

Article

Analysis of Audiovisual Productions in the Development of Tourism in the Ruins of Armero

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Abstract

This research aims to analyze audiovisual productions related to the development of tourism at the Armero ruins and the visitor experience in the area. The methodology used is qualitative and was carried out in two phases. This research began in August 2023 with interviews with visitors to Armero and a content analysis of YouTube videos that recount the Armero tragedy. The impact on collective memory and the sense of belonging among visitors is highlighted. The visitors' personal productions show that the experience in Armero becomes an emotional journey, where history is tangled with the hope of rebuilding the social fabric and honoring the memory of the thousands who lost their lives. This research reveals a range of emotions: from awe at the natural beauty to respect and sadness when remembering the tragedy that buried this prosperous Colombian city in 1985. In conclusion, the importance of preserving historical memory is evident, so that tragedies like Armero's are not forgotten and can promote reflection on natural risk management and community resilience.

Keywords: dark tourism; imaginary tourism; filmic tourism

1. Introduction

This article analyzes tourism dynamics at the Armero ruins, starting with an exploration of the imaginaries, motivations, and expectations of those who visit this site. Therefore, it is important to understand the perceptions that drive travel and how these influence the tourist experience; this is essential to understanding this phenomenon. Currently, many tourists express interest in learning the details of the greatest tragedy in Colombian history. Many people express interest in visiting the ruins for cultural, educational, commemorative, recreational, or even macabre reasons.

To contextualize this phenomenon, the research addresses the collective imagination and experiences of visitors to a territory marked by one of Colombia's greatest tragedies. On 13 November 1985, the eruption of Nevado del Ruiz triggered a series of lahars that descended through the Lagunilla, Gualí, and Azufrado river basins, burying the city of Armero and causing approximately 28,000 deaths (Magano et al., 2023). The disaster was caused by the accelerated melting of the glacier, which generated enormous flows of mud, rocks, and volcanic material (Patiño, 2011). Despite signs of volcanic activity and prior warnings, preventive measures proved insufficient, highlighting significant shortcomings in risk management and disaster prevention in Colombia (Ospina Enciso, 2013).

As can be seen in Figure 1, Armero was a municipality located in the northern part of the department of Tolima, in the Magdalena River valley, at an approximate altitude of 280 m above sea level and only 48 km from the Arenas crater of the Nevado del Ruiz



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volcano. The marked difference in altitude between the slopes of the volcano and the plain favored the rapid descent of lahars, while the flat topography allowed the flows to spread over a large urban area (Hiernaux-Nicolas, 2002). The hydrographic network was mainly composed of the Lagunilla and Azufrado rivers, which originate on the glacial slopes of the volcano and converge near the old town center (Ujueta & Mojica, 1995). Furthermore, the plain on which Armero was built was formed by deposits from ancient lahars that occurred in 1595 and 1845, geological antecedents that had already been identified before the 1985 eruption (García, 2005). This event combined water from glacial melt with ash, pyroclastic material, rocks, and sediments carried by the riverbeds, generating a flow estimated at 90 million cubic meters (Ramírez, 2010).

Before the tragedy, Armero was a growing city with urban infrastructure, educational institutions, health services, and public spaces that strengthened community life (Ujueta & Mojica, 1995; Ramírez, 2010; García, 2005; Martínez & Sánchez, 2008). Its cultural identity was expressed through religious festivals, popular music, and local cuisine, consolidating it as a regional benchmark (García, 2005; Ujueta & Mojica, 1995; Vargas, 2012; López, 2014). Economically, it was one of the main agricultural and livestock centers of Tolima, renowned for its production of rice, cotton, and sorghum, which is why it was known as the “White City” (Ramírez, 2010; Vargas, 2012; Mendoza, 2007; López, 2014; Martínez & Sánchez, 2008; Torres, 2009). Likewise, social life was characterized by strong community ties, solidarity, and a marked sense of belonging (Patiño, 2011; Gómez & Herrera, 2013; Cardona, 2006). This prosperity was abruptly interrupted by the tragedy of 1985, which left a permanent mark on the Colombian collective memory (Ramírez, 2010; Vargas, 2012).

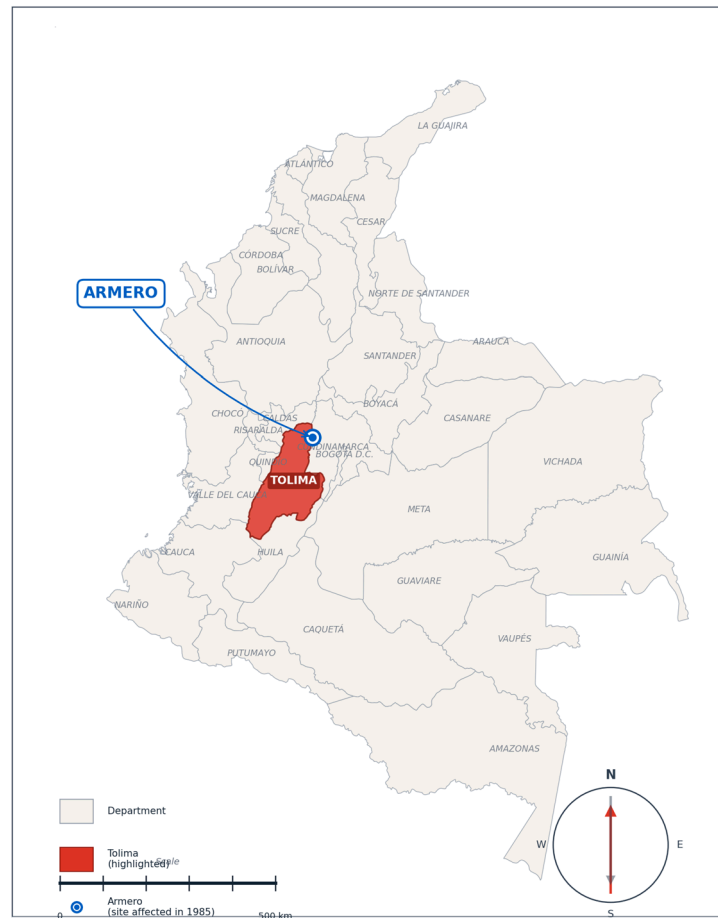
The tourist imaginary is composed of representations that influence how travel is conceived and experienced (Hiernaux-Nicolas, 2002). In this sense, this research analyzes the role of audiovisual productions and narratives that visitors construct before arriving in Armero and how these are transformed after visiting the site. The emotions and reflections derived from the visit vary according to personal experience; some experience nostalgia, sadness, or empathy, while others develop a more historical or educational interest. Even so, this place continues to evoke a particular attraction, leading to questions about the elements that transform settings marked by tragedy into tourist destinations.

Local cultural practices continue to play an important role in the contemporary tourism experience. In addition to enriching the visit, they reflect the identity, resilience, and memory of the community. Several authors point out that the authenticity of these practices significantly influences visitors’ perceptions and satisfaction (Mora et al., 2022). In Armero, their integration into the tourism offerings allows for a better understanding of the relationship between memory, culture, and tourism in settings marked by tragedy.

In recent years, audiovisual resources have become strategic tools for strengthening the interpretation of tourist destinations (Sharma & Sharma, 2024). These resources allow for the reconstruction of historical contexts, the transmission of emotions, and a deeper understanding of traumatic events. According to Laaksonen and Varga (2024), places like Chernobyl and the Auschwitz concentration camp have developed dark tourism experiences supported by documentaries, multimedia materials, and digital experiences. These tools promote historical learning and reflection on the human and social consequences of tragedies (Basaraba, 2024). Therefore, the objective of this research is to analyze audiovisual productions related to the tourism development of the Armero ruins and the visitor experience in the area. This aims to contribute to the understanding of the relationships between tourism, memory, and culture, as well as to provide a foundation for future research on the imagery and audiovisual productions of tourism in places marked by tragic events.

Location of Armero — Tolima, Colombia

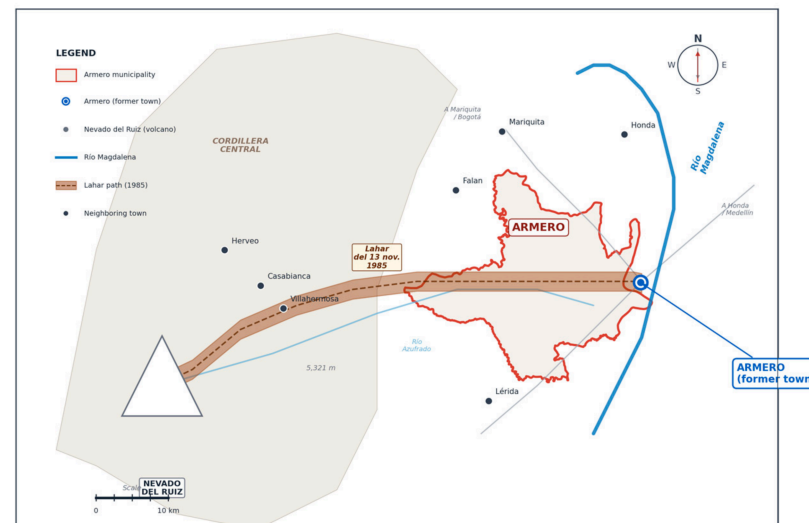
Geographic location of the former municipality of Armero



Armero — Tolima, Colombia

Detail map of the former municipality of Armero (today Armero-Guayabal)

5°00' N - 74°43' W
Elevation = 280 m a.s.l.
Municipality area = 410 km²



Source: OpenStreetMap (municipal boundary) - Natural Earth (relief)

Figure 1. Colombian Map, Armero, Tolima. **Source:** Produced with the support of the AI Z.ai.

1.1. Audiovisual Productions in Development for Dark Tourism

Film-induced tourism is defined as the movement of visitors to destinations that have been depicted in films, television series, or other audiovisual productions (Beeton, 2011; Oshriyeh & Capriello, 2022). Araújo-Vila et al. (2024) analyze it as a key factor in promoting a destination's image and its capacity to establish places in the global imagination. Beeton (2011) distinguished between tourism induced by fiction films, documentaries, and television programs, noting that the category encompasses a broad spectrum of practices with distinct dynamics. Oshriyeh and Capriello (2022), from the consumer's perspective, argue that many people travel motivated by a film with the desire to recreate scenes, sensations, or emotions experienced during the screening, thus fulfilling a desire previously constructed by the audiovisual medium. In the case of Armero, although fictional productions are excluded from the analysis, documentary productions and YouTube videos play a role in the symbolic construction of the destination, activating motivations to visit and configuring emotional repertoires that the visitor seeks to reproduce on the site.

Sánchez-Castillo (2020) warns that many studies on film tourism rely on anecdotal accounts of tourism successes, which limits the validity and generalizability of the findings, and proposes developing more robust methodologies. Sánchez-Castillo (2022) suggests using digital data to accurately identify the audiovisual elements that act as tourism stimuli. da Costa and Sizzo (2021), from a geographical perspective, propose the notion of territory used to analyze how filmic representations influence the real transformation of geographic space, not only symbolically, but also in its material and social dimensions. Nieto-Ferrando et al. (2021) emphasize that the textual analysis of audiovisual fictions shows that aesthetic and symbolic narratives influence the idealization of destinations; however, the audience reinterprets this content according to their experiences, cultural frameworks, and expectations, making cinema's capacity to construct tourism imaginaries contingent.

The development of audiovisual productions in dark tourism represents a particular intersection, where these productions narrate real or fictionalized tragedies that motivate travel to the depicted sites (Beauvais, 2022; Stadler & Hawkes, 2022). Beauvais (2022) analyzes "Netflix tourism" in Medellín, showing how streaming series generate new tourist flows to places associated with drug trafficking, with ethical tensions between memory, market, and social sensitivity that materialize in tours of Comuna 13. Stadler and Hawkes (2022) address serial killer films and the affective contours of the genre and the place, showing how fiction shapes the visitor's emotional experience. Tevely et al. (2022) examine the blurring of boundaries between fact and fiction in the context of dark tourism. Zerva (2021) traces the evolution of dark tourism on Netflix from place-centric approaches to narrative-mediated models, revealing how personal interpretation shapes meanings, experiences, and ethical tensions. These contributions illuminate the case of Armero, where documentary productions on YouTube fulfill functions analogous to those of commercial streaming cinema in the production of dark tourism imaginaries.

The ethics of the audiovisual representation of pain constitute a critical axis of cinematic tourism in contexts of tragedy. Vermoesen and Soberon (2025) argue that contemporary cinema does not operate neutrally, but rather as a symbolic technology that produces a cinematic tourist gaze capable of transforming territories, landscapes, and memories into consumable objects, reconfiguring the relationships between spectators, places, and historical legacies of domination. Kumar et al. (2024) analyze how responsible marketing and appropriate narrative mediation influence public perception and the growing demand for dark tourism, opening possibilities for the ethical management of the phenomenon. Sun and Lv (2021) delve into the mind-body connection that deepens the visitor's emotions and historical understanding on-site. Basaraba (2024) analyzes virtual paranormal dark tourism on YouTube, where the ethics of representation are strained by the platform's algorithmic

logic. In the case of Armero, these tensions materialize in the debate surrounding documentaries, where the monetization of pain, sensitivity, and creative responsibility clash, shaping an ethical field that demands clear protocols for audiovisual production at memorial sites.

Dark tourism is defined as the movement of people to sites associated with death, suffering, tragedy, or the macabre (Foley & Lennon, 1996; Lennon & Foley, 2000; Stone, 2006). The term was coined by Foley and Lennon in the mid-1990s to describe a phenomenon that, while it has existed since antiquity—from pilgrimages to battlefields to visits to catacombs and execution sites—acquired renewed media and academic prominence in the 21st century. Iliev (2021) and Mora et al. (2022) agree that dark tourism has become a global practice that articulates historical memory, collective grief, and cultural consumption, generating both fascination and ethical controversy. In this sense, the category is not limited to major sites of mass death, but rather encompasses a broad spectrum of spaces—from cemeteries and memorials to ruins of natural disasters—where death and trauma constitute the main tourist attraction, defining a transdisciplinary field of study that intersects tourism, memory, ethics, and communication.

Stone (2006) proposed a graduated typology of dark tourism, ranging from the “lightest dark” sites—such as catacombs with educational purposes or exhibitions about death—to the “darkest dark,” such as extermination camps or sites of recent genocide. This gradation allows us to understand the diversity of visitor motivations, which range from morbid curiosity and the search for emotional experience to historical learning and personal mourning (Lewis et al., 2022; Podoshen, 2013). Iliev (2021) distinguishes between experiential, educational, and reflective motivations, showing how the visitor’s critical dimension depends on the symbolic framework of the site. Sun and Lv (2021) emphasize the mind–body connection that is activated through physical contact with the tragic site, deepening the emotional dimension of the experience. These contributions allow us to interpret the Armero case as a destination that combines several levels of “darkness”: the natural disaster, national mourning, paranormal narratives, and institutional neglect, attracting a heterogeneous public with diverse motivations that the theoretical framework must differentiate.

Dark tourism associated with natural disasters occupies a particular place within this category, as it articulates human vulnerability to the force of nature with the social construction of memory (Mora et al., 2022). Salgado et al. (2024) argue that preserving historical memory through narratives and conservation policies strengthens critical awareness of collective and personal memory, transforming disaster sites into educational spaces. Magano et al. (2023) warn that these tours can generate both positive impacts—empathy, historical awareness, and vindication of the victims—and negative effects on the psychological, emotional, and spiritual well-being of visitors, especially when exposure to trauma is intense or lacks mediation. In Armero, the city’s physical ruins and the testimonies of survivors function as memory devices that constantly strain the line between the pedagogy of mourning and the spectacularization of pain, especially when visitors seek to reconstruct the history of the white city buried in 1985 (Ospina Enciso, 2013; Cardona, 2006).

The case of Armero can be contextualized within a global geography of dark tourism by comparing it with other places marked by tragedies. The Chernobyl exclusion zone demonstrates how tourist flows to disaster sites are mediated by audiovisual practices and guided tours, generating ethical tensions between visitors and local communities (Laakso-nen & Varga, 2024). Similarly, Auschwitz-Birkenau has become established as a benchmark for memory tourism, where audiovisual mediation strengthens historical learning and ethical reflection (Basaraba, 2024; Magano et al., 2023). Hence, the ethical dimension constitutes one of the main debates surrounding dark tourism, since the transformation of spaces of tragedy into tourist attractions generates tensions between memory, grief, and the

market (Shekhar & Valeri, 2022). Shekhar and Valeri (2022) points out that these practices can be perceived as forms of exploitation when profitability is prioritized over the dignity of the affected communities. Likewise, the commercialization of traumatic memories can trivialize suffering and reactivate identity conflicts (Ironsides & James, 2024), challenges that are also evident in the context of Armero.

The articulation of the three axes—dark tourism, tourist imaginaries, and audiovisual mediations—allows us to understand the Armero case as a complex phenomenon in which audiovisual productions construct imaginaries that motivate dark tourism and reproduce collective memory. Audiovisual mediations (film, documentaries, YouTube, social media) act as devices that produce tourist imaginaries, which, in turn, activate motivations to visit sites of tragedy, generating experiences that feed back into the circulation of new audiovisual content (Mora Forero, 2025). This symbolic chain operates within an ethical horizon that constantly strains the line between education and spectacle, commemoration and exploitation, memory and market, configuring a field of study that demands theoretical sensitivity and rigorous methodology. The study of Armero, therefore, requires a multi-dimensional approach that incorporates audiovisual communication, cultural geography, reception studies, and spatial economics, as proposed by Nieto-Ferrando et al. (2021, 2024) and da Costa and Sizzo (2021), articulating the symbolic and material dimensions of the production of destiny and positioning the ethics of representation as a transversal criterion of analysis.

1.2. Tourist Imaginaries

The concept of tourist imaginaries is part of the broader theoretical tradition of social imaginaries developed by da Costa and Sizzo (2021) for whom the imaginary constitutes a constitutive dimension of the social, capable of creating meanings that are not reducible to the rational or the empirical. Hiernaux-Nicolas et al. (2002) applied this notion to the field of tourism, defining tourist imaginaries as social representations that influence how travel is conceived and experienced. The tourist imaginary is not a mere reflection of the reality of the destination, but an active symbolic construction that precedes, accompanies, and reconfigures the visitor's experience. Understanding these imaginaries is key to analyzing places like Armero, where the image of the site is strongly mediated by accounts of the tragedy, local legends, and audiovisual narratives that circulate before, during, and after the visit, shaping a horizon of expectations that guides the perception of the place and the repertoire of emotions that the visitor considers legitimate to experience.

Tourist imaginaries tend to stereotype destinations, reducing their diversity and authenticity to make them more consumable (Hiernaux-Nicolas et al., 2002). Iliev (2021) agree that imaginaries are social and cultural constructs that affect tourist experiences; while address them in rural tourism, Iliev applies them specifically to dark tourism, highlighting the cultural influence on tourists' motivations. Hiernaux-Nicolas et al. (2002) emphasize that media-driven and tourism-driven narratives can distort the perception of a destination by highlighting specific aspects and omitting others, producing a simplified image that ends up replacing the real complexity of the place. In the case of Armero, this is evident in the YouTube videos that dominate social media platforms, where the almost exclusive focus on the disaster generates a limited perception of the place, associating it almost exclusively with the 1985 tragedy and overshadowing the previous history of the once prosperous "white city" of Tolima, its cotton economy, and its cultural life (García, 2005; Mora Forero, 2025).

In places marked by tragedies, tourist imaginaries operate a particular symbolic transformation: they turn pain into attraction, mourning into experience, and ruin into a consumable landscape (Leite, 2014; Gravari-Barbas, 2019). Leite (2014) and Gravari-Barbas

(2019) analyze how these imaginaries transform sites of tragedy into attractive products through symbolic narratives that mediate the visitor's relationship with the trauma. These authors discuss the creation of cultural representations that influence visitors' perceptions and experiences, establishing interpretive frameworks that guide what is seen, felt, and remembered. In Armero, the imaginaries surrounding the tragedy the buried children, the girl Omaira, the ruined hospital, the legends of apparitions function as symbolic devices that structure the visit, generating an emotional experience that combines commemoration, education, and morbid fascination in varying proportions depending on the visitor. This logic of symbolic transformation is what allows a cemetery, a ruin, or a field of rubble to become a tourist destination with itineraries, photo spots, and rituals of passage.

The mediation of platforms like YouTube and social media has profoundly reconfigured the production and circulation of tourist narratives about sites of tragedy (Basaraba, 2024; Sharma & Sharma, 2024). Basaraba (2024) analyzes the rise in paranormal investigations as virtual dark tourism on YouTube, a phenomenon that opens new channels for the circulation of macabre narratives about places like Armero. Sharma and Sharma (2024) explore how digital platforms amplify dark tourism, generating new forms of mediated engagement that exceed the logic of traditional media. In the case of Armero, the videos analyzed in Mora Forero's (2025) study show how YouTube has become a living archive of memory that simultaneously educates, commemorates, and sensationalizes. This platform allows imaginaries to be collectively constructed through user-generated comments, reactions, and content, overcoming the unidirectional logic of mass media and configuring an algorithmic visibility regime that rewards emotional impact over historical rigor.

The relationship between tourist imaginaries and collective memory constitutes a fundamental dimension of the theoretical framework. Following (Sharma and Sharma (2024), collective memory is socially constructed within group frameworks that define what, how, and who remembers; individuals remember to the extent that they are embedded in social groups that provide them with schemes for remembrance. Basaraba (2024) introduced the notion of "places of memory" (*lieux de mémoire*) to designate the sites where the collective memory of a community crystallizes, especially when living memory fades. In Armero, tourist imaginaries operate in tension with several layers of memory: the official one, transmitted by mass media (35% of visitors); The hereditary, transmitted through intimate narratives (29%); and the printed, conveyed by the press (25%) (Mora Forero, 2025). This diversity of sources demonstrates that the memory of the disaster does not circulate uniformly, but is mediated by mechanisms of symbolic authority that structure what is remembered, how it is remembered, and who has the legitimacy to narrate it, generating tensions between hegemonic memory and subaltern memories that tourism analysis cannot ignore.

2. Materials and Methods

The methodology employed in this research is qualitative. A content analysis was conducted on 30 videos published on YouTube, a technique that allowed for an in-depth examination of various elements present in the audiovisual materials, such as texts, images, narratives, and concepts. This type of analysis facilitates the identification of patterns, recurring themes, and underlying meanings, and is fundamental for understanding social and cultural contexts, validating theoretical propositions, and synthesizing complex information (Campos & Mújica, 2008). Thanks to this, researchers can recognize significant nuances and expand knowledge in different disciplines, especially in the social sciences, where certain phenomena may go unnoticed using traditional methods.

As a second methodological instrument, three research videos were produced to explore people's social imaginaries regarding the Armero tragedy and their associated

experiences. The use of multimedia content as a research tool allows for the capture and analysis of data in multiple formats—video, audio, images, and text—enabling a richer and more detailed approach to complex phenomena. This strategy fosters a deeper understanding of human experiences, behaviors, and social dynamics, as it employs advanced content analysis techniques capable of revealing perspectives that can be difficult to obtain through exclusively written or traditional visual methods (Schuck & Kearney, 2006).

In July 2023, a field visit was conducted in Armero, Tolima, with the purpose of recording two videos titled “Learn the History of Armero” and “What is Your Perception of Armero?” The comments made by viewers were collected and analyzed from these videos. The videos were published on the YouTube channel “Tourism Researcher,” which broadened the scope of the data collection and allowed for the gathering of diverse perceptions associated with the case study. In a field study conducted in November 2024, 10 interviews were carried out with visitors to Armero, in order to find out how people learned about the tragedy, through what means and how audiovisual productions have influenced the development of the tourist experience.

3. Results

The audiovisual productions presented in Table 1 reveal that the representation of the Armero tragedy extends beyond a simple historical reconstruction, incorporating diverse narrative strategies that shape visitors’ perceptions of the destination. Although the videos differ in format—from documentaries and survivor testimonies to digital tourism content—they consistently construct Armero as a symbolic landscape where memory, human suffering, resilience, and ethical reflection converge. Historical footage, eyewitness testimonies, on-site recordings, and documentary narration are the most frequently employed audiovisual resources, enhancing authenticity and reinforcing emotional engagement with the audience.

A clear pattern emerging from the analysis is the predominance of emotions associated with sadness, empathy, compassion, admiration, and reflection. Videos centered on survivors and emergency responders emphasize resilience and humanitarian values, encouraging viewers to identify emotionally with individual experiences rather than focusing exclusively on the physical destruction of the town. Conversely, tourism-oriented productions that explore the ruins introduce elements of curiosity and exploration, creating a hybrid narrative in which educational purposes coexist with the experiential motivations commonly associated with dark tourism. This combination demonstrates that Armero is increasingly interpreted not merely as a disaster site but as a place where visitors seek historical understanding, emotional connection, and ethical reflection.

The videos also activate distinct moral frameworks that influence the interpretation of the tragedy. Several productions explicitly emphasize institutional responsibility, failures in disaster management, and the necessity of preserving collective memory to prevent similar catastrophes. Others foreground solidarity, heroism, and community resilience, presenting the disaster as a lesson in human dignity and social responsibility. In contrast, videos produced by digital influencers generate ethical debates concerning the commercialization of suffering and the boundaries between respectful remembrance and entertainment-oriented tourism. Audience responses reflect these tensions, as users frequently reward educational and commemorative narratives while criticizing sensationalist or superficial representations that appear to trivialize collective trauma.

Table 1. YouTube videos about Armero with a documentary style.

No	Video Title	Video Summary	Narrative and Audiovisual Analysis	Comments Summary	Link
1	Armero: la tragedia que conmovió al planeta	Documentary that reconstructs the Armero tragedy through archival footage, survivor testimonies, and contextual explanations about the disaster.	Uses historical footage, emotional narration, and survivor testimonies to construct a collective memory narrative centered on loss and remembrance. The predominant emotions are sadness, empathy, and reflection. The video frames Armero as a symbolic place of memory and reinforces a moral discourse focused on preventing future institutional negligence.	Comments express sadness, solidarity, and remembrance; they highlight the importance of remembering, preventing future negligence, and honoring the victims of the disaster.	https://youtu.be/4yRK4APP8Bk?si=vIKxOsO6LJELn0_T (accessed on 25 June 2026)
2	Recorriendo los misterios de Armero–Paulette	A YouTuber visits Armero, explores the ruins and cemetery, and recounts local stories, legends, and elements associated with dark tourism and memory.	Combines travel-vlog aesthetics with narratives of tragedy, mystery, and local legends. The audiovisual language promotes curiosity and exploration while simultaneously invoking respect for the victims. The video constructs Armero as both a site of memory and a dark tourism destination, generating tensions between commemoration and entertainment.	Comments debate respect, sensationalism, and remembrance; some appreciate the informative visit, while others criticize the approach for being insensitive to the pain.	https://youtu.be/1MAg3--9ZlA?si=2hZ-eeXAiabVcw1 (accessed on 25 June 2026)
3	Sobrevivientes de Armero	Testimonies from survivors recount their experiences, losses, and emotional recovery after the avalanche.	Relies on first-person testimony as its primary narrative resource. The accounts evoke empathy, grief, and admiration for resilience. The moral framework emphasizes human suffering, survival, and the preservation of historical memory. Armero is represented as a space where personal trauma becomes collective remembrance.	Comments show empathy, admiration for resilience, and sorrow upon hearing the accounts; users appreciate the preservation of these historical memories.	https://youtu.be/pe61_MFh54k?si=57AgRpNaVEmjioEi (accessed on 25 June 2026)
4	Sobreviví Armero, la historia del médico Juan Gaitán	A physician who survived while assisting victims narrates his experiences during the catastrophe.	The narrative focuses on heroism, sacrifice, and humanitarian action. Through personal testimony and detailed recollections, the video highlights ethical responsibility during crises. The dominant emotions are admiration, respect, and compassion, reinforcing a positive memory associated with solidarity amid tragedy.	Comments highlight the doctor's bravery, acknowledge his work, and express gratitude for learning about human stories that demonstrate heroism amidst the disaster.	https://youtu.be/Kia2d9fOhLA?si=yTDNux69bsWTMUlt (accessed on 25 June 2026)

Table 1. Cont.

No	Video Title	Video Summary	Narrative and Audiovisual Analysis	Comments Summary	Link
5	Egresado de U. de Caldas cuenta testimonio de experiencia en avalancha de Armero	A survivor recounts his personal experience during the disaster and its long-term consequences.	The testimony-based narrative emphasizes vulnerability, survival, and personal transformation. The video encourages reflection on disaster preparedness and collective learning. It constructs Armero as a historical lesson and a reminder of the social consequences of inadequate risk management.	Comments emphasize the importance of testimony, express respect for survivors, and reflect on disaster preparedness.	https://youtu.be/U7PIevjktBA?si=1clgo8o_sFH5wvkd (accessed on 25 June 2026)
6	Documental “Armero ¿poder de Dios o negligencia humana?”	Documentary that explores religious interpretations and institutional responsibility surrounding the tragedy.	Uses interviews, historical evidence, and argumentative discourse to establish a moral debate regarding responsibility. The narrative contrasts faith-based explanations with scientific and political perspectives. Emotions of indignation, reflection, and questioning are evident, while Armero is portrayed as a symbol of institutional failure and social injustice.	Comments debate state responsibility, question previous decisions, and reflect on how faith and science interpret human catastrophes.	https://youtu.be/bd6UhFooKIA?si=_YvqFa78mBBImrpF (accessed on 25 June 2026)
7	Armero-Dos días después de la tragedia 15 noviembre 1985	Original footage recorded immediately after the disaster documenting destruction, rescue efforts, and survivors.	The raw visual material provides a direct and highly impactful representation of the catastrophe. The absence of extensive editing reinforces authenticity and emotional intensity. The dominant emotions are shock, sorrow, and compassion. The video contributes to the construction of Armero as an enduring symbol of collective tragedy and historical memory.	Comments value the historical material, express sorrow and respect, and point out the importance of remembering to avoid repeating institutional errors.	https://youtu.be/ZNBVwC56uKA?si=zb1TJQkQoO5xZhbb (accessed on 25 June 2026)
8	Armero documental-La Liendra	A social media influencer visits Armero and combines historical information with personal reflections and tourism-oriented content.	Employs contemporary digital storytelling characterized by informal language, personal experiences, and audience engagement strategies. The video generates a hybrid representation of Armero as both a memory site and a tourism attraction. Ethical tensions emerge regarding the commercialization of tragedy and the boundaries between education, remembrance, and entertainment.	Comments are divided: some appreciate making the memory visible, while others criticize the lighthearted tone; there is a debate about the ethical limits of tourism content.	https://youtu.be/eyFNapFTX34?si=O06r-cgTdYXlzhCX (accessed on 25 June 2026)

Note. Author’s own elaboration.

Overall, the findings suggest that YouTube functions not only as a platform for disseminating historical information but also as an active space where competing narratives continuously reshape the social meaning of Armero. Rather than promoting a single interpretation, the audiovisual corpus contributes to constructing multiple destination imaginaries, including Armero as a memorial landscape, a site of dark tourism, a symbol of institutional failure, and a place for ethical learning and historical reflection. These diverse representations significantly influence how potential visitors understand the destination before experiencing it in person, highlighting the central role of digital media in the contemporary construction of dark tourism experiences (Table 1).

The audiovisual productions presented in Table 2 demonstrate that contemporary representations of the Armero tragedy have evolved beyond historical documentation to encompass multiple interpretative perspectives, including heritage conservation, disaster risk education, scientific dissemination, digital storytelling, and even paranormal entertainment. This diversity of audiovisual approaches indicates that Armero continues to be actively reinterpreted within the digital media ecosystem, where different producers construct competing narratives that shape public understanding of the disaster and influence the destination's image.

A prominent finding is the coexistence of commemorative, educational, and entertainment-oriented narratives. Documentary productions and historical reports predominantly employ archival footage, expert interviews, survivor testimonies, and chronological reconstructions to reinforce collective memory, institutional responsibility, and the ethical obligation to preserve the lessons of the disaster. In contrast, guided tours and heritage-focused videos integrate historical interpretation with landscape exploration, encouraging respectful visitation while positioning Armero as a place where tourism and remembrance coexist. These productions generate emotions of empathy, nostalgia, contemplation, and social responsibility, reinforcing the site's symbolic value as both a memorial landscape and an educational destination.

An important contribution of this corpus is the incorporation of scientific and institutional narratives, particularly through the documentary *Armero: 40 años con ciencia volcánica*. Unlike productions primarily centered on emotional testimony, this documentary frames the tragedy through volcanic science, hazard monitoring, and disaster risk management. The use of scientific explanations, animations, and expert interviews broadens the interpretative framework by linking remembrance with prevention and public education. Audience responses indicate that viewers highly value this approach, recognizing scientific communication as an essential component of historical memory and future disaster preparedness. This finding suggests that contemporary audiovisual narratives increasingly integrate emotional remembrance with educational objectives, expanding the social functions of dark tourism interpretation.

The analysis also reveals the persistence of ethical tensions surrounding the digital representation of tragedy. Videos focused on paranormal experiences or mystery tourism employ suspenseful storytelling, dramatic audiovisual effects, and supernatural narratives that transform the ruins into spaces of entertainment rather than remembrance. Audience reactions are notably polarized, with some users expressing curiosity while many others criticize these representations for commercializing collective suffering and diverting attention from the historical and human dimensions of the disaster. These responses demonstrate that digital audiences actively negotiate the ethical boundaries between education, memorialization, and entertainment, reinforcing the importance of authenticity and respect in dark tourism narratives.

Table 2. YouTube videos about Armero, travel-style experiences.

No	Video Title	Video Summary	Narrative and Audiovisual Analysis	Audience Reception and Dominant Perceptions	Link
1	El pueblo que desapareció: Armero	A documentary reconstructing the disappearance of Armero through archival footage, survivor testimonies, and historical analysis of the disaster and its consequences.	The documentary combines archival footage, voice-over narration, and eyewitness testimonies to construct a historical narrative centered on collective memory and social responsibility. It evokes sadness, empathy, and reflection while portraying Armero as a place of remembrance and a symbol of institutional lessons. The dominant moral frame emphasizes the importance of preserving historical memory to prevent future tragedies.	Comments express deep sadness, solidarity with the victims, acknowledgment of past mistakes, and the need to keep the memory of the tragedy alive. Viewers value the documentary as an educational and commemorative resource.	https://youtu.be/MEFuyFYeo4c?si=O2cvGeUy1vqRXuFX (accessed on 25 June 2026)
2	Armero: recorrido conociendo la Historia	A guided tour through the ruins of Armero describing significant locations, historical events, and the relationship between memory, heritage, and dark tourism.	The audiovisual narrative combines historical explanation with on-site exploration, using landscape imagery and interpretative storytelling. The video balances educational content with tourism practices, representing Armero as both a memorial landscape and a destination for reflective dark tourism. The predominant emotions are respect, curiosity, and contemplation.	Comments appreciate the historical explanations and emphasize the importance of respectful visitation. Many viewers reject sensationalism and support educational approaches to heritage interpretation.	https://youtu.be/qLjqyfxlyXw?si=JS1iVLny4_IONcW9 (accessed on 25 June 2026)
3	Armero 37 años después de la tragedia	A report documenting the current condition of Armero, including monuments, abandoned spaces, survivor testimonies, and reflections on memory and state responsibility.	The report contrasts past destruction with the present landscape, highlighting abandonment, resilience, and ongoing remembrance. Through interviews and contemporary images, it constructs Armero as an unfinished memory marked by institutional debt and social resilience. The narrative reinforces emotions of nostalgia, sadness, and reflection.	Comments lament the deterioration of the site, express solidarity with survivors, and call for greater preservation efforts and institutional commitment to historical memory.	https://youtu.be/0Vgc2S5h6G8?si=mCOcREKITRZrvGLU (accessed on 25 June 2026)

Table 2. Cont.

No	Video Title	Video Summary	Narrative and Audiovisual Analysis	Audience Reception and Dominant Perceptions	Link
4	La historia oculta de Armero: “La ciudad blanca” antes de la tragedia	The documentary reconstructs Armero before the disaster by presenting its economic development, cultural traditions, urban life, and regional importance.	Unlike videos focused exclusively on the disaster, this production builds an identity narrative by recovering Armero’s social and cultural prosperity. The audiovisual discourse encourages viewers to understand not only what was lost physically but also the disappearance of an important cultural landscape. It evokes nostalgia and admiration while strengthening the symbolic value of memory.	Comments express surprise at Armero’s former prosperity, nostalgia for the lost city, and recognition of the profound cultural consequences of the tragedy.	https://youtu.be/LPlvM1f_xso?si=sGjGYRLEZq65XspX (accessed on 25 June 2026)
5	Historias paranormales en Armero	A video presenting local legends, alleged paranormal experiences, and supernatural stories associated with the ruins of Armero.	The narrative employs suspense, mystery, dramatic music, and first-person accounts to transform the tragedy into a paranormal experience. This approach shifts attention from historical memory toward entertainment and mystery tourism, generating ethical tensions concerning the commercialization of collective suffering.	Audience reactions are polarized. Some viewers enjoy the paranormal perspective, whereas others criticize the video for trivializing the tragedy and distancing public attention from its historical and human significance.	https://youtu.be/7LmUFMnkUng?si=pLwkURCIOCvvmQ85 (accessed on 25 June 2026)
6	Tragedia en Armero es lo peor que he visto en mi carrera	A professional involved in the emergency response recounts the disaster through personal memories, describing rescue operations, emotional challenges, and the long-lasting psychological impact.	Personal testimony serves as the principal narrative resource, emphasizing humanitarian commitment, ethical responsibility, and the emotional burden experienced by rescue personnel. The video generates empathy and admiration while reinforcing the disaster as a collective human experience rather than merely a historical event.	Viewers express profound respect for rescue workers, recognize the emotional impact of their testimonies, and value these accounts as essential contributions to preserving historical memory.	https://youtu.be/updKpWVsY6o?si=fj2qtgz8-Sl0YPcJ (accessed on 25 June 2026)

Table 2. Cont.

No	Video Title	Video Summary	Narrative and Audiovisual Analysis	Audience Reception and Dominant Perceptions	Link
7	Armero: 40 años con ciencia volcánica	An institutional documentary produced by the Colombian Geological Survey explaining the geological causes of the lahar while integrating scientific knowledge, disaster risk education, and collective memory forty years after the tragedy.	The documentary adopts an educational and scientific narrative supported by animations, expert interviews, and historical documentation. Unlike emotionally centered productions, it emphasizes prevention, volcanic monitoring, and disaster risk management. Armero is represented as both a site of memory and a learning environment where scientific knowledge contributes to protecting future generations.	Viewers highly value the documentary for its educational approach, appreciating the integration of scientific explanations with remembrance. Comments emphasize that understanding volcanic hazards is essential to preventing future disasters while honoring the victims.	https://youtu.be/2O0jSu9o3pw?si=8sGkPA4vP24iZk3z (accessed on 25 June 2026)
8	Minuto a minuto: cómo el volcán enterró vivo a Armero	A chronological reconstruction of the events leading to the 1985 catastrophe, combining archival footage, historical evidence, expert explanations, and survivor testimonies.	The documentary employs a chronological storytelling structure that progressively reconstructs the disaster through multiple audiovisual resources. It emphasizes institutional failures, emergency decision-making, and the human consequences of delayed responses. The dominant emotional responses are tension, compassion, and indignation, reinforcing Armero as a continuing symbol of historical responsibility and collective memory in contemporary digital media.	Audience responses highlight the documentary’s clarity and emotional impact. Many viewers stress the importance of understanding both the scientific and political dimensions of the disaster, recognizing the production as a valuable contribution to preserving historical memory and public awareness.	https://youtu.be/hUmPkzztTXw?si=mL0wJMFVJfxNVFHQ (accessed on 25 June 2026)

Note. Author’s own elaboration.

Finally, the inclusion of recent productions such as *Minuto a minuto: cómo el volcán enterró vivo a Armero* demonstrates that the disaster remains highly relevant within contemporary digital platforms. By combining archival footage, scientific explanations, survivor testimonies, and chronological storytelling, these productions renew public interest in the causes, consequences, and institutional responsibilities associated with the tragedy. Collectively, the videos analyzed indicate that Armero is no longer represented solely as the site of a historical catastrophe but as a dynamic landscape of memory, scientific learning, ethical reflection, and cultural heritage. Consequently, YouTube functions not only as a repository of audiovisual content but also as a space where historical narratives are continuously reconstructed, negotiated, and disseminated, significantly influencing the collective imagination and the development of dark tourism associated with Armero.

The controversy surrounding the documentary *ARMERO*, produced by La Liendra, stems from the sensitivity of the subject matter and the way in which the tragedy of 1985 is depicted. Various sectors have questioned the use of emotionally charged images, considered by some to be a sensationalist tactic that could violate the memory and dignity of the victims. The possibility that the filmmaker might profit financially or gain visibility from collective suffering has also been criticized, generating ethical debates about the monetization of pain. Added to this is the perception of a limited narrative approach that could oversimplify a complex historical event. Although La Liendra argues that its intention is educational and seeks to preserve memory, the controversy reveals the tension between creative freedom and the ethical responsibility of representing tragedies.

The videos analyzed play a significant role in preserving the collective memory of Armero. In them, participants share memories of their loved ones, family photographs, images of the old houses, and records of the town's ruins. They also disseminate information about the tragedy, historical data, local and national news, as well as content related to volcanic activity and the search for missing children. Some groups also promote small businesses run by the victims' families, becoming platforms for community support. Although publications with commemorative and educational purposes predominate, in some cases, diverse content that deviates from the main objective is observed. Collectively, these groups constitute communication and memory networks that strengthen the bond between survivors, descendants, and residents of the present-day municipality of Armero-Guayabal.

The comments on the video "Know the History of Armero" reflect its significant impact on the audience, highlighting its cinematic quality and its ability to convey the history and importance of the Armero tragedy. The way viewers express their interest in and admiration for the video, as well as their desire to learn more about this historical event, shows how audiovisual storytelling can generate empathy and awareness of past events. Furthermore, the reflection on the importance of remembering these tragedies to prevent their repetition demonstrates how the video successfully conveys a profound and relevant message about historical memory and collective responsibility (Table 3).

Table 3. Audiovisual products generated.

Name	Views	Link to the Video
Conoce la historia de Armero	402	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySCHkFxqAYk (accessed on 25 June 2026)
¿Qué percepción tienes de Armero?	417	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fk-whUCcSis (accessed on 25 June 2026)

Note. Author's own elaboration.

The comments on the video “What is your perception of Armero?” reflect a deep impression of the history and impact of the Armero tragedy. Several key ideas stand out: the importance of remembering and learning from history to prevent similar tragedies in the future, the need for solidarity and preparedness in the face of natural disasters, and the interest in visiting Armero to better understand its history and culture.

The community recognizes Armero as an emblematic place that has provided a great lesson, despite the tragedy. The energy and unique experience offered by this site are highlighted. Furthermore, the importance of not forgetting the history of Armero is emphasized, as it serves as a powerful reminder of the force of nature and the importance of solidarity and preparedness for natural disasters. Overall, the comments demonstrate a deep respect and sensitivity toward the Armero tragedy, as well as a genuine desire to learn from it and honor the memory of the victims.

The audiovisual materials created to address the Armero tragedy have successfully captured the audience’s attention, as evidenced by the views on YouTube. The video “Learn the Story of Armero,” with 402 views, and the video “What’s Your Perception of Armero?”, with 417 views, reflect significant viewer interest in better understanding this historical event. These videos provide information about the tragedy, its context, and its repercussions, sparking public interest in exploring and reflecting on the history of Armero. Choosing platforms like YouTube to disseminate this content demonstrates an effective strategy to reach diverse audiences and raise awareness about the importance of remembering and learning from the history of Armero.

Interviews

Analysis of the question, “How did you learn about the Armero tragedy?” reveals an interesting disparity in responses. The majority of participants (35%) learned of the event through audiovisual media, followed by family stories (29%) and print media (25%). These figures demonstrate that knowledge about the Armero tragedy does not circulate uniformly, but rather is mediated by communication mechanisms and forms of symbolic authority that structure what is remembered, how it is remembered, and who has the legitimacy to narrate it.

The predominance of audiovisual and print media in transmitting the event suggests a dependence on institutionalized sources of information, which tend to frame the narrative from official or media perspectives. From a critical standpoint, this allows us to question not only which aspects of the tragedy are emphasized or silenced, but also how collective memories can be shaped by editorial, economic, or even political interests.

On the other hand, the high percentage of family narratives as a means of transmission (29%) highlights the importance of oral knowledge and intimate memories, which, although less institutionalized, play a key role in the construction of social knowledge about the past. This type of transmission represents embodied, affective, and situated knowledge, reflecting an alternative epistemology that challenges hegemonic narratives. However, its dependence on lived experience or generational proximity implies a risk of loss over time, especially in contexts where new generations have no direct connection to the event.

In contrast, social media (1%) and word-of-mouth transmission (5%) occupy a marginal place, which can be interpreted as a weak digital or community appropriation of the memory of the tragedy. This absence may be related to a lack of historical memory strategies in digital or educational spaces, which limits the intergenerational reach of this knowledge. When visitors were asked, “What motivated you to visit Armero?” Many expressed historical interest and personal curiosity. Many are drawn to learn the story of the Armero tragedy, as well as the details about the girl Omaira and the fate of the survivors. Visiting the site and witnessing the ruins, especially the hospital, is part of this motivation. Similarly, some

were invited by friends or family, while others mentioned feeling a personal connection to the history of Armero after visiting the site for the first time.

Some visitors expect to experience paranormal phenomena at the site, while others seek to understand the historical background and not just rely on information received through the media. On the other hand, for many, research and history are driving forces that motivate them to visit Armero. The opportunity to get involved in projects related to the region is seen as a way to better understand what happened. In short, the motivations for visiting Armero are diverse, ranging from historical interest and personal curiosity to the influence of friends or family, the emotional connection to the tragedy, and the desire to understand history from a deeper perspective. In addition, there is a search for both paranormal experiences and knowledge in an attempt to understand and honor what happened in this place.

4. Discussion

The results show that YouTube videos about Armero contribute to the construction of dark tourist imaginaries and to the generation of emotions linked to the tragedy. These findings are consistent with those of [Beauvais \(2022\)](#), [Stadler and Hawkes \(2022\)](#), and [Zerva \(2021\)](#), who argue that audiovisual narratives influence the emotional relationship between viewers and places associated with traumatic events. Similarly, [Araújo-Vila et al. \(2024\)](#) and [Oshriyeh and Capriello \(2022\)](#) note that audiovisual representations generate expectations and motivations for visiting, an aspect reflected in the historical interest and empathy toward the victims observed in the videos about Armero.

The comments on the videos are characterized by feelings of sadness, respect, and reflection. These findings are consistent with the arguments put forward by [Iliev \(2021\)](#), [Lewis et al. \(2022\)](#), and [Sun and Lv \(2021\)](#), who highlight the potential of dark tourism to foster processes of learning, commemoration, and the construction of collective memory. Likewise, [Salgado et al. \(2024\)](#) note that this type of tourism is often closely linked to experiences of nostalgia, an aspect that is also evident in the case studied, where many visitors associate their visit with memories of family members and loved ones who died during the tragedy. In this context, sites associated with disasters take on a meaning that transcends mere tourist interest, becoming places where visitors encounter memory and the past. Similarly, many visitors recognize an educational and pedagogical function in these sites, viewing them as settings that allow for an understanding of the consequences of a tragedy and reflection on its impacts, as proposed by [Magano et al. \(2023\)](#).

People who visit this destination construct images; as noted by [Hiernaux-Nicolas et al. \(2002\)](#), [Gravari-Barbas \(2019\)](#), these elements are associated with pain as a symbolic aspect of consumption. One of the most enduring images is that of Omara Sánchez, who became the symbol of the tragedy as the world watched her die live. In turn, [Basaraba \(2024\)](#) and [Sharma and Sharma \(2024\)](#) argue that digital platforms amplify these imaginaries through content with a strong emotional impact, as seen in documentary videos such as “Tragedy in Armero: The Worst Thing I’ve Seen in My Career,” where the raw nature of the accounts is evident, along with how a young girl became the face of the tragedy.

The results of this study are partially consistent with those of authors such as [Shekhar and Valeri \(2022\)](#), [Ironsides and James \(2024\)](#), and [Vermoesen and Soberon \(2025\)](#), who warn against the commodification and trivialization of suffering. In most of the videos analyzed, it is evident that many of the comments focus on expressions of respect and recognition for the victims of the Armero tragedy, which aligns with [Nieto-Ferrando et al. \(2021\)](#), where audiences reinterpret audiovisual content according to their own cultural and emotional frameworks. The coexistence of historical and paranormal content aligns with [Stone’s \(2006\)](#) typology, given that Armero is a place with a high degree of authenticity and few

artificial elements incorporated into its tourism offerings. As noted by Basaraba (2024), the paranormal narratives of Armero constitute only a small fragment and do not predominate over the historical and commemorative representations of the memory of the tragedy.

The case study found that a large proportion of visitors come to Armero motivated by prior knowledge gained through documentaries, news reports, and other audiovisual content that has helped spread and keep alive the memory of the tragedy. However, this approach to the destination also generates various ethical tensions related to the representation and consumption of suffering, as noted by Laaksonen and Varga (2024). Along the same lines, that tourism practices linked to traumatic events can be perceived as unethical when they lack elements that foster remembrance, reflection, and respect for the victims. Likewise, the commercialization of products associated with tragedy can trivialize collective grief and reignite identity conflicts, as Ironside and James (2024) warn. Therefore, the ethical challenges in managing memory tourism remain one of the main hurdles to ensuring responsible and respectful experiences.

5. Conclusions

Some visitors express their intention to visit the ruins of Armero after watching audiovisual productions and reading the comments on the videos; many of them were previously unfamiliar with this area. In addition to tourist interest, they cite religious motivations, the need to preserve collective memory, and the desire to understand the history of the greatest tragedy Colombia has ever experienced. These accounts align with field research: although the disaster was traditionally covered by the press and news programs, current audiovisual productions—including documentaries, reports, and content on digital platforms—have become crucial channels for informing and raising awareness. Thus, these materials not only disseminate information but also spark curiosity and encourage people to visit dark tourism sites like Armero.

This research reveals a range of emotions that characterize the experience of Armero as a destination: from astonishment at learning the history of what was once a prosperous “white city” of regional economic and cultural importance, to respect and profound sadness upon encountering the ruins and testimonies of the tragedy that buried this Colombian city in 1985. Visitors experience a complex mix of feelings, including historical curiosity, solidarity with the victims, admiration for the resilience of the survivors, and an inevitable confrontation with the collective grief. This emotional duality manifests itself in the diverse motivations for visiting the site: some seek to understand the magnitude of the disaster and learn about risk management, others wish to honor the memory of those who lost their lives, while a minority is drawn to paranormal elements or dark tourism, generating tensions about the ethics of these practices.

Audiovisual content on YouTube acts as an emotional catalyst by amplifying these contradictory perceptions. Documentary videos that reconstruct the events through survivor testimonies and historical material generate comments filled with empathy, sadness, and reflection on the importance of preserving memory to prevent future negligence. In contrast, content produced by influencers and digital creators provokes polarized reactions: while some users appreciate the increased visibility of the issue among younger audiences, others express outrage at what they perceive as a lack of sensitivity or an attempt to monetize suffering. This division reveals how format, tone, and communicative intent directly influence the reception of the message, transforming the same historical event into a source of education or an object of controversy depending on how it is presented.

The construction of collective memory about Armero reveals multiple layers of meaning that go beyond the factual account of the disaster. The narratives circulating on digital platforms, family stories, and traditional media not only report on what happened but also

actively shape how current and future generations understand and emotionally relate to the tragedy. The comments on the videos reflect a genuine desire to learn, recognition of the heroism of those who helped during the catastrophe, and a need to keep the memory alive as an act of justice toward the victims. However, they also highlight the risk that certain narrative approaches may trivialize or sensationalize the suffering, especially when entertainment elements are linked to an event of such magnitude. This tension between education and spectacle, between respect and morbid curiosity, defines the complex emotional and ethical landscape surrounding Armero as a site of historical memory.

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