival material that featured the deceased for shock value, thus trivializing the suffering of victims by using them as a background. After some outcry, he provided an email address – “undouche.me@yolocaust.de” – so that people on those viral images could request their photo to be removed from his website. Those who hailed Shapira an online social justice warrior (SJW) made me question the role and impact that any social media user could have in determining the ethics of the memorial visits and the Holocaust remembrance at large.

This article examines the role of social media users in Holocaust remembrance by analyzing Instagram, TripAdvisor, Yelp, Flickr, and WordPress images, captions, hashtags, comments, and reflections from 2017 to 2019, that were “location-tagged” at the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin, Germany. By examining these public social media posts, my goal is to find out more about the way people discuss the memorial, their experiences, and the topic of the Holocaust at large. I aim to explore what people choose to post from their visit and what the social media interaction then looks like as a result. This paper also hopes to begin piecing together the possible decision-making process behind the visitors’ posts: from choosing to be in

² Joel Gunter, “‘Yolocaust’: How should you behave at a Holocaust memorial?” *BBC News*, 20 January 2017.

the picture, appearing in a certain way, to possibly editing and then posting it. The ultimate goal is to facilitate a larger discussion about the impact of social media users on the representation of the Holocaust. As visitors increasingly post their pictures from the memorial online for others to consume and react to, I was left wondering: How could one try to understand what is happening and possibly open a discussion that would lead to social media users contributing positively to Holocaust remembrance?

Why Should You Care What Visitors Post on Social Media?

Most official social media accounts of Holocaust museums and memorials tend to feature archival photographs with educational captions, promotional pictures of upcoming events, and photographs of survivors visiting their sites. Visitors on the contrary often upload pictures of themselves from their visit. It often seems that many visitors fail to grasp the intended message, especially, despite the tremendous effort of the memorial staff and their contributors to educate visitors about the horrors of the Nazi persecution and genocide. No matter what official sites and educators may try to communicate and moderate, visitors would still go on social media and disregard the written and unwritten rules. Understanding what drives them may help memorials, academics, and the public at large, adapt more useful ways of sharing information and making sure they process their visit in a way that does Holocaust remembrance justice. The personal smartphone screen of today has made it possible for millions to speak to this imagined community while consuming, watching, and relating our comments in real time.³ It is worth our time to consider how one could navigate this phenomenon effectively.

³ Yasmin Ibrahim, *Production of the "Self" in the Digital Age* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 33.

A lot is at stake when discussing this topic, which is why the right information and interpretation could help one improve their understanding of the past and condemn the rise of antisemitism. It ties in with the debate on what constitutes free speech and hate speech continues, while worldwide platforms like Facebook refuse to take responsibility and the justice system at large are still figuring out ways to handle digital crimes and misdemeanors.⁴ Today, as white nationalists express their opinions more and more boldly, we cannot let the message of Holocaust memorials be misrepresented and misinterpreted. A study published in April, 2018 showed that awareness of the Holocaust is fading in the United States, as more than one-fifth of U.S. millennials either have not heard of it or are not sure, if they have.⁵ It is absolutely critical that we address the issue of on-site and digital footprint of those who visit Holocaust memorials, especially in Germany, particularly as antisemitism and misinformation, including Holocaust denial are on the rise across the world.

Historiography: Understanding Digital, Tourist, and Memorial Aspects

This article will consider three different types of the existing literature on the topic of the Holocaust remembrance and social media: 1. Scholarship on Digital Media; 2. Dark Tourism, and 3. Holocaust Memory Studies. It is remarkable how quickly the use of social media is growing. In 2016, around one-third of the world population was active on social media sites, by 2020, the share is expected to reach thirty-eight percent.⁶ The increasing importance of social media today is

⁴ By David Ingram, "Mark Zuckerberg defends Facebook's stance on misinformation with example of Holocaust deniers," *NBC News*, July 18, 2018,

⁵ "New Survey by Claims Conference Finds Significant Lack of Holocaust Knowledge in the United States," Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, Accessed April 9, 2019.

⁶ Andrea Ceron, *Social Media and Political Accountability: Bridging the Gap Between Citizens and Politicians* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 5.

undeniable. The literature on the subject is fairly recent and continues to expand. One such scholarly work by Leighton Evans and Michael Saker examines location-based social media in regards to space, time, and identity. They lay out space in terms of the physical and the digital.⁷ This explicit acknowledgement of the two different mediums helps situate the physical space of Berlin's memorial and its discussion on social media.

A significant portion of the posted material in the past two years includes selfies. Its definition however is much broader than typically expected; it includes pictures of people who asked someone to take a picture of them. In his book on selfies and digital media, Yasmin Ibrahim argues that the infantile moment of self-discovery with the screen is equivalent to the mirror moment of self-identification.⁸ He points out that in the digital age, the screen performs a multitude of functions from self-discovery to voyeurism.⁹ According to Ibrahim, the mirror moment of self-discovery is unsettling as the self is perceived as whole and thus produces both an alienation and abstraction with the flesh.¹⁰ When addressing selfies related to tragic events, he claims that the refashioning of the self as part of another person's trauma communicates the solidarity in these enactments and the potency of employing the self as a political tool of expression.¹¹ Can that approach be applied when talking about the past? It would have to be situated in its specific context. Mostly, because his interpretation ignores numerous challenges and considerations social

⁷ Leighton Evans and Michael Saker, *Location-Based Social Media: Space, Time and Identity* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 88.

⁸ Ibrahim, *Production of the "Self" in the Digital Age*, 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

media users would have to face when trying to “refashion one’s self as part of another person’s trauma” and the weighty ethical concerns behind that attempt.

Dark Tourism

Besides the ethical considerations behind the digital and social media aspects of this topic, this article will explore some scholarship concerning “dark tourism.” Tourism pertaining to the sites of or dedicated to violent death is called *thanatourism*.¹² This topic often results in a plethora of controversy. A few years ago, an Australian artist Jane Korman made a trip to Poland and posted a Youtube video of her father Adolek Kahn, an 89-year-old survivor of Auschwitz, herself, and her three children dancing to Gloria Gaynor’s song “I Will Survive” near concentration camps, ghettos, synagogues, and memorials. After some backlash, Korman addressed the incident on her blog: “Though we lost a great many, we did, as a people, survive. And I’m all about stomping on our horrific past through the subversive acts. Even if it includes employing a hokey *b’nai mitzvah* party disco standard.” The question however many had was: What were they stomping on? A lot of the memorials represent victims specifically. Other concerns included the question of who gets to represent survivors and Jewish people as a whole.¹³

As scholar K.P. Allar keenly points out one of the issues in “Holocaust tourism” is the issue of ownership and the ability and right to interpret and present a historical narrative.¹⁴ If the Berlin memorial is in Berlin to be a reminder to the German people, aren’t there serious concerns about them empathizing with the victims when walking through the stelas? Yet these tourist sites can

¹² Brigitte Sion, Ed., *Death Tourism: Disaster Sites as Recreational Landscape* (London: Seagull Books, 2014), 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁴ K.P. Allar. “Holocaust tourism in a post-holocaust Europe: Anne Frank and Auschwitz” in *Dark Tourism and Place Identity: Managing and Interpreting Dark Places* (Frew, Elspeth., and White, Leanne. Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 199.

also shed some light on a preferable code of conduct. One such example would be the way that various Holocaust sites handled the issue of food and tourists. Historian S.I. Salamensky shows that most Holocaust memorial sites ban food, but have specific places for food where they serve Jewish and Israeli cuisine. Without the physical separation, eating can be distracting and offensive as those places also symbolize many of those who starved to death.¹⁵ And thus eating at the memorial should be avoided as it is open space. There are numerous parks people in Berlin can go to in order to eat outdoors.

Holocaust Studies and Memorials

One must tackle ethical considerations of what constitutes acceptable behavior for visitors of the physical and digital spaces of Holocaust remembrance sites. Walter Reich, former director of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., and currently Yitzhak Rabin Memorial Professor of international affairs, ethics, and human behavior at George Washington University laid out the anxieties about trends in Holocaust research and status of Holocaust memory:

- Distorting the very definition of the Holocaust*
- Trivializing Holocaust memory*
- Dismissing the victimization of the Jews to advance the victimization of others*
- Distorting the Holocaust in popular culture, especially film*
- Academizing the Holocaust*
- The effects of Holocaust kitsch*
- The effects of the seamier efforts to recover Holocaust assets*
- The effects of using the Holocaust to achieve political, diplomatic, and military ends.¹⁶*

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Claudio Fogu, Wulf Kansteiner, Todd Presner, eds., *Probing the Ethics of Holocaust Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 333.

At the same time, Dirk Moses insists that scholars should not deny others the intense emotions they may feel about the subject of the Holocaust, “whether existential angst or anticipatory fear, experiencing them is all too human.”¹⁷

In addition to considering these important points when dealing with the topic of the Holocaust in general, there are even more challenges when merging memory and the digital. In *Holocaust Memory in the Digital Age*, Jeffrey Shandler claims that not only is the photography never, in essence, a memory, but it actually blocks memory.¹⁸ Meanwhile, psychologists Betsy Sparrow, Jenny Liu, and Daniel M. Wegner argue that with the rapid increase of the access to the Internet, people have lower rates of recalling of the information itself but instead they can recall where to access it.¹⁹ As a medium that collects and stores, that forgets nothing, the Internet might seem to offer the potential to Holocaust remembrance on an unprecedented scale. It is more complicated than that though, psychologist Daniel Schacter argues that, “The brain does not operate like a camera, not does memory work like a video recorded, allowing us to replay the past in exact detail.”²⁰ He argues that memories are built from fragments of experience also known as an encoding process: a procedure for transforming something a person sees, hears, thinks, or feels, into a memory.²¹ One can see how important it is to consider various disciplines in trying to understand how memory and digital media interact and affect people.

That includes urban studies. One study asked similar questions as does this paper but solely from physical space aspect. Arden Pennell argues that people smiling, playing, and sunbathing at

¹⁷ *Probing the Ethics of Holocaust Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 332.

¹⁸ Jeffrey Shandler, *Holocaust Memory in the Digital Age: Survivors' Stories and New Media Practices* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2017), 34.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

Berlin's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe represent a celebration of the Memorial's correspondence to the spatial needs of the historic city center.²² Using a site-specific, local historical context rather than memorial or Holocaust discourse, she presents it as “a physically appropriate heir to the land upon which it was built.” She focuses more on Berlin’s residents and what it means to them, as opposed to the broader range of visitors. Her positive take on the site as a symbol of East and West German unity, similar to a park where people come together to have a good time, misses the most important message of the memorial: Germany’s responsibility for and collective remembrance of the Holocaust. The memorial was not meant for Germans to come together as a divided country from Cold War, instead the memorial is dedicated to the Jewish people who were murdered during the Holocaust, and thus, her comparison of the memorial to Berlin wall is inadequate.

Perhaps the most comprehensive work on Berlin’s Holocaust memorial to date is by Irit Dekel, *Mediation at the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin*.²³ He argues that visitors become witnesses of Holocaust victims and the state of victimhood, and then reflect on what being a witness means to them; others feel guilt and shame or reflect on their moral standing as visitors of the memorial. He also emphasizes the role of silence and reflections on knowledge there. According to Dekel, visitors tend to discuss: the topic of denunciation, the topic of sentiment, and the topic of aesthetics.²⁴ His work is comprehensive, and this article hopes to add social media aspects of the site to his important findings.

²² Arden Pennell, “Why Are They So Happy? Berlin’s Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Local Context,” *Telos*, no. 144 (2008), 95.

²³ Irit Dekel, *Mediation at the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin* (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

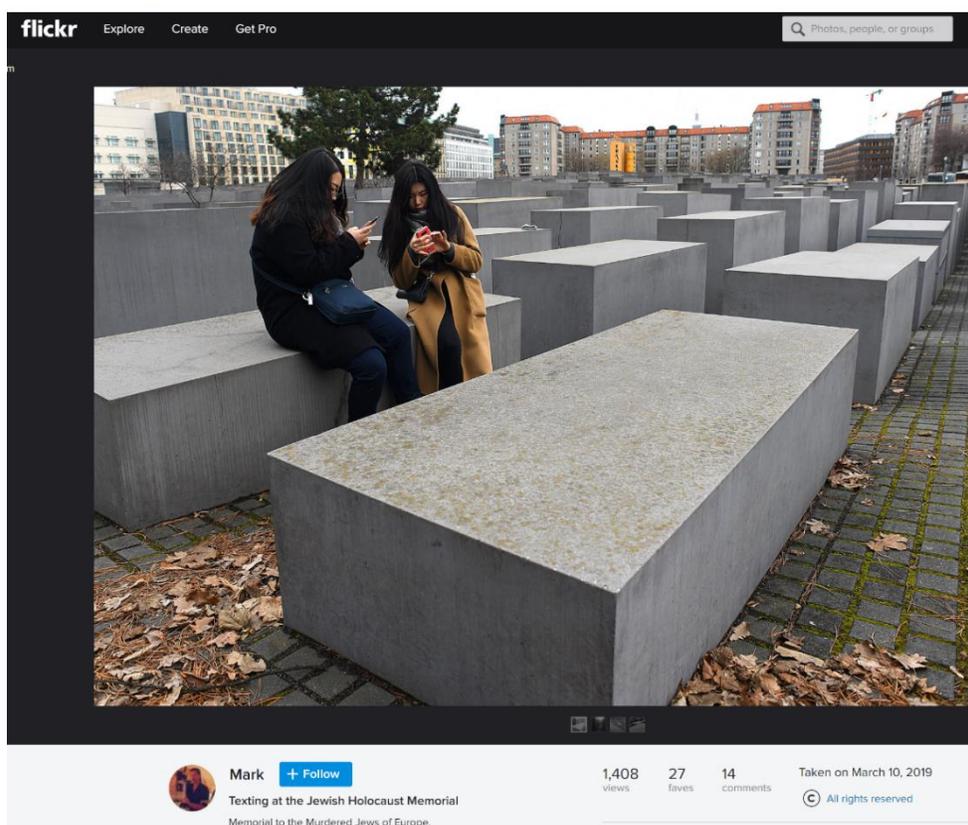
²⁴ Dekel, *Mediation at the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin*, 21.

The Process and Unexpected Findings

The images I selected for my analysis represent a glimpse of what one would find in spring 2019 when looking at the location-tagged and publicly shared social media posts featuring people at the Berlin Holocaust memorial dedicated to Jewish victims. Due to the high volumes of data, I limited my search to the posts from 2017 to 2019, and tried to select a few that seemed to reflect a pattern. Every platform had a different search engine and thus a different set of challenges. Instagram has an option of viewing “stories” or posts that are only available within twenty-four hours of posting. As a result, that feature would leave any user with a unique set of temporarily available data from that particular day. On the other hand, these “stories” usually offer a better sense of real-time interaction. One could film or photograph something they stumbled upon at that particular moment and share it instantly in their stories, instead of posting it. Posting content could imply a relative sense of permanence in comparison to a day-long story. Instagram proved to contain the most useful data for this paper to an unexpected degree due to its general popularity and availability.

Other social media websites posed a series of significant challenges. TripAdvisor’s search engine allows one to select posts based on the number of stars the reviewer gave the site. As a result, initially, I began looking at the highest (5-star) and lowest (1-star) rating reviews in an attempt to find any potential outliers or patterns. People who usually review places tend to bring attention to whether how great their experience was and to recommend the place or on the other hand, to file a complaint and warn others. TripAdvisor is based largely on brief reviews with few photos, meanwhile Flickr, a photograph-centered platform, featured almost no photos with people or commentary about the site. Flickr is heavily patronized by professional photographers who interact with one another, searching for feedback. Its search engine allows one to search based on

date and color composition of the photograph. Below is a rare example of the Flickr user filling in the caption section and featuring people. His caption condemns two young women for using their cellphones to text. His criticism aligns with the general call for visitors to focus on what the memorial represents, thus respectfully offering full attention. Of course, in reality, using a smartphone could also help one learn, for instance, one could look up something that they did not know about the Holocaust or the memorial itself.



Julie Greg PRO 21d
Beautiful photo!

Brian (The One and Only) 21d
Terrific capture Mark! 🙌

Mark 21d
Julie Greg Thank you,Julie.

Mark 21d
Brian (The One and Only) Thank you,Brian.

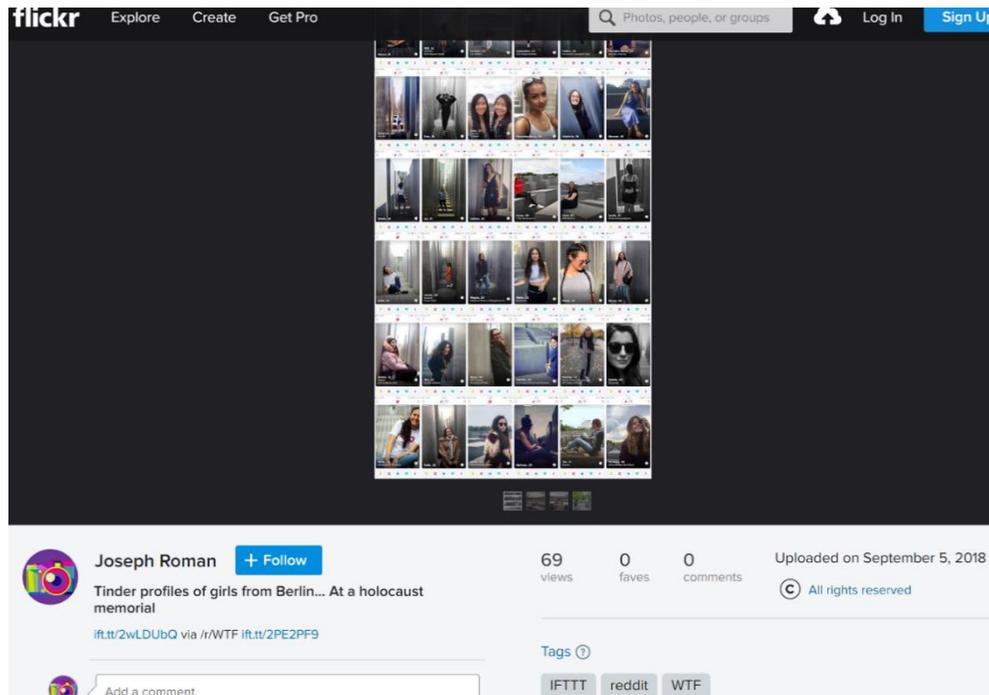
Silke PRO 21d
And, yes, this is how young people experience the memorial. There is staff to keep people from climbing onto the steles.

Mark 21d
Silke I saw kids running around the blocks and even climbing up on top of them, and this is typical kids. I guess there was no staff in the section I was. I am glad they had what looked like some school trips visiting, as they would go down below and hear from the guide about the history. Thanks for commenting, Silke.

Flemming Munch 21d
Beautiful photo

Another Flickr user created a collage of young women's profile pictures from an online dating application called Tinder (see image below). Those images show women at the Holocaust memorial. It is possible that he himself found all those photos by using the dating application that was set to "interested in women," it is possible that others shared those pictures with him, or that he just found it somewhere on the Internet. Either way gender definitely played a role in this.

People commonly use Tinder to meet people for brief sexual encounters and sometimes longer-term dating. A place that commemorates victims of Nazi genocide is certainly not the place to use as a background for a dating application profile picture.



Like Flickr, Yelp yielded few results as it has a very particular pool of users and locations

Megan K.
Oakland Hills, Oakland,
CA
120 friends
128 reviews
148 photos
Elite '19

★★★★★ 9/1/2018

I went to this place at night and during the day. The genius behind the design is simply undescrivable until you try walking thru it and remind yourself of the sense of loss, uncertainty. Great place to take distictive Instagram worthy pictures.



in mind, there are not many historic sites that have a lot of reviews, and the Berlin memorial turned out to be no exception. Yelp featured only 229 reviews of the memorial overall, and very few had any pictures. The review on the left called the memorial “Insta-worthy” with caption “Tomorrow may not come ☹️.” Another post

praises the memorial for how open to interpretation it is, whilst saying that one can “still have fun there” (See below).

 **Ami W.**
Dagenham, United Kingdom
👥 20 friends
⭐ 82 reviews
📷 59 photos

[Write a review](#)

[Add a photo](#)

[Reply to a review](#)

[Send a message](#)

[Follow Ami W.](#)

★★★★☆ 6/15/2016

Definitely worth a visit. I felt quite humbled by the memorial. It isn't just a memorial, it's an installation of art in its truest form; open for interpretation and fuels the imagination. It's all about how it makes you feel.

If you don't have this on your list of places to visit in Berlin then please include it. Even if you're not particularly the arty type, there's still much fun to be had.



WordPress presented a different set of challenges, since its search engine is not very



useful, and the website itself is in a dire need of update. The WP blogposts I found using key words referring to the site were selected based on their relevance, and whether the blogger actually went there. I chose to incorporate a blog post that featured a sketch from the site.²⁵ That post's comment

section became a place of remembering, sharing, and gratitude (see below).

²⁵ Kestrelart, "Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, Berlin." WordPress, April 7, 2018



weisserwatercolours says:
April 8, 2018 at 2:28 pm

You are, by doing this, helping these cruelly-abbreviated lives, live again through your art-remembrance. Thank you.

Reply



kestrelart says:
April 9, 2018 at 9:56 pm

Thank you.

I realise this has lived with me since childhood. Seeing the remnants of Auschwitz and hearing the words of Jacob Bronowski on television in the 1070s stayed with me life long, a cornerstone of how I see the world. I have written more in a second post on this subject. Sometime I also need to write about historian John Grenville, whom I had the privilege to know late in his life, and who talked to me a little of his childhood in Berlin and his escape on the Kinder Transport.

Reply



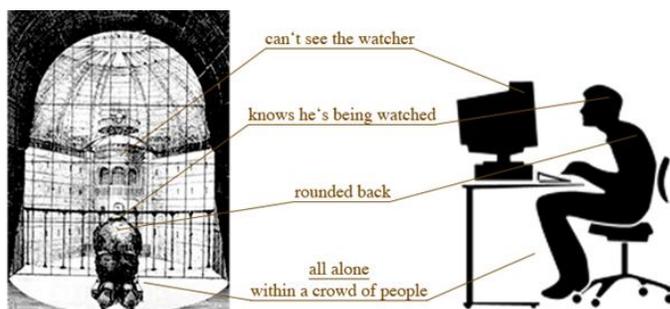
weisserwatercolours says:
April 10, 2018 at 2:06 pm

My best friend in 1950s grade school—Janie—had parents who spoke in a decidedly German accent. It wasn't unusual to me, because my father, a German pastor, had a congregation made up of recently arrived post-war German immigrants. Much later I saw Janie's mother on a PBS TV programme, describing how she and her physicist husband were rescued at the last minute in 1939 Vienna by faculty members of MIT. And later I learned how members of my father's congregation had secrets and Nazi involvements they wanted to stay hidden. I personally discovered LIFE magazines kept away from our coffee table, and so learned as a young boy of Auschwitz by staring at those photographs. I married a Jew and became a pastor, and was a member of Jewish/Christian Dialogue, Montreal, and visited Yad Vashem in 1989. Your paintings speak to me in multiple ways—and I thank you.

The benefit of using WordPress for analysis is that the descriptions are typically explicit, lengthy, and vivid. For examples, one visitor writes: “Your chest may tighten, your eyes may water, your heart may flutter – but as difficult as it may be, visiting this memorial is important to do. In order

to avoid repeating history's worst mistakes, we must take care to remember the past, and to learn from our past mistakes. We must open our hearts to other cultures and ways of life. We must choose peace and integration over violence and exclusion."²⁶ The user makes a clear connection between the past and the present.

Another WordPress post addressed growing concern about the rise of antisemitism and extreme right-wing groups and its effect on memorials and Holocaust remembrance at large. The blogger writes how after the AfD politician Wolfgang Gedeon demanded the abolition of this "forced culture of remembrance;" trying to push the survivors and their memories out of German society. The International Auschwitz Committee responded: "The AfD fights ever more brutally and unscrupulously what the survivors of Auschwitz as contemporary witnesses have reached in German society."²⁷ Would collective self-policing on social media and at the Memorial itself help



Holocaust remembrance?²⁸ If, so, how would one do it without interjecting on one's freedom and privacy? The advantage of the blog post is that it allows

for longer reflections than other types of social-media. But every platform offered its unique content and became a place where people shared and contested information.

²⁶ Alba Marie, "Holocaust Memorial, Berlin, Germany," Top Most Beautiful Places in Europe, 28 November, 2016.

²⁷ "Destroy Holocaust monuments, German AfD neonazi says," February 20, 2018.

<https://dearkitty1.wordpress.com/2018/02/20/destroy-holocaust-monuments-german-afd-neonazi-says/>

²⁸ Xinyu Zhang, "Power of Panopticism in Modern Society," *Medium*, May 30, 2017.

<https://medium.com/@xzhan065/power-of-panopticism-in-modern-society-79ea015fab9a>

Instagram: Advertising, Photos Sessions, and Inspirational Quotes

In the past few years, Instagram has become one of the most compelling storytelling platforms. Ruth La Ferla describes it as “a repository for uplifting confessions, compressed screeds, some with candidly political overtones, self-help digests, mini essays and speculative musings and, perhaps most compellingly, serialized memoirs in sound-bite form.”²⁹ Marcus Messner, an associate director of the Richard T. Robertson School of Media and Culture at Virginia Commonwealth University argues that Instagram story captions became a way to grow the kind of intense engagement that photos alone cannot hope to achieve.³⁰ “Lately, I’ve started to wonder if Instagram is the new WordPress,” wrote Harling Ross, an editor at *Man Repeller*.³¹

According to my primary research, most IG users who post their photos publicly often choose to include themselves into the picture. The entire title “Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe” appears as the location tag on the post. As a result, it is almost impossible for both IG users and their followers not to know what the location is about since the name is self-explanatory. One type of IG users who post is influencers and models, many of whom advertise wearing or using various brands at the Holocaust memorial. The posts tagged at this location overall are from different countries, but the majority are from Europe and the U.S., largely due to a relative traveling ease and higher chances of economic ability to visit Berlin. Another type of users is tourists who

²⁹ Ruth La Ferla, "The Captionfluencers," *The New York Times*, March 27, 2019.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

describe the next city or country they are heading to in their captions. There is also a type of picture that many call “an obligatory picture” or “insta-worthy,” where the person in the photo is hanging mid-air between the pillars (see picture below).



Many captions include quotes that have nothing to do with the memorial (see two photos below). This is common for IG photos, however, the location tag “Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe” appears right under their usernames and to the right of the pictures, making it unmissable and impossible to not realize what the memorial is dedicated to.

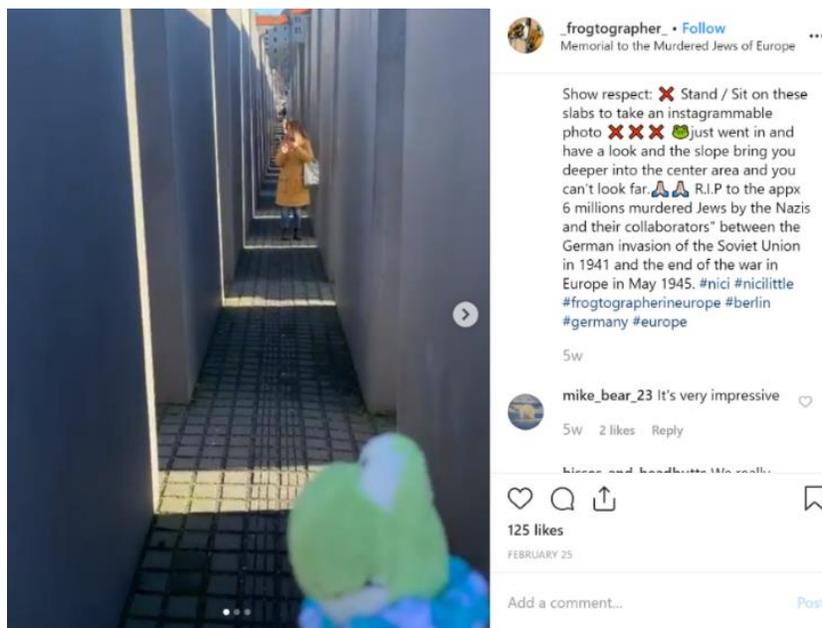




Apart from the unrelated caption quotes, I also came across a “joke.” The user seems to realize that this is not the place for “comedy,” yet she writes: “Maybe not the best place to make jokes but I can’t think of another caption so um yeehaw.” No, it is not.



A few scrolls later, I came across a video of a toy frog giving a tour of the memorial and asking its visitors respect the place in its caption (below). This goes on to show that people have different understanding of what is acceptable and respectful behavior at the Holocaust memorial site.



A tour-guide toy plush frog and jokes about the Holocaust memorial both appear on IG and the comments are all positive. Certainly, the users may have deleted the negative ones. Leighton Evans and Michael Saker argue that social media affects how people move in physical spaces and behave in physical spaces.³² As a result, one of the factors contributing to these two posts existing online is that their followers did not just find their behavior acceptable, but in fact approved and encouraged it with their “likes” and comments. That of course happened after they themselves made the decision to make and share the post.

³² Leighton Evans and Michael Saker, *Location-Based Social Media: Space, Time and Identity* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 88.



karla431 · [Follow](#)

Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe



190 likes

karla431 After this picture was the moment, when I took the engagement ring out of my bag, to be ready to propose. Even though this photo seems so calm, I was so nervous. Still the best decision in my whole life.

essijoannaa so cute !!!



mr_worldwide_305_ [#yolocaust](#)



APRIL 2

To my surprise, [#yolocaust](#), first used in 2017, appeared in the most recent search, as an IG commentator expressed his anger at this young couple celebrating their engagement at the site (see screenshot above). Once again, we see how users try to define how the memorial should be represented both physically and digitally. But due to lack of consequences besides this shaming comment, the post is likely to remain and the profile owner could easily erase any evidence of the criticism by deleting the comment and/or blocking the commentator. Or how does one become certain that the user who was shamed then became aware of why the commentator was angry?

Would deleting the picture serve as sufficient proof? What one *can* conclude though is that the existence of that post can serve as an example of acceptable behavior to other people, and that matters.

Selfies

Taking and posting any type of selfie at the Holocaust memorial is another topic of controversy. Users themselves tend to debate whether one can or should do it, and whether there are specific ways to do so ethically. Despite the common misconception of IG as a selfie social media platform, a study based on data from six international big cities showed that only one tenth of IG photos are selfies.³³ Most participants in the selfie genre discourse want to present themselves in a positive way and seek recognition by other participants-acceptance and approval.³⁴ Having someone else take a picture of you is also a case of self-photography by delegation and a testimony of the constant wish of actors to be present in pictures.³⁵ The majority of Instagram authors capture and share photos that are of interest to themselves, their friends and family, as opposed to complete strangers. They use it for documentation and communication with people they know. According to *Exploring the Selfies*, the main value for less popular IG users is emotional rather than aesthetic.³⁶ However, perhaps due to the lack of resources, such as a better camera and editing applications, those users may have pictures that are not as good in quality and resolution, but it does not mean that they value and desire to display the aesthetic any less than the influencers.

³³ Julia Eckel, Jens Ruchatz, and Sabine Wirth, *Exploring the Selfie Historical, Theoretical, and Analytical Approaches to Digital Self-Photography* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 180.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 204.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 178.



Here is one example of a selfie. The photo above is one of the more common selfies at the site: a solemn and serious look with the memorial on the background. His caption says: “No words” in Spanish. The hashtags this user included reflect both the location and parts of his identity he wanted to share with anyone who came across this photo. The discussion of the selfie code of conduct appears also on TripAdvisor (see below). The reviewer who posted his selfie recommends others to dress well and modestly and “not to pose in a fancy and funk way.”



13hawaii
ehingen

📄 390 👍 177

🟢🟢🟢🟢🟢 Reviewed May 6, 2017

not a place for a selfie

we have been there for 5 minutes. that was enough. no place for children. not a place for tourists and not a place for honeymooners

Date of experience: May 2017

👍 1 Thank 13hawaii



People who criticize the selfie gesture typically blame selfie-takers of visually expressing a dissociation of people from the context.³⁷ Scholars Anja Dinhopl and Ulrike Gretzel reconceptualize the tourist gaze as facilitated by smart phones and social media. They argue that the practice of selfie-taking in tourism is constituted by “othering,” stylized performing and producing/consuming visual culture of the self.³⁸ Through these processes, tourists ascribe the characteristics they otherwise associate with tourist sights onto themselves.³⁹ The problem is that it could mean that the visitors imagine or present themselves identifying with the victims.

Selfie and Generational Divide

Besides such important concerns, there is also a clear generational divide regarding this issue. For instance, British model Rhian Sugden defended herself after receiving backlash for taking a selfie at the Holocaust memorial in Berlin during her vacation. “I’ve got no time for this moaning generation. I’m on holiday. Sightseeing and took a pic. Under no circumstances is this disrespectful,” the model said. She continued her defense on her Instagram stories, saying she

³⁷ *Exploring the Selfie Historical, Theoretical, and Analytical Approaches to Digital Self-Photography*, 55.

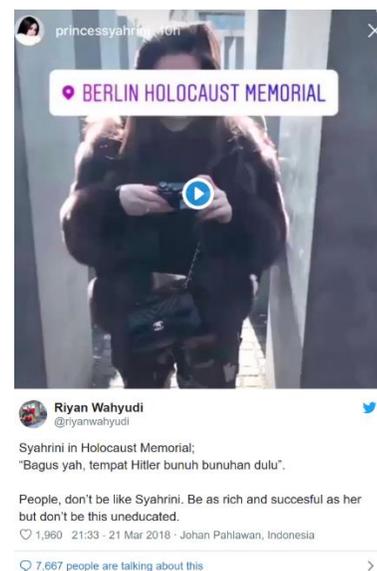
³⁸ Anja Dinhopl, Ulrike Gretzel, *Annals of Tourism Research* 57 (March 2016): 126-139.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

received threats over the selfie.⁴⁰ This incident reflects a couple of trends: 1. Largely a “baby-boomer/millennial” generational divide and hostility that carries over online, 2. A mob justice effect of social media, in which women in particular tend to receive death threats over their posts. Celebrities have a platform, and if used unwisely it can send the wrong message. She should have listened to those who expressed indignation. However, there are no clear rules or judges that users can quite appeal to. The moral gaze of others can both be a validation and check on the self.⁴¹ The culture of social network sites thrives on the narcissistic and the performative, on the one hand, and reciprocity and exchange on the other.⁴² Most platforms ban some nudity and violent content, but not much else.

Temporality of IG Story

Another celebrity got under fire, this time for posting an IG story video from Berlin’s Holocaust memorial. Indonesian celebrity Syahrini with 20 million followers is filmed saying: “We can take photos? Good right, the place where Hitler once killed people”⁴³ (see screenshot). And since this was an IG story, it disappears within one day, leaving no trace on her page, her outraged followers took screenshots. Not only does she wield



⁴⁰ Katharine Lam, "Model Defends Taking Selfie at Holocaust Memorial," *New York Post*, December 5, 2018.

⁴¹ Ibrahim, *Production of the "Self" in the Digital Age*, 51.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 52.

⁴³ Haymun Win, "Indonesian celebrity Syahrini gets flak on social media for comments made at Holocaust memorial site." *Business Insider*, March 23, 2018

an incredible amount of influence, she also provides her followers with poorly presented and misleading information.

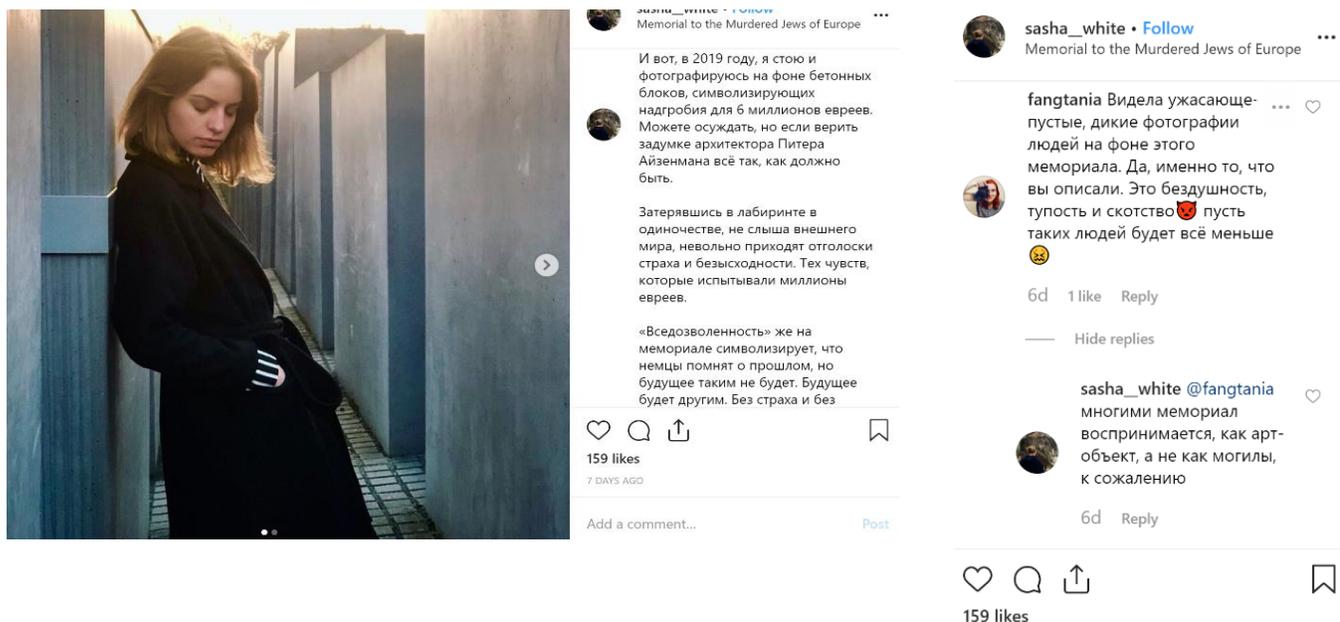
While some seek to forget their social media presence at the memorial, others seek to capture and preserve their experience at the memorial. Evans and Saker argue that location-tagged social media reflects the user's intent to go back and reminisce about their experience at that site.⁴⁴ According to Ibrahim, the human pull towards the virtual reveals our deep-seated fear of death and the need to place fragments of ourselves to float infinitum as data; we have always sought to retain ourselves on earth through cultural artifacts.⁴⁵ This is linked to digital monumentalizing, the rules of which we are yet to figure out.



⁴⁴ Evans and Michael Saker, *Location-Based Social Media*, 42.

⁴⁵ Ibrahim, *Production of the "Self" in the Digital Age*, 79.

For example, the picture above is a clear-cut example of someone attempting to literally connect with the past. Although, the numerous hashtags may indicate recommendations “visit_berlin, as well as an attempt to self-promote as a photographer.

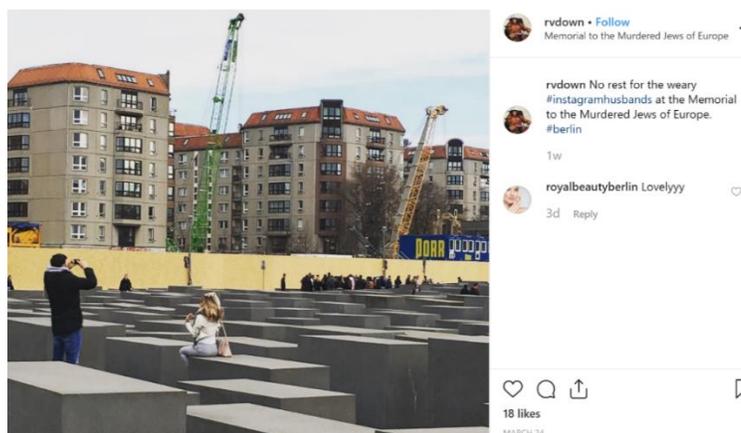


Some Instagram users, including this one from Russia (see above), expressed their frustration with the people who perceived the memorial more as an artwork, as opposed to tombstones (they are not tombstones). This comparison is quite common.⁴⁶ For instance, one TripAdvisor reviewer from the UK made a similar complaint.

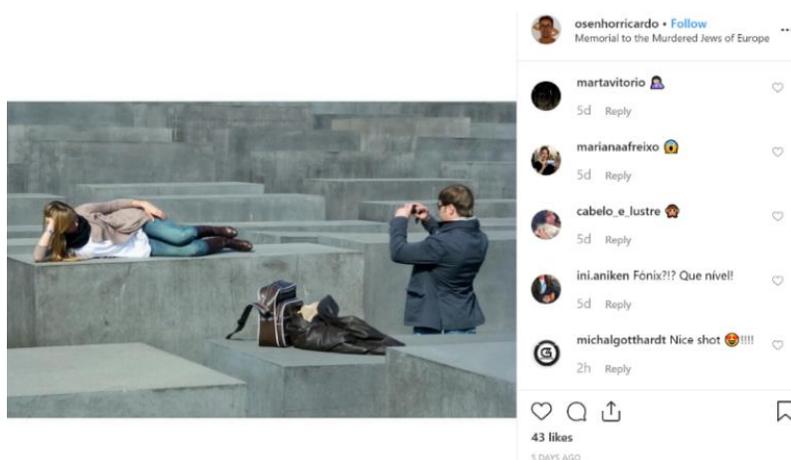


⁴⁶ The title itself remains controversial, as other proposed other titles that would not be as violent but also acknowledge who was responsible for it.

The last type of IG posts from the memorial that this article will address is the one taken by so-called “Instagram husband.” The term mocks those photos typically taken by a woman’s male partner. People tend to criticize those women for vanity and control over their boyfriends and husbands who are forced to “work as a photographer.” Gender definitely plays an important role in the way people pose and perceive pictures. One study showed that female self-depictions have a more pleasing and complaisant character, while men try to exert dominance and intimidation.⁴⁷



Take the picture below: it shows a woman laying down on the memorial pillar and posing as what appears her husband taking a picture of her. The person who posted it is, most likely a stranger, aimed to seek some solidarity in exposing this inappropriate behavior. The comments expressed



Selfie: Historical, Theoretical, and Analytical Approaches to Digital Self-Photography, 373.

almost exclusively in emojis reflect their support of this IG user's denunciation of such photoshoots.

TripAdvisor: "How Would You Rate Your Holocaust Memorial Visit?"

According to TripAdvisor, Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe has 33,055 reviews and is number 5 of 984 things to do in Berlin. There are few pictures on this site, and even fewer pictures with people in it. Those reviews with a 1-star rating complained about the memorial's poor symbolic representation and "disrespectful behavior of other visitors." Other reviews featured words like: "boring," "confusing," "sad," "ugly," "angry," and "disappointed." In contrast, the vast majority of reviewers who gave the site 5 stars described the memorial as: "poignant," "moving," "unique," "sobering," "provoking," "humbling," "impressive," and "haunting." This aligns with Dekel's findings that visitors tend to discuss: the topic of denunciation, the topic of sentiment, and the topic of aesthetics.⁴⁸ It appears that when rating the memorial site, TripAdvisors evaluated: the monument itself, the experience, the way it was monitored, and other visitors. It reflects the trends observed on other social media platforms as the users defined and debated, without an explicit declaration to do so, what the physical and digital space of the memorial should look like.

⁴⁸ Dekel, *Mediation at the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin*, 21.



alf0nza
Christiansted, St.
Croix

7 1



Reviewed November 8, 2018 via mobile

No Respect

I've been there and seen it. School children jumping from stone to stone, people drinking beers and smoking pot on the memorial stones. No respect. History is bound to repeat itself I have previously sent letters to the City of Berlin and the Holocaust Memorial. They both responded saying that it was the architects wish that the memorial be open to interpretation. The memorial is very powerful and it takes up a whole city block but it is unmarked so many don't even know what it represents . Very sad for the Millions of innocent Men, Women and Children who were brutally tortured and murdered apparently now in vain. I keep on sharing this post for them !

[Show less](#)

Date of experience: November 2018

[Ask alf0nza about The Holocaust Memorial - Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe](#)

1 Thank alf0nza

This review is the subjective opinion of a TripAdvisor member and not of TripAdvisor LLC.



mikewG7290CF
Bristol, United
Kingdom

78 43



Reviewed October 4, 2017 via mobile

Disrespectal German school party

Visited today and was upset and bemused by a party of school children who used the memorial as a playground . Even more staggering was the adult school teacher in charge of them taking photos of them posing , as if it was some sort of adventure playground or theme park . It's a memorial to the millions of Jews who were murdered by the Nazis !!! . I was expecting a place of respect and remembrance . Would this disrespectful behaviour be tolerated at Ground zero ? The museum is much better as it quiet , informative and respectful of this horrific chapter in modern history .

[Show less](#)

Date of experience: October 2017

[Ask mikewG7290CF about The Holocaust Memorial - Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe](#)

4 Thank mikewG7290CF

This review is the subjective opinion of a TripAdvisor member and not of TripAdvisor LLC.



937isaj



Reviewed July 27, 2017 via mobile

Disrespectful attitudes made me angry

I wasn't prepared to leave feeling angry. I wasn't looking to find fault. Before I visited it, I had always seen the memorial as a testimony to Germany's ability to stare it's own history in the face. But seeing German children laughing and jumping over the memorial left all 5 of us appalled, especially when those children were in the company of adults who must've been teachers. Eventually, we found a tiny plaque which expressly says, "No jumping". Why are art museums in Berlin manned by guards insisting you tow the line in this highly regulated society, but there is no sign of the equivalent here or at the Jewish Museum where we witnessed similar behaviour? I certainly didn't see anything akin to this sort of disrespectful display at the Genocide Museum in Kigali or the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg. Do something. This is not acceptable. People are still being murdered for their ethnic origins and beliefs. No laughing matter.

[Show less](#)

Date of experience: July 2017

Ask 937isaj about [The Holocaust Memorial - Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe](#)



Interestingly, parents of the children who played at the memorial also rated their experience poorly (see below).



sufialias

Bangor, United Kingdom



Reviewed July 27, 2018

Prepare a heavy heart for this.

I understand it is a monument and you are supposed to come here with a respectful mind, but when this security guy just harshly told my child off when he was standing/jumping on it, I find it totally loses the point. Facing such a big area of blocks like that, children being children would want to walk, jump and explore. It does not mean they are not respectful. Why not build a high monument that no one can climb up, or put up a big sign? This guy is constantly patrolling policing your way of interacting with this place. I find that very annoying. There is also broken glass inside without being cleaned away. For me, I think there are much more suitable places to pay tribute and be reminded of the lesson of history. Parks and museums will be better choices than this pretentious place.

[Show less](#)

Date of experience: July 2018

Ask sufialias about [The Holocaust Memorial - Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe](#)



This review is the subjective opinion of a TripAdvisor member and not of TripAdvisor LLC.

The review above shows that security tried to prevent children from playing at the Holocaust memorial. But this was another visitor had a different experience. A self-described American expat living in the Netherlands Rachel Heller writes about her visit: "I spotted a security guard. I don't know if a guard was there at night. It didn't make any difference, though. He didn't

shoo people off the stones, or remind them of the meaning of the place. He just stood there. Apparently using this memorial as a playground is perfectly acceptable.”⁴⁹ People who commented on her personal blog were supportive and recommended to reaching out to the Berlin Tourism Department. Victoria@TheBritishBerliner comments that at the Jewish Museum in Berlin, “there is a sense of seriousness and love for the Jewish people, Jewish culture, and Jewish history,” unlike the Memorial.⁵⁰ Social media can serve not only as a place of expressing one’s opinion and emotions, but also a place where other people would give support and recommendations.

A recently posted travel guide provides one with a series of suggestions for "How to Be Respectful at Germany's Holocaust Memorials: Not Taking Selfies and Other Tips About Being Respectful.”⁵¹ Erin Porter writes that it is not the place for peace signs, selfies, and bunny ears. She also recommends avoiding using these sites as a fashion backdrop for a photo shoot of you. Her TripSavvy post outlines these useful rules:

- The Field of Stelae can only be entered slowly and on foot
- Keep your voice low and avoid loud noises
- Visitors are instructed not to jump between the stones or play sports on the grounds
- Dogs and other pets are not allowed
- Smoking and alcohol are not allowed.
- This also may not be the day to wear your hilarious "I'm with stupid" shirt or profanity-strewn hat. There is no need to dress as if you are going to a funeral, but pack in the comedy on the day of your visit and try to pick something respectful.⁵²

⁴⁹ Rachel Heller, "Rachel's Ruminations." Accessed April 10, 2019.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Erin Porter, "How to Be Respectful At Germany's Holocaust Memorials: Not Taking Selfies and Other Tips About Being Respectful," *TripSavvy*, March 23, 2019.

⁵² Ibid.

Despite numerous complaints against parents, some reviews show that they took the opportunity to visit the memorial to learn and educate their children (see three examples below).



nuttybabe29
Singapore, Singapore

36 30

5 stars Reviewed December 19, 2018 via mobile

Holocaust Memorial Berlin

Walk from Brandenburg to visit a sad historical site. It was worth the walk with the kids and share with them the horrific truth.



Date of experience: December 2018

Thank nuttybabe29



amirnoy1
Berlin, Germany

19 7

5 stars Reviewed January 23, 2019 via mobile

Very powerful

We have been at the Holocaust memorial as part as a guided tour I must say that for me as an Israeli Jew it was a powerful experience it is huge memorial and have a psychological effect I haven't been in the museum below and that was my bad

Show less

Date of experience: January 2019



See all 8 reviews by amirnoy1 for Berlin

Ask amirnoy1 about The Holocaust Memorial - Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe

Thank amirnoy1



ShankerSreekumar
Dubai, United Arab Emirates

171 135

5 stars Reviewed October 31, 2018

Must visit

An unusual work of art. We visited this place as part of our Berlin tour. It's good to visit the place with a good guide who can explain you in detail. Make sure your kids don't get lost in between. Its located just next to USA Embassy and all. Worth visiting.

Show less

Date of experience: August 2018



See all 10 reviews by ShankerSreekumar for Berlin

Ask ShankerSreekumar about The Holocaust Memorial - Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe

2 Thank ShankerSreekumar

This review is the subjective opinion of a TripAdvisor member and not of TripAdvisor LLC.

Besides the official rules and unwritten social norms, some visitors turn to the designer Peter Eisenman's reflections about the use and purpose of the site. He imagined this as a place for

life to happen. He wanted children to run between the pillars and people to touch the stones. His design intends for this to be “less a holy place and more of a living monument.”⁵³ However, as important as his opinion may be to some, many visitors may not be willing to grant him this authority, while others may not know who he was.

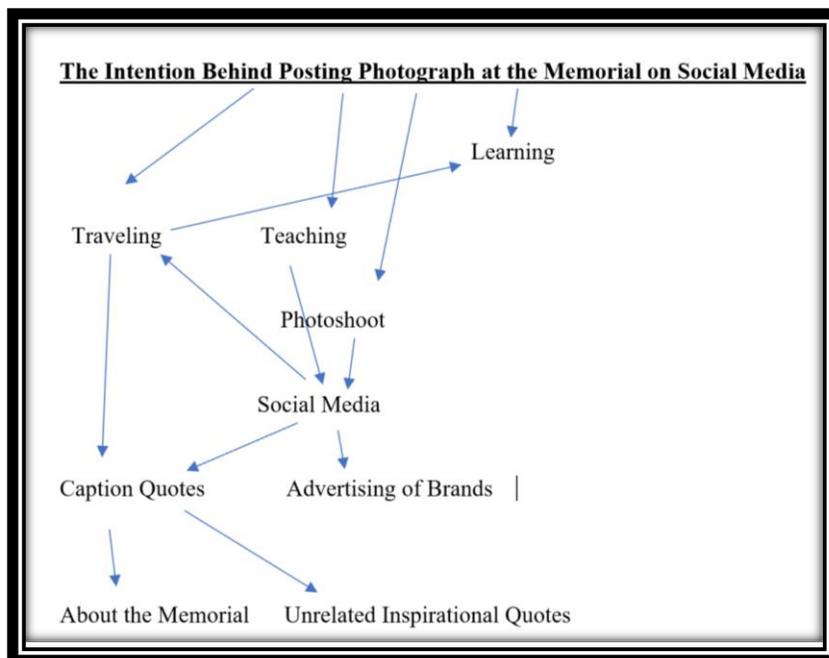
Conclusion

Social media could become an effective tool for ensuring that people remember and learn about the Holocaust in a meaningful way that transmits its importance, tragedy, and complexity. While Holocaust memorial sites and museums have been figuring out the most effective methods of teaching about it and maintaining the physical spaces, the digital space with its numerous users, who are constantly interacting with one another, is much harder to follow, let alone regulate. As a result, it is crucial to understand how and why visitors use their social media to share their experiences. Many of them came as travelers; others came there to learn and then spread what they learned to others. And since this study had used only location-based social media, it is clear that the users had to have been at least aware of the name of the memorial because they used "the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe" to tag the location. This project shows that if one were to browse Instagram, Flickr, Yelp, TripAdvisor, and WordPress posts from 2017 to 2019, they would find that there are numerous visitors posted photos of themselves without acknowledging the meaning behind the place in their captions or comments. There are also users who expressed

⁵³ Porter, "How to Be Respectful at Germany's Holocaust Memorials," *TripSavvy*, March 23, 2019.

their anger with this situation and laid out explicit advice on how to be a respectful visitor of the site.

Instagram had the largest number of posts, in tens of thousands, often featuring young people from different countries (majority Western though due to easier travel restrictions and economic opportunities). Many IG users seemed to interact with the memorial the same way that they do with other landscapes they deem “picturesque” or more commonly known as “Instagrammable.” Those IG users with a relatively smaller number of followers (fewer than 10,000) tended to pose to: 1. Show that they travel; 2. Prove that they visit memorable places; 3. Share their feelings about the memorial with friends and acquaintances; 3. Show themselves in the favorable light: to underline the sides of their appearance and/or personality they believe their followers would approve of or “like” (e.g. as someone well-dressed, or well-travelled, cultured, caring); 4. To teach their followers about what they learned about the Holocaust. One could also see IG influencers tagging clothing brands whilst model-posing at the Memorial to the Murdered Jews. There are various places suitable for a photoshoot, especially commercial ones, a Holocaust Remembrance site is not one of them.



The question that arose from this location-based social media research: Who gets to set and monitor the rules? The short and official answer is the memorial staff. However, in the end, by sharing, seeing, and reacting to posts about the memorial, social media users create and contest the sense of what constitutes acceptable behavior at the physical site and its online representation. TripAdvisor poses a very strange for many people question: How does one rate and review their experience at the Holocaust memorial site? Those who left negative comments expressed their disapproval of those visitors who ate, laughed, smiled, took pictures of themselves, and played. Most define the respectful and ethical way to visit the memorial as walking around quietly, visiting the learning center, and reflecting. It seems that then this should be reflected in the digital space, but it reveals something else instead. Yelp, similarly to TripAdvisor, is specifically based on rating and review of a location, however the website overall focuses mostly on eateries rather than historic sites.

WordPress was perhaps both the easiest and most challenging social media platform to explore when searching for people sharing their experiences at the Berlin Holocaust memorial. It provides a copious amount of qualitative data: blog-like descriptive and reflective narrative; yet it also does not have the best search engine. WordPress however seems to encourage more creativity in its users, people describe their visits with vividly and emotionally. Many expressed their outrage at the disrespectful way other visitors behaved and how much it hurt especially those who were related to Holocaust survivors. Other WP users urged to remember the past in order to fight the rise of antisemitism and extremely far right-political groups and parties like the German AfD.

This paper has briefly overviewed some of the most popular location-tagged social media websites to give the reader a glimpse into what seems fleeting, yet at the same time is almost permanent. It locates the topic of Holocaust remembrance and social media in the larger area of digital media by shedding light on some of the trends taking place in the past two years. The article also tackles the topic of dark tourism not just in its physical aspects, but the shape that place then occupies and how people interact with it online. Users debate the way they should display and frame Holocaust remembrance online, they use social media to share their impressions and family stories, and condemn behavior they deem unacceptable.

There is a clear disconnect between the intended message of commemorating Jewish victims and numerous visitors posting pictures of themselves with little awareness of what the monument represents. There are also numerous users who viewed the images, posts, and reviews, but did not leave a comment, rating, or like; as a result, it becomes even more challenging to try and measure the impact of social media. Did some users who left no visible digital feedback perhaps go on to find out more about the site they saw tagged? It is possible. Think about the layers one needs to consider when looking at a social media post of someone at the memorial: Who took

that picture? Why was it taken and posted? Was the image cropped? Was it edited? Were some comments deleted? Was the image taken long before it was posted? The answers to all of these questions are not easily found, and thus this mini-study only shows you a very individual glimpse of what is happening. The question of remembrance then involves a variety of factors: if the users who saw pictures from the memorial, then looked it up on Google, did they go to a more reliable official website or a website with dubious information? It is hard to tell.

While the designer of the Berlin memorial to European Jews who were persecuted and killed by the Nazis and their collaborators encourages the use of the memorial as a recreation site, it still should be secondary to the primary goal of remembrance of the Holocaust. It is located in the center of Berlin for a reason, it is there to remind who is responsible, why and how it happened, and so that it never happens again. It should not be solely used, presented, and discussed, as a park for a picnic or an artwork to pose in front of. Location-based social media platforms could help people bridge that gap between the digital and the physical. It is time for interdisciplinary collaboration where historians and educators improve the way they teach about the past and Holocaust remembrance by working with experts on social media, digital technology, and psychology in order to understand what drives people to use social media and commemoration sites in the way that they do.

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