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Social imaginaries of tourists in the ruins of Armero – Tolima

Imaginarios sociales de turistas en las ruinas de Armero – Tolima

Imaginários sociais de turistas nas ruínas de Armero - Tolima

Abstract

Armero is a small town located in the department of Tolima, Colombia, affected because of the tragedy and disaster that occurred on November 13, 1985. Therefore, the development of this research focuses on inquiring why the tourist chooses to visit the municipality and his thoughts about dark tourism. The objective is to scrutinize the social imaginaries and the perception of the tourist, in a place mourned by events that triggered more than twenty-five thousand deaths. To achieve this, surveys were applied to 49 people who have visited the ruins of Armero, showing the interest of the participants in the places where dark tourism is practiced. As well as the feelings that the place produces, generating empathy with the locals. Finally, it was deduced that Dark Tourism in Armero could serve as a gateway to engage in practices infused with sustainability and ethics, thereby promoting the memorialization of the territory.

Key Words: dark tourism, social imaginaries, perception, tourist, tourism.

Resumen

Armero es un municipio ubicado en el departamento del Tolima, Colombia, enmarcado en la tragedia del desastre ocurrido el 13 de noviembre de 1985. De allí que el desarrollo de esta investigación se centra en indagar por qué el turista elige visitar el municipio y sus pensamientos sobre Turismo oscuro. El objetivo es analizar los imaginarios sociales y la percepción del turista, en un lugar enlutado por hechos que desencadenaron más de veinticinco mil muertes. Para ello se aplicaron encuestas a 49 personas que han visitado las ruinas de Armero, mostrando el interés de los participantes por los lugares

donde se practica el turismo oscuro. Así como las sensaciones que produce el lugar, generando empatía con los lugareños. Finalmente, se concluyó que el turismo oscuro en Armero puede ser una ventana para ingresar a la práctica con elementos de sustentabilidad y ética para promover la memoria del territorio.

Palabras clave: turismo oscuro, imaginarios sociales, percepción, turista, turismo.

Resumo

Armero é um município localizado no departamento de Tolima, Colômbia, marcado na tragédia do desastre ocorrido em 13 de novembro de 1985. Além disso, o desenvolvimento desta investigação se concentra em Indagar por que o turista eleito visita o município e seus pensamentos sobre Turismo escuro. O objetivo é analisar os imaginários sociais e a percepção do turista, em um lugar enlutado por aqueles que desencadeiam mais de veias mil mortes. Para isso, se aplicam perguntas a 49 pessoas que visitaram as ruínas de Armero, mostrando o interesse dos participantes pelos lugares onde se pratica o turismo escuro. Assim como as sensações que produzem o lugar, gerando empatia com os lugares. Finalmente, concluiu-se que o turismo escuro em Armero pode ser uma janela para ingressar na prática com elementos de sustentabilidade e ética para promover a memória do território.

Palavras-chave: turismo negro, imaginários sociais, percepção, turista, turismo.

Introduction

In the pursuit of comprehending the feelings harbored by tourists towards locales enveloped in the somber atmosphere of events stemming from natural or anthropogenic disasters, this research unfolds. Armero, situated in the department of Tolima, Colombia, bore witness to devastation inflicted by a deluge of mud and stones following the eruption of the Nevado del Ruiz volcano on November 13, 1985, resulting in the tragic loss of over 25 thousand lives (Usma, 2022).

Over time, the local community and various entities have endeavored, drawing upon resilience and memory, to foster tourism in the area, disseminating the narrative underlying the avalanche. Consequently, understanding the visitor's perceptions and the rationale behind selecting this destination assumes significance. To achieve this, a search of authors who have conducted research on this topic is carried out, and likewise, accompanied by an inquiry into the social imaginaries harbored by visitors pre- and post-tour.

Tourists exploring the ruins of Armero Tolima wield a notable influence on imaginaries, a facet of considerable import in the research due to its capacity to manifest the creative faculties of human cognition (Mora et al., 2022). Nevertheless, a prominent incentive for tourists venturing to Armero is the morbid curiosity surrounding the witnessing of others' demise (Mora et al., 2022; Young, 2022). Concurrently, Armero has garnered recognition as a repository of memory and historical significance, rendering it a preferred destination for myriad travelers (Kleshcheva, 2021; Nieto & Mora, 2022; Young, 2022).

Therefore, the research objectives pivot on the analysis of social imaginaries that tourists harbor during their visit to the ruins of Armero - Tolima. Additionally, the study seeks to explicate, drawing from extant literature, the constructs of dark tourism, unravel the motivations prompting individuals to visit the Ruins of Armero, and delineate their sentiments post-experience. Consequently, a data collection instrument was used, specifically a survey administered to a cohort of visitors, was employed to derive empirical results.

According to Korstanje (2017), dark tourism is occasionally intertwined with the emotions evoked by the visited site, coupled with the mortuary capitalism encompassing it, constituting the commodification of empathy for locales steeped in histories of tragedy and death. This dynamic unveils a facet of the complex milieu experienced in Armero, where the commercialization of history and memory, including specific instances like that of Omaira Sanchez, assumes tangible form, with some individuals expressing a form of "devotion."

It is imperative to underscore that exclusively those individuals who had not previously visited the municipality were interviewed to ascertain information, ensuring that responses emanated genuinely from their

imaginaries and perspectives, thereby facilitating a nuanced and high-quality analysis. Consequently, the structured survey questions were designed to delineate the parameters of this research, encompassing social imaginaries and the travelers' perspectives.

Theoretical Framework

Dark Tourism

This form of tourism is distinguished by its capacity to attract visitors to destinations with historical or contemporary ties to somber, tragic, or disquieting events. Despite the initial appearance of controversy or impropriety, dark tourism assumes a pivotal role in society for several compelling reasons (Agnew, 2019; Sharma & Nayak, 2019). Additionally, dark tourism contributes substantively to history preservation and comprehension. Through visits to sites associated with tragic events—such as concentration camps, natural disaster locations, or conflict zones—individuals gain insights into past atrocities and their repercussions (Sun & Lv, 2021; Kerr et al., 2022). These historical sites serve as tangible reminders of human transgressions, thereby fostering reflection and a commitment to preventing future conflicts and tragedies (Iliev, 2021; Kennell & Powell, 2022).

Dark tourism, significantly, wields economic impact. Many destinations marked by historical tragedies or dark occurrences have identified tourism as a crucial revenue source (Zheng et al., 2019; Wyatt et al., 2022). Visitors to these locales expend resources on accommodation, sustenance, transportation, and related activities, thereby potentially ameliorating economic conditions in regions susceptible to financial adversity (Kunwar & Karki, 2019; Prayag et al., 2021). Concurrently, dark tourism fosters empathy and social awareness (Gauta, 2020; Khaydarova & Joanna, 2022); witnessing human suffering and the aftermath of violence often motivates individuals to address social and political predicaments (Dolenec & Vodeb, 2021; Sigala & Steriopoulos, 2022).

This form of tourism can serve as a catalyst for action, inspiring individuals to engage in charitable endeavors, social movements, or humanitarian initiatives (Çakar, 2020; Sharma, 2021). Moreover, the imperative to understand dark tourism is grounded in several pivotal aspects influencing the perception and experience of the world (Kladou et al., 2021; Lennon, 2020). Dark tourism allows visitors to contemplate the repercussions of somber events and delve into historical narratives, thereby enhancing their comprehension and appreciation for the complexity of the human condition (Pratt et al., 2019; Oren et al., 2021).

Encountering places of suffering and tragedy prompts consideration of how traumatic events are remembered, commemorated, and the implications of their commercialization (Putra & Puspita, 2020; Isaac, 2022). This prompts reflection on the responsibilities of tourism destinations, travelers, and society at large in preserving historical memory and demonstrating

respect for victims (Abbasian & Kawa, 2019; Mitchell & Gallaway, 2019). Therefore, an understanding of dark tourism invites contemplation on the intricacies of the human experience and how the painful past and somber events are addressed in the era of globalized tourism (Grundner & Neuhofer, 2021; Cornelia et al., 2021). Understanding the motivations, impacts, and ethical dilemmas associated with dark tourism is essential for travelers, academics, and destination managers, facilitating a responsible and respectful approach to dark tourism that contributes to learning, empathy, and the preservation of historical memory (Ghorbanzadeh et al., 2021; Suyasa, 2022).

According to Pimentel & Marques (2022), it is evident that perspectives on dark tourism vary among authors, making it challenging to categorize this activity within a typology. Consequently, identifying a singular motivation for tourists visiting these places is deemed impractical, as personal, cultural, and psychological motives emerge from the analyzed information (Iliev, 2021; Stone & Morton, 2022).

A more profound reflection is imperative, considering factors such as visitor or tourist motivation and the impacts generated by their experiences. This is particularly relevant when considering the concept of dystopian dark tourism proposed by Pimentel & Marques (2022). Conversely, Quintero & Castro (2023) contend that in some instances, attendees place more significance on capturing photographs of their visit, or what they term as being closer to experiencing the event, than engaging in a commemorative tour honoring those who lost their lives in tragic events.

Furthermore, visitors frequenting sites categorized within dark tourism exhibit diverse perceptions regarding their motivations for visiting these locales. Consequently, a singular characterization of motivation is challenging, given the breadth of thought (Lischer, 2019; Magano et al., 2023). Although there is a prevailing belief that this form of tourism is predominantly embraced by individuals with a direct connection to the place, it also attracts those curious about history and events, or individuals who, within their itinerary, happen upon such sites (Iliev, 2021; Mora et al., 2023).

Lewis et al. (2021) advocate for a comprehensive exploration of the motivations and intentions of tourists visiting places considered part of dark tourism, without specifying a particular destination. In contrast, Soulard et al. (2023) posit that social mobilization by travelers results in feelings of empowerment, seeking memories, education, and identification of social problems through diagnoses, prognoses, and motivations.

Jang et al. (2022) propose a fusion of dark tourism and educational tourism, with the latter prevailing in representative places such as Hiroshima and Fukushima. The historical and cultural relationship assumes significance in the context of dark tourism, where the authors propose that not only should memory and reconciliation efforts be undertaken but learning should also be emphasized as a complementary aspect (Sharman & Nayak, 2020; Bin Shaiful et al., 2022).

Similarly, Fabros et al. (2023) indicate that, at the darker end of the tourism spectrum, tourism sites are characterized by the most extreme situations of death and suffering. Conversely, Jang et al. (2022) suggest that in these destinations, tours with an educational foundation promote learning, disaster response, and community emphasis, without neglecting the other motivations associated with the development of the route and the curiosity linked to dark tourism.

Moreover, these sites are educationally oriented, emphasizing history, guidance, and authentic product placement, unintentionally positioned and with a lesser tourism infrastructure (Collins-Kreiner, 2020; Fabros et al., 2023). Even though Lewis et al. (2021) present four dimensions determining outcomes in their research—obscure experience, learning experience, casual interest, and attractive entertainment—with the intention of framing tourism motivation (Wang et al., 2019; Israfilova & Khoo-Lattimore, 2019).

Furthermore, the expansion of dark tourism underscores the pivotal roles of media participation and governmental support in promoting this concept, given that tourism, across all typologies, generates employment and increases foreign exchange (Sarkar et al., 2022). However, Quintero & Castro (2023) assert that tourism perception must be examined from multiple angles, thereby validating the perspective of the local populace. The commercialization of these sites risks desensitizing tourists and diminishing empathy for the victims (Kužnik & Grafenauer, 2020; Stone & Grebenar, 2022).

Communities can benefit from dark tourism not through the commercialization of tragedy but through contributions to resilience and emotional processing as part of the overall process (Jordan & Prayag, 2022).

Methodology

After the theoretical compilation that supports the pillars of the present work, it was used as research methodology from the quantitative approach with the application of a questionnaire to tourists who have made the tour in the municipality of Armero - Tolima, in order to be able to establish the tourist imaginaries before their visit and the perception after it. Thus, the quantitative approach is fundamental in various disciplines and fields of study due to its ability to provide a solid and objective basis for research and decision-making, i.e., it is based on the collection and analysis of numerical data, which provides objective and accurate results (Tamara, 2022). In addition, the quantitative approach makes it possible to measure variables precisely and to quantify relationships between them.

The instrument was applied virtually to 49 travelers entitled "Social Imaginaries in the Ruins of Armero - Tolima" from April 25, 2023 to July 31, 2023, which gives an introduction about the participation in the study for academic purposes of the Minuto de Dios University Corporation.

In this work we inquire about the imaginary and tourist perception that travelers have in the visit to the municipality of Armero - Tolima, so with the questions asked is established first, the sociodemographic information, followed by those that denote the perception and opinion about the place and these sites that are surrounded by disaster and death framed in the dark tourism, in order to reach a deep analysis and solve the problem question objective of this work.

Results

In relation to the questions asked in the application of the methodological instrument for the collection of information, the results obtained are as follows:
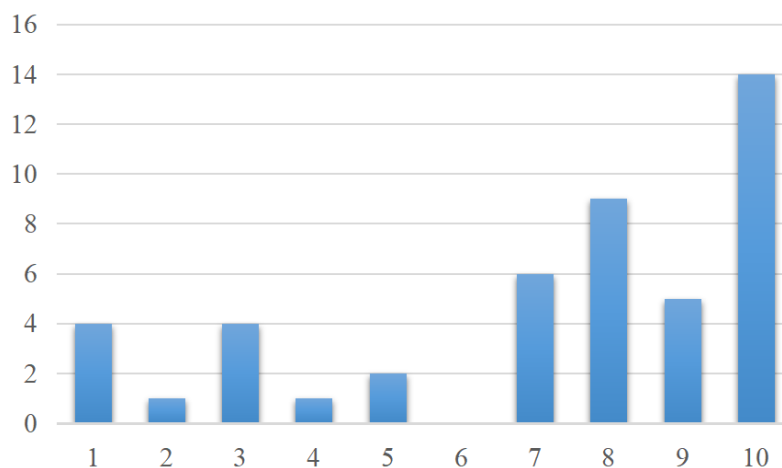
Figure 1.

¿What age range are you in?
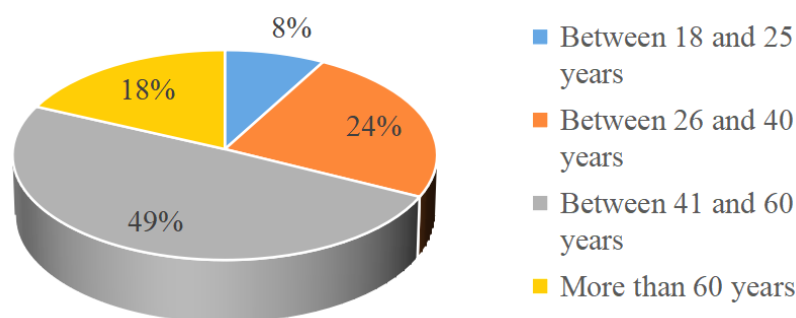
Note: The 49% of the people who have visited Armero and who were surveyed were between 41 and 60 years of age.
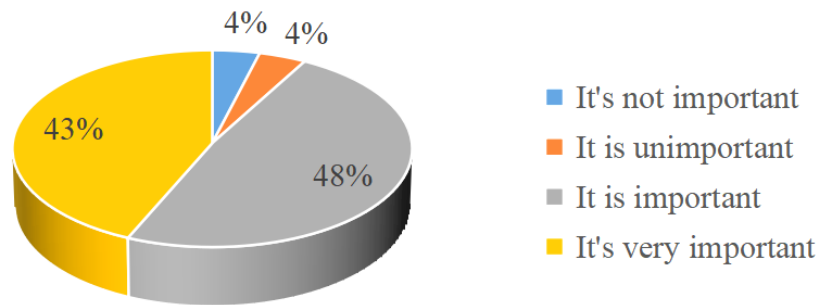
Figure 2.

Rate from 1 to 10 the level of satisfaction in your visit to Armero - Tolima

Note: The of the people consider that their satisfaction rating from 1 to 10 in the visit to Armero is between 8 and 10, the latter being the highest level with 29%.
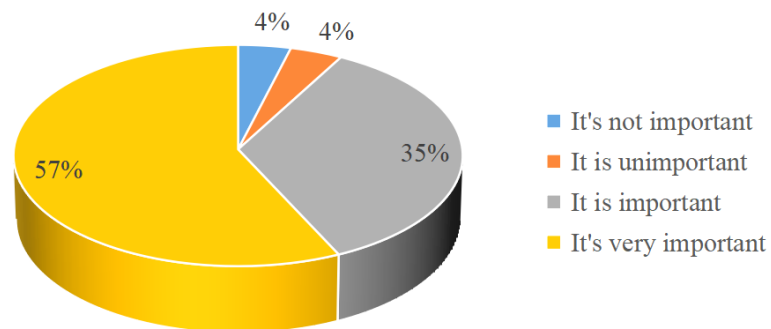
Figure 3.

How important is it for you to visit Armero and learn about the details related to the death that surrounds this place?

Note: 49% of respondents consider that it is important for them to visit Armero in order to learn about the aspects associated with the death of so many people in the tragedy.
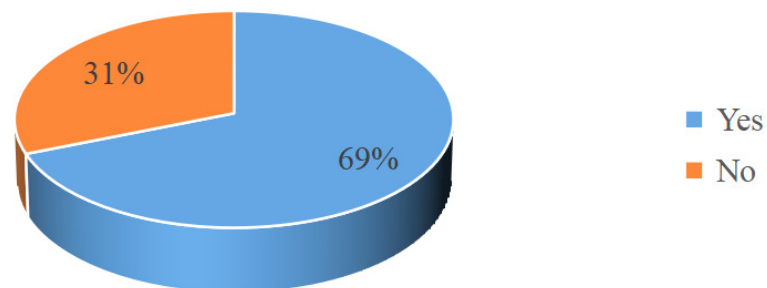
Figure 4.

How important is it for you to know the most representative stories of Armero?

Note: 57% of the total number of people surveyed considered it very important to learn about the most relevant and representative stories of Armero during their tour.
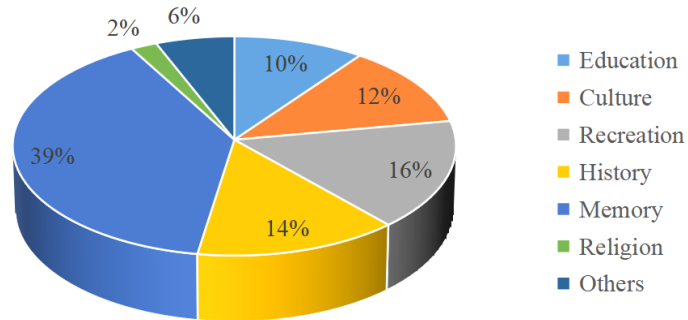
Figure 5.

Are you curious about places where natural disasters, catastrophes, or death-related events have occurred?

Note: Most of the people surveyed (69%) indicated that they are interested in knowing places where events related to death have occurred, either due to natural events or catastrophes.
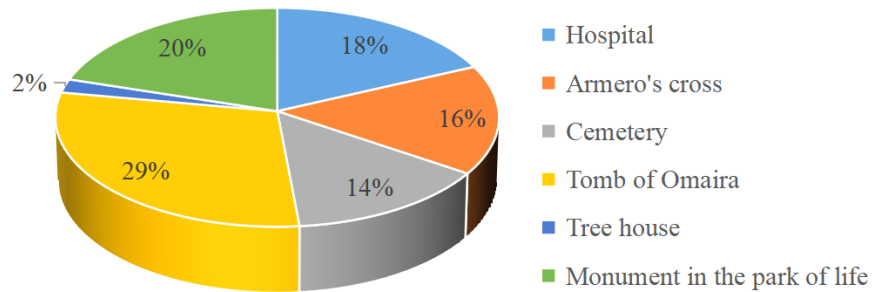
Figure 6.

Your visit to Armero is related to

Note: When inquiring about the motivation for which tourists visit Armero, it is evident that 39% of them indicate that it is related to memory processes that are identified in the place.

Figure 7.

Of the places found in the ruins of Armero, mention which called your attention the most?

Note: Likewise, when asked about the place that most arouses interest of those found in the ruins of Armero, it is evident that 29% are attracted by the tomb of Omaira, the girl who is an insignia of tenacity and strength for the locals.
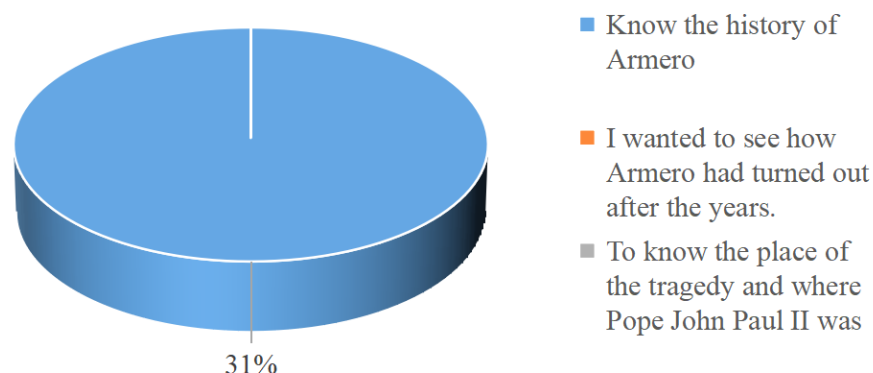
Figure 8.

Describe Armero in one word
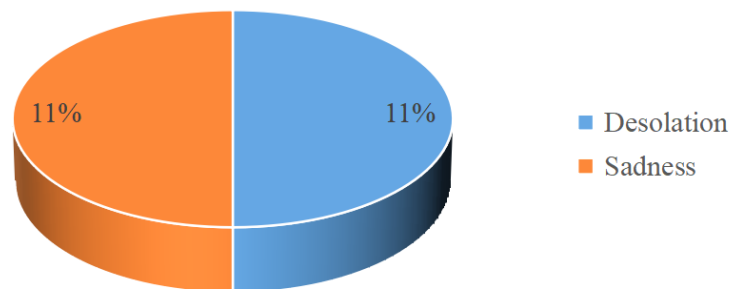
Note: When respondents were asked to describe in a single word what Armero meant to them, 11% answered "Desolation", followed by "Sadness" with the same percentage, which shows the feelings that the municipality provokes.

Figure 9.

Indicate briefly what motivated you to visit Armero - Tolima

- Know the history of Armero
- I wanted to see how Armero had turned out after the years.
- To know the place of the tragedy and where Pope John Paul II was

Note: This question was formulated in an open-ended manner in order to know briefly what was the reason that led the participants to visit Armero, when tabulating the information it was determined that 31% of the answers are associated with knowing the history of Armero and its oral tradition, before and after the tragedy.

Figure 10.

Indicate briefly what is your perception of Armero after your visit

- Sadness, nostalgia, oblivion, abandonment
- Place abandoned by the state
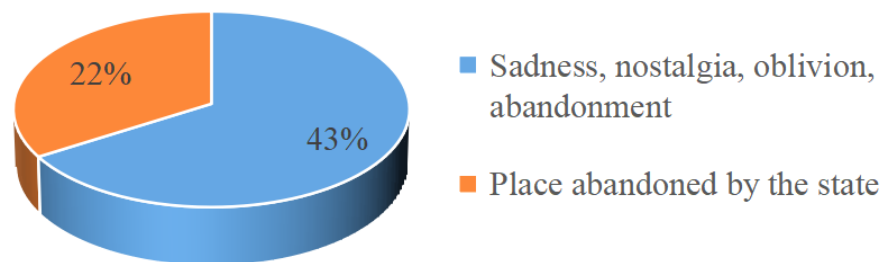
Note: Finally, the last question was also asked in an open-ended manner, inquiring about the traveler's perception after visiting Armero. The tabulation showed that 43% of the respondents associated feelings such as sadness, nostalgia, forgetfulness, abandonment, among others, followed by 22% who perceive Armero as a place abandoned by the state and lacking proper maintenance.

Discussion

Dark tourism in Armero, Colombia, is a phenomenon that raises debates and reflections on ethics and sensitivity to the tragic events that marked its history. This type of tourism, although initially controversial, plays an essential role in society for several significant reasons. However, for authors such as Agnew, 2019; Sharma & Nayak, 2019 highlight that this type of tourism attracts visitors who seek to understand and honor the memory of that devastating disaster. However, for liev, 2021; Kennell & Powell, 2022 although it may be uncomfortable for some, these historical sites offer an opportunity for the preservation and understanding of history.

By touring these places linked to tragedies, people have the chance to learn about the heartbreaking consequences of past events. That said, according to Kladou et al (2021) & Lennon (2020) these sites often act as tangible testimonies of human error, encouraging reflection and commitment to the prevention of future disasters. In this way, according to the results through dark tourism, a dialogue on the importance of historical memory is promoted to prevent similar tragedies from being repeated in the future.

Conclusion

To conclude, it was determined that people who have visited Armero - Tolima rate the level of satisfaction with the visit in an average of over seven points with a range of one to ten, which is favorable considering that with this figure it is evident that the place can be highly recommended. Likewise, it can be determined that for most people it is important to visit the place and learn about the details of death that surround it, identifying dark tourism in the activity carried out. It can be inferred from the results that more than sixty percent of the travelers feel attraction and curiosity to visit places that are linked to death, natural disasters, catastrophes or violent events on occasions, as it had been stated by representative authors of dark tourism such as Seaton and Korstange, to name a few.

Therefore, in the study of this case, it is evident that dark tourism is related to the concern of knowing the most representative sites of the municipality such as the tomb of Omaira Sanchez, the 13 year old girl who died victim of the avalanche, a catastrophe that claimed the lives of more than twenty-five thousand people, the monument in the park of life, one of the works of the master Hernan Dario Nova or the ruins of the San Lorenzo hospital which was left with the second and third floor after the avalanche buried the main floor. For this reason, it is coherent to find that the majority of those consulted indicated that the visit to Armero - Tolima is related to the processes of memory.

Illiev (2021), states that dark tourism approaches people who have a direct link with the place, those who go out of curiosity to know the history or those who pass through the place on their way to their destination. This point is partially coincident with the results of the research because people stated that their motivation is to know the history, the oral narration, why they lived in Armero – Tolima?, whether their close family lived there or simply to know the place, which coincides with the author. This makes the tourist activity in the municipality awaken feelings such as sadness, desolation, abandonment and negligence on the part of the state, in contrast to the resilience and hope that is the reality of the Armeritas who work in the territory as tour guides, merchants, among others.

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