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ANALYSIS OF LAWANG SEWU MUSEUM AS DARK TOURISM IN SEMARANG CITY

Ryan Dharmawan[1]*, Wiwik Nirmala Sari[2]
[1*, 2] Universitas Pradita, Indonesia

Correspondence: Ryan.Dharmawan@student.pradita.ac.id

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Abstract

Lawang Sewu is one of the most iconic historical landmarks in Semarang, deeply associated with colonial heritage and tragic past events, particularly when its underground space functioned as a prison during the Japanese occupation. This historical background positions Lawang Sewu as a relevant subject within the framework of dark tourism, not merely through mystical narratives but as a medium of historical education, collective memory preservation, and humanitarian reflection. This study adopts a qualitative case study approach, employing observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. The analysis draws on dark tourism, cultural commodification, and phenomenology theories to illustrate how the visitor experience at Lawang Sewu extends beyond appreciating colonial architecture to engaging in historical understanding, emotional reflection, and the transformation of dark narratives into educational tourism value. The findings highlight that Lawang Sewu can be positioned as an ethical dark tourism destination that serves as a space for learning, reflection, and cultural identity reinforcement, thereby contributing positively to the development of heritage-based tourism in Semarang.

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INTRODUCTION

History is a story about experiences of what happened in the past, through documents, relics, and stories from previous generations. By studying history, we can recognize past mistakes such as conflicts or injustices and try to correct them so they are not repeated. History also helps us understand past mistakes, so we can be wiser in making decisions in the future. According to Sulistyanto (2021), history is the best teacher that reminds us of the past so that we can build a better future. As a concrete example, Lawang Sewu in Semarang, a magnificent building left behind by the Dutch colonialists, which now functions as a railway history museum, teaches us important lessons about the colonial period, the Japanese occupation, and the struggle for independence. Lawang Sewu reminds us of the value of struggle and the importance of preserving history as a guide for progress (Azabit and Zulfikar, 2025).

Lawang Sewu is widely known as a historic building, with a long history that has evolved over time until it became a historical museum. First, Lawang Sewu was a building constructed by the Dutch colonial government to be used for railway administration, which was built between 1904 and 1918 (Izzata et al., 2024). Lawang Sewu then underwent several changes in function, from being used for railway administration during the colonial period to becoming a prison for indigenous prisoners during the war in 1942 when Indonesia was occupied by Japan and the building was taken over by the Japanese. After Indonesia gained independence in 1945, the building was used as KODAM IV or Diponegoro Military Regional Command as a military office from 1949 to 1994 (Darmayanti and Santoso, 2023). In 2011, Lawang Sewu was inaugurated after being restored as a museum showcasing the beauty of Dutch colonial architecture and its rich history, which attracts both local and foreign visitors. Based on this, Lawang Sewu is used as an object research such as dark tourism because this building is widely known to have a dark history, especially the basement, which was once used as a prison and place of torture when the building was taken over by the Japanese government, arousing tourists' curiosity and interest in its tragic aspects (Andrianto and Pranoto, 2025). Dark tourism is an event that has already passed that is related to death, disaster, and suffering (Lin et al., 2024).

Then, after undergoing a restoration process aimed at preserving its original form and historical value in 2011, Lawang Sewu Building A was inaugurated as a cultural heritage site. The restoration of Lawang Sewu features a blend of classic European architecture and modern touches, creating a building that is both grand and elegant. European elements are reflected in the symmetrical shape of the building, the towering domes, and the use of red brick, which gives the building a classic look, while modern elements are seen in the use of glass and iron. This combination not only provides aesthetic value but also represents the process of cultural acculturation that took place in Indonesia during the colonial period. The influence of European architecture brought by the Dutch was adapted to the local climate and culture in the Semarang area (Brahmanto, 2022).

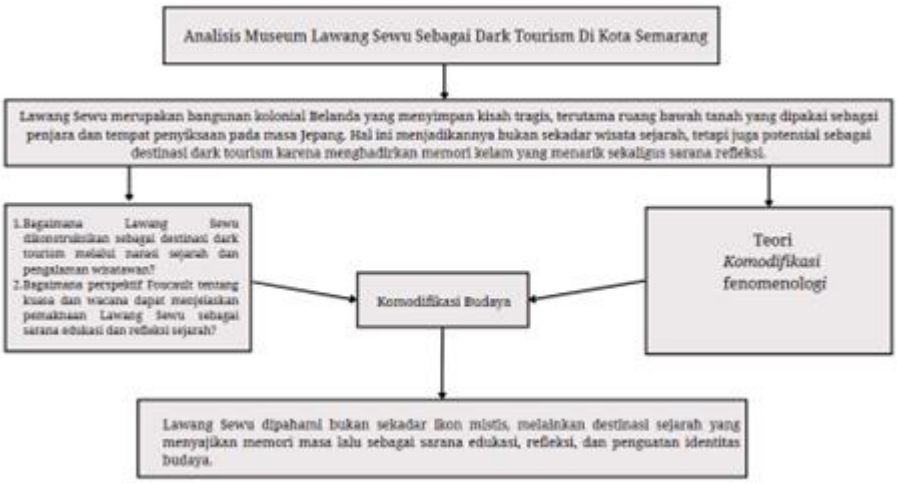
The original form of Lawang Sewu has been preserved so that the public and visitors can witness the original form and grandeur of the architecture of the past. One of the unique features of Lawang Sewu, apart from its classic European architectural style and modern

touches, is the basement, which creates a cool atmosphere inside the building and makes the basement of Lawang Sewu a cooling space. This basement was once used as a place of massacre and imprisonment for the indigenous people during the Dutch colonial period. This dark history adds to its historical value and is a unique attraction for tourists, as visitors can not only enjoy the beauty of the architecture, but also experience the thrill it offers (Bashit et al., 2020). Lawang Sewu has now been converted into a museum and an attractive educational tourist destination. This transformation illustrates how historical structures can not only be preserved but also repurposed into useful public spaces. The historical festival, which is maintained through conservation and development, has an economic impact, as visitors are invited to explore cultural heritage while contributing to the local economy. This museum is not merely a place to display artifacts, but also a living learning platform that presents narratives of the past and historical insights, encouraging appreciation of cultural heritage while empowering the education-based tourism sector (Safitri and Wijayati, 2023).

This indicates that problems still exist at Lawang Sewu, as highlighted in previous studies. Based on the results of problem identification by researchers through previous research journals and the results of visitor data identification in 2022 (LAWBY et al., 2022), it was found that there are two main motivations behind tourist visits to Lawang Sewu, namely, first, an interest in the mystical atmosphere that is strongly attached to Dutch colonial buildings, and second, a desire to explore the historical value and architectural heritage left behind by the Dutch. However, findings from Andrianto and Pranoto in 2025 suggest that mystical nuances can have negative impacts in addition to obscuring the original historical meaning of Lawang Sewu. These negative impacts include changing the meaning of the Lawang Sewu building and commercializing the tragedy that once occurred there.

In line with the dark tourism indicator that states that dark tourism is not about mystical or paranormal stories (Mavragani and Mandrinou, 2022), but rather relates to the experience of visiting places that have been associated with death, destruction, suffering, or tragic events resulting from disasters and conflicts. Wulandari et al. (2024) state that dark tourism motivates tourists to deepen their understanding of the dark events of the past and creates a strong educational and emotional experience. This study was conducted to analyze strategies to increase visitor interest in dark tourism at Lawang Sewu comprehensively by examining the implementation of the strategies carried out. Lawang Sewu management. This research is highly urgent because it aims to develop visitor appeal to Lawang Sewu through a more focused and ethical dark tourism perspective by explicitly removing mystical narratives. The goal is to focus visitor interest on historical value, rather than solely on horror or mystical sensations. Additionally, this research also makes an important contribution to strengthening Lawang Sewu's position as an educational tourist destination that balances historical, cultural, and modern tourism aspects. The research results are expected to serve as a basis for managers in formulating promotional strategies and creating tourist experiences that preserve historical authenticity, improve service quality, and expand educational relevance. In this way, Lawang Sewu will not only be attractive but also sustainable in terms of historical value and long-term benefits for the community and tourism in the city of Semarang.

Figure 1. Thinking Framework



(Source: Researcher, 2025)

From Figure 1.1, it can be seen that this study examines Lawang Sewu as a Dutch colonial building that holds stories of the past, particularly the basement that was once used as a prison during the Japanese occupation. This makes Lawang Sewu not only a historical tourist destination but also a potential object of dark tourism because it presents collective memories that can be used as a means of education and reflection. The research questions include how Lawang Sewu is constructed as a dark tourism destination through historical narratives and tourist experiences. To answer these questions, this study uses the theory of dark tourism, cultural commodification, and phenomenological approaches. With that, this study is expected to show that Lawang Sewu is understood not only as a mystical icon, but as a historical destination that presents memories of the past as a means of education, reflection, and strengthening cultural identity.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach, which is to understand the phenomenon of strategies to enhance historical aspects at the Lawang Sewu Museum in depth. This method allows researchers to capture the experiences, narratives, and interpretations of museum managers not only in depth but also in a relevant and contextual manner related to the research discussion (Haryono, 2023; Safarudin et al., 2023).

Qualitative methods are methods of exploring information and deepening understanding to find out more about something being studied, such as through behavior, perceptions, motivations, actions, and so on (Safarudin et al., 2023; Syahroni, 2022). With this approach, when researchers delve into the direct experiences of informants, the phenomena observed become clearer and more detailed, increasing the effectiveness of the information-seeking process. Through this explanation, Safarudin concludes that qualitative methods are methods of gathering information in which researchers go to the research location without directly influencing the research subjects and without attempting to influence the informants.

Researchers are the key to obtaining the data needed to answer research questions using the data triangulation method (Safarudin et al., 2023).

This study used nonprobability sampling in determining the sample, namely purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is determining the sample based on the initial consideration that the ability and quality of information possessed by the informant is in accordance with what the researcher needs. Sample selection based on purposive sampling was carried out so that the researcher could obtain information relevant to the problems occurring at the location (Ahmad and Wilkins, 2024; Suryani and Herianti, 2023). This sample focuses on individuals who have in-depth insights and direct experience related to the phenomenon being studied. With this approach, researchers ensure that each informant has the ability to convey rich and meaningful data, thereby strengthening the validity of the research findings and supporting a more rigorous analysis process. In addition, this sampling pattern also speeds up the data collection process because researchers interact directly with relevant informants and maximize the efficient use of research resources, both in terms of time and cost. From the management of Lawang Sewu, three key informants were selected who met the criteria: (1) a marketing staff member, (2) a direct manager, and (3) a member of the public relations team, each of whom had worked for at least 3 years and understood the strategies for developing the historical value of the destination. This combination was intended to obtain rich and in-depth data from various managerial perspectives that influence the development of Lawang Sewu's heritage.

Table 1. Informant Data

No	Nama	Umur	Pekerjaan	Berapa lama Bekerja
1	Arif	25 Tahun	Humas	Agustus 2021
2	Anastasia	23 Tahun	Marketing	Februari 2024
3	Tia	25 Tahun	Pengelola	Desember 2022

(Source: Researcher Processing, 2025)

The data collection method in this study was through direct interviews at two locations, namely Lawang Sewu itself and the office that manages Lawang Sewu, to obtain information about the analysis of strategies to improve the historical aspects of Lawang Sewu. Interviews with Lawang Sewu managers were conducted using semi-structured techniques to obtain information that was presented and needed by the researchers (Equatora Awi, 2021). To strengthen the validity and credibility of the data, data triangulation was applied, which is a combination of methods for collecting information from various sources and perspectives, such as interviews, observations, and documentation, allowing researchers to compare and balance perspectives between informants and researchers themselves (Nurfajriani et al., 2024; Zahroh et al., 2025). Interviews are a method of obtaining information through face-to-face interaction as a medium for seeing the perspective of the informant to find out the truth of what is being sought. Interviews are conducted using several questions to find out the actual data (Fadhallah, 2021; Fauziah, 2023).

Field observations involve visiting the location to be studied in order to obtain valid information regarding the actual conditions of the research location. Field observations are

conducted so that researchers can see firsthand how Lawang Sewu conveys historical aspects. Through observation, researchers can see the atmosphere, facilities, and visitors' responses to the atmosphere at the location. Thus, the data obtained from observation can assist interviews to produce more accurate and comprehensive research (Ebrahim and Khalifa, 2025; Jailani, 2023).

Documentation was carried out so that researchers could collect tangible evidence in the form of photographs, writings, and history related to Lawang Sewu. Researchers were able to strengthen their observational data. In addition, documentation could reinforce the authenticity of the data because there was physical evidence in the form of relevant documents or images (Lawan and Yusuf, 2022; Rahmi and Kep, 2022).

Researchers will ensure data management using Miles and Huberman's data analysis techniques (Spradley and Huberman, 2024; Usman, 2020). Data collection is the initial stage carried out by obtaining key information through interviews with selected informants, so that researchers obtain data according to research needs. Data reduction involves researchers selecting and separating important parts of the interview results that are relevant to the research problem and facilitate the data analysis process. Data presentation involves filtering the data and then organizing it in narrative form, thereby facilitating the researcher's work and making the information obtained easier to understand.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

According to PT. KAI management, several strategies have been implemented. In 2025, there are three main strategies carried out by management in an effort to increase the historical value for tourists visiting Lawang Sewu. These strategies include opening the basement of Lawang Sewu to the public as an attraction and a place to learn about the history of the building, renovating the building, and providing tour guides and storytelling to enhance the educational tourism experience.

Lawang Sewu management focuses on organizing various special events as a strategy to attract the attention of the surrounding community to become more familiar with and visit this historic building. The events held are not only for entertainment, but also related to historical and cultural values, thereby providing additional appeal for tourists. The emphasis on these activities aims to revive the atmosphere of the historic building, provide a different experience for visitors, and maintain Lawang Sewu's existence as a historical tourist destination. As a counterbalance, the management also strives to create inclusive activities that can be enjoyed by all groups, so that the community feels closer to and has an emotional connection with Lawang Sewu.

The management of Lawang Sewu has implemented a strategy of opening up access to the basement as an additional attraction for visitors. This step was taken to provide a more complete tourist experience while showing the public that the basement of Lawang Sewu is not as mystical as is often imagined. The emphasis on this strategy aims to shift public perception from a haunted impression to a more historical and architectural understanding. By presenting the basement as part of the tour, visitors can see firsthand the historical value and actual function of the building. Management also emphasizes the educational aspect in

presenting information, so that visitors are not only entertained but also gain new insights into the history of Lawang Sewu.

Lawang Sewu management implements a building restoration strategy as an effort to preserve and increase tourist appeal. The restoration is carried out in stages while still paying attention to the authenticity of Dutch colonial architecture, which is a hallmark of Lawang Sewu. This strategy not only serves to strengthen the historical value, but also ensures safety by extending the life of the building and providing comfort for visitors. The emphasis on preserving architectural details aims to maintain Lawang Sewu's identity as an authentic historical building. The management also strives to innovate tourist support facilities so that historical aspects can keep pace with tourist needs.

Lawang Sewu management also implements a strategy of providing tour guides to deliver storytelling services that enhance the visitor experience. The presence of tour guides not only helps tourists understand the history and architectural value of Lawang Sewu, but also conveys the narrative in an interesting and easy-to-understand manner. As a form of quality improvement, each guide will undergo periodic examinations every three years. These examinations aim to ensure that tour guides remain capable of accurately explaining the history of Lawang Sewu and receive updates on materials related to this historic building. As a result, visitors receive an informative and relevant tourist experience.

The Subheading of Result and Discussions

The term dark tourism was first introduced by Foley and Lennon and has since gained widespread recognition through various studies. When applied to Lawang Sewu, this concept can be interpreted as an effort to present tragic stories from the past as tourist attractions (Siti Hamidah, 2023). This is in line with studies in Indonesia that view Lawang Sewu as an icon of dark tourism because its colonial history and basement have been turned into part of a historical tourist attraction (Christina Lawby, Priscilia Fedora, 2022).

From a phenomenological perspective, dark tourism arises because of the emotional experiences tourists have when exploring Lawang Sewu, such as its underground rooms and former prison. The gloomy atmosphere evokes feelings of fear, sadness, and even reflection on the history that once took place there. This is in line with the findings of Wulandari et al. (2024), which emphasize that emotional experiences are at the core of dark tourism activities.

Lawang Sewu also demonstrates the practice of cultural commodification, where dark spaces and historical tragedies are repackaged into tourism products that can be marketed through paid tours, visual exhibitions, and guide narratives. This shift in function shows that dark events, which were initially negative, are then processed into positive and attractive tourism experiences. A similar phenomenon was also found in a study (Hendro, 2021) on Cultural Commodification in Tourism Development in Nagekeo Regency, East Nusa Tenggara, which shows how local culture is turned into a tourism commodity through the packaging of attractions and targeted promotional strategies. This is in line with the findings (Prasiasa et al., 2023) on the creative tourism industry in Bali, which confirms that cultural elements can be transformed into tourism commodities to meet market demand. Therefore, Lawang Sewu's identity as a dark tourism destination was born from a combination of the subjective experiences of tourists, namely phenomenology and the process of cultural commodification,

which transformed dark memories into marketable tourist attractions that are relevant in the modern tourism industry.

Opening of the Basement as an Educational Tourist Attraction

The historical value of Lawang Sewu has been enhanced by the opening of the cooling room, which is said to have been used as a prison when the building was taken over by the Japanese government. Tourists can now see for themselves how this area, which was previously off-limits for reasons such as the massacre and torture of prisoners, is now open to the public. However, when we look at it directly, we see that this is not the case, but it is true that prisoners were held in the basement. (Brahmanto, 2022).

Figure 2. Basement Preparation Area
(Source: Researcher, 2025)

Figure 2. shows the preparation area before entering the basement. After passing through the preparation room, tourists can explore the basement of Lawang Sewu, which once held a frightening image, not only as an underground prison that tortured prisoners during the Japanese occupation, but also as an educational facility that reveals its historical function as a drainage and natural cooling system for the Colonial building. It reopened on December 3, 2024, after being closed for a decade (Afidah, 2024).

Figure 3. Access to the Basement
(Source: Researcher, 2025)

Figure 3 shows the entrance to the basement, which is no longer in use. Access to this basement is an important part of the historical narrative because Lawang Sewu itself is a historic building that was built between 1904 and 1907 as the headquarters of the Dutch East Indies railway company. This building has high historical value because it played a role in various important events during the colonial period and the struggle for independence (Hussein, 2023). Its educational value is further highlighted by the efforts to adapt the building into a museum that displays historical information, restoration facilities, and the use of digital technology to enrich the visitor experience. This reflects that Lawang Sewu is not only a tourist attraction but also a source of historical education. With the narrative conveyed by the tour guide in an educational manner, the tourist experience can be far more deep and meaningful. Research shows that storytelling about history strengthens visitors' emotional and intellectual connections, enhancing educational value, experience, and entertainment through guide interaction and the authentic atmosphere of the place (Moreira et al., 2025). Guides at Lawang Sewu currently provide mostly technical information and have not yet implemented an educational storytelling system, even though this skill has been proven to be important for deepening the heritage experience in the context of cultural tourism (Karacaoğlu, 2024).

The Role of the Guide in Historical Narratives

In an effort to enhance historical value and the quality of the tourist experience, Lawang Sewu implements a storytelling strategy by tour guides as one of its key approaches. The tour guides operating at this location are not official employees of the management, but rather a third-party community that has obtained official licenses, similar to a driver's license, and must undergo renewal every three years to maintain standards of professionalism and narrative accuracy. The educational material they deliver is dynamic: in addition to the main material from the training, additional guidelines from the Lawang Sewu management are provided to them directly on a regular basis.

Each guide explains the history of the building in detail without emphasizing mystical stories, covering the origins of Lawang Sewu, the Japanese occupation, and the function of the basement as a place of torture and detention for independence fighters. They also discuss interesting architectural aspects, such as the reason why there are no bathrooms in the main building but are built separately, and the unique glass structure, namely the inward-opening window design, which functions as a natural ventilation system for the second floor. One of the visual attractions that is often talked about is the long corridor that resembles a train carriage. The guide explains how this corner has become a popular photo spot thanks to the reflection of light on the glass, which creates dynamic shadows.

Figure 4. Group Photo with Lawang Sewu Guides
(Source: Researcher, 2025)

Figure 4. shows the important role of tour guides in guiding visitors through the heritage narrative of Lawang Sewu. This storytelling strategy is intended to reinforce the historical value of Lawang Sewu through a fact-based narrative approach, avoiding mystical sensationalism and focusing visitors on the actual historical context. Accountable guide training through license renewals and material support from management ensures consistent educational quality and up-to-date information. With a third-party community model that does not charge fees, management practices inclusive collaboration and a model of trust in local guides, while maintaining an authentic heritage narrative.

Building Restoration

The management of Lawang Sewu implemented a building restoration strategy to strengthen the physical structure and preserve the aesthetic value of the heritage site, while also eliminating the "haunted" or "frightening" impression often associated with old buildings. Through an adaptive reuse approach, the restoration process prioritized safety, structural reinforcement without altering the historical characteristics, as well as improvements in ventilation and natural lighting in line with extending the building's lifespan

and preventing further deterioration (Laroche, 2025). In addition to structural improvements, the basement area was cleaned and aesthetically enhanced with warm lighting that considered the principles of prospect and refuge in architectural psychology, where visitors are able to see their surroundings clearly (prospect) while simultaneously feeling safe and protected (refuge) (Nute & Chen, 2021).

Figure 5. Documentation of the Restoration of Lawang Sewu
(Source: Researcher, 2025)

Figure 5. shows original documentation from Lawang Sewu that illustrates the building restoration process. This restoration is also important in countering the perception that buildings commonly associated with the image of haunted houses are old, dark, dilapidated, with dim corners and worn-out elements that evoke discomfort and mystical associations (Damayanti et al., 2024). Restoration provides solutions such as recycling cultural heritage as an educational value, while reducing the negative psychological connotations that often attach to old structures. This also reflects the idea that adaptive reuse is not just about preserving the physical structure of a building, but also revitalizing the public's perception of heritage, making it more welcoming, informative, and aesthetically relevant to modern society.

CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study shows that cultural commodification is not only an economic or aesthetic process but also a subjective experience that affects cultural actors and their supporting communities because cultures that were originally rooted in sacred values and social functions change their appearance to attract markets and tourists, resulting in a reduction in meaning from sacred values to entertainment and aesthetic values. Although there are economic benefits such as increased income and promotion of culture to a wider audience, these benefits are often accompanied by complex impacts of marginalization on indigenous cultural groups in terms of control over cultural representation, loss of cultural authenticity, and the potential loss of important cultural context. This study emphasizes that cultural commodification must be viewed from two sides: as an opportunity for cultural

preservation and as a risk if authentic cultural meaning is ignored or sacrificed in the process of cultural transformation.

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AUTHOR PROFIL

Ryan Dharmawan
Undergraduate student, Hospitality and Tourism, Cultural Commodification.

Wiwik Nirmala Sari, SST. Par., M.Par
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0000-9855-9109
A tourism scholar with degrees in Tourism and Tourism Studies, currently serving as a Lecturer at Udayana University, focusing on gastronomy tourism and sustainable tourism development.