

Street Art and Sustainable Tourism: A Case Study of Bogotá, Colombia

Silvia López Rozo

University of Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain

slopezro195@alumnes.ub.edu

Abstract: Street art presents an alternative to traditional tourist attractions, contributing to urban regeneration and economic diversification in marginalized areas. However, as with any form of tourism, without proper planning, it can negatively affect the quality of life of local communities. Bogotá, the capital of Colombia, is currently recognized as one of the leading street art destinations in Latin America, attracting significant interest from international visitors. This study explores the sustainability of street art tourism in Bogotá's historic center, based on the perspectives of key tourism stakeholders, addressing a gap in academic literature on this emerging cultural tourism practice. Fieldwork was conducted using a mixed-methods approach that combined qualitative and quantitative techniques. In-depth interviews were held with members of the local community, street artists, tourism entrepreneurs, and representatives from the local public administration of culture and tourism. Additionally, the study included tourist surveys, participant observation during street art tours, and mapping exercises. Findings indicate that visitors perceive Bogotá's street art as an authentic and distinctive experience that deepens their understanding of local culture, values, and history. Interviewees from the host community generally express a positive view of street art tourism, as it is associated with supporting local businesses and enhancing perceptions of safety in the area. Notably, the street art tours that appear to deliver the most significant socioeconomic benefits to residents are those organized through community-based tourism initiatives, supported by public institutions. The study results suggest that street art tourism in Bogotá might have significant potential to enhance the city's image, attract cultural visitors, and diversify traditional tourist offerings through authentic experiences. Coordinated efforts by public administrations could help realize this potential, including promoting street art, expanding tours beyond the historic center, and improving infrastructure and mobility to support tourism in new urban areas. Furthermore, the sustainability of street art tourism depends on collaboration among public institutions, private tourism actors, local communities, and street artists, which might help mitigate potential negative impacts on the local community.

Keywords: Street Art Tourism, Alternative Tourism, Creative Tourism, Community-based Tourism, Sustainable Tourism

1. Introduction and Framework

Tourism has the potential to promote economic, social, and cultural development within host communities. However, without adequate planning, it may adversely affect residents' quality of life and cause harm to cultural heritage and biodiversity (WTO, 2018). To mitigate these risks, tourism development must be strategically planned and implemented in a sustainable manner. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) defines sustainable tourism as "tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities" (WTO, 2018).

Increasing awareness of sustainability's significance for the planet's future, coupled with globalization and mass tourism, has prompted many tourists to seek more engaging and meaningful activities that preserve ecosystems while supporting local culture and economies (Richards, 2018). Within this context, street art emerges as an attractive alternative for travelers pursuing distinctive experiences and opportunities to connect with the culture and everyday life of host communities, beyond conventional and overcrowded tourist attractions (Klein, 2018).

1.1 Street Art Tourism

Street art is a subcategory of public art that encompasses contemporary graffiti and non-commercial murals. It is recognized as an artistic form that can contribute to reshaping the image of cities by beautifying public spaces and fostering community integration. In various locations around the world, open-air galleries have been established where murals can be viewed without restrictions on opening hours or entrance fees (Klein, 2018).

Street art has gained popularity as a form of alternative tourism through which mature destinations might offer novel experiences and help alleviate congestion in traditional tourist areas (Best, 2012). Similarly, smaller cities lacking significant material heritage resources have embraced street art as a cultural and artistic offering that enables them to attract tourists and diversify their economies (Insch and Walters, 2017). Street art itself can also serve as a major tourist attraction, particularly appealing to travelers who are art enthusiasts and those seeking distinctive urban experiences (Best, 2012). The growing interest in choosing destinations and tourist sites for their street art has led to the recognition of "mural tourism" as a niche within cultural tourism (Skinner and Jolliffe, 2017).

The increasing popularity of street art has created an opportunity to attract tourists interested in participating in tours focused on street art and murals in urban settings. During these tours, guides assist in interpreting the artworks, bringing tourists closer to the experiences, realities, and social and political issues of local communities. Moreover, these tours allow visitors to explore works located in marginalized neighborhoods in a controlled and safe manner (Klein, 2018).

1.2 Street Art Tourism in Bogotá

In Bogotá, Colombia, the uncontrolled growth of graffiti and street art led the local government to regulate the “responsible practice of graffiti” in 2013. The regulation specifies prohibited locations for painting and establishes penalties for violations. It also introduces educational strategies and initiatives to promote street art and create spaces for participation and dialogue between local authorities and urban artists (IDARTES, 2023).

For the past fifteen years, street art has also been employed by Bogotá’s local government as a tool for urban regeneration, social integration, and economic development in marginalized areas. This approach has not only created opportunities for urban artists but has also influenced public acceptance of their work. Today, street art in Bogotá has achieved international recognition, and many foreign tourists participate in street art tours (IDARTES, 2023).

1.2.1 La Candelaria Neighborhood and the Historic Center

Although significant street art interventions can be found across all districts of Bogotá, tourism centered on these works is particularly concentrated in the La Candelaria neighborhood, located in the historic center. Many graffiti writers and artists favor this sector because of the great visibility their projects can achieve, since the historic center is visited daily by a diverse range of people, including residents from all areas of the city and tourists.

In addition to street art tours, historical walking tours in La Candelaria include several murals and street art expressions along their routes. Because the murals in this area are characterized by themes related to the indigenous mythology, the region’s fauna and flora, and the traditional music and gastronomy, the guides of historical tours use the interventions to explain the local history and culture.

2. Methods

This research aims to explore the perspectives of the various stakeholders on street art tourism in Bogotá and to assess whether this activity is being developed sustainably. Fieldwork was carried out between November of 2024 and March of 2025, using a mixed-methods approach that combined qualitative and quantitative techniques.

In-depth interviews: Key leaders and representatives of the local community, street artists, tourism entrepreneurs, and senior officials of the local public administration of culture and tourism were identified and invited to participate in the study, resulting in fifteen in-depth interviews. Additionally, twelve short informal interviews were conducted with residents of La Candelaria to gather their opinions on street art and its associated tourism in the area. These informal interviews were conducted with vendors and customers at the local public market.

Table 1: Description of participants in in-depth interviews

| Participants in In-Depth Interviews | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|
| Sector | Organization | Job title/Role |
| Local Government | Bogotá Secretariat of Culture, Recreation and Sports (SCRD) | Senior officials responsible for street art related initiatives |
| | Bogotá Institute of the Arts (IDARTES) | |
| | Bogotá Institute of Tourism (IDT) | |
| | Bogotá Observatory of Tourism | |
| | La Candelaria Local Mayor’s Office | |
| Local Community | La Candelaria public market vendors (La Concordia) | Public market vendors’ leader |

| Participants in In-Depth Interviews | | |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|
| Sector | Organization | Job title/Role |
| | Traditional Artisans of La Candelaria | Traditional Artisans' leader |
| Tourism companies | Capital Graffiti Tours | Co-founders, tour guides |
| | Breaking Borders | Co-founder, tour guide |
| Street artists | Local Graffiti Roundtable of La Candelaria | Official leader |
| | Local street artists | Including male and female artists, new and experienced |

Participant observation in walking tours: the study also included systematic participant observation during ten street art tours and five historic walking tours in La Candelaria's neighborhood. Participation in these tours made it possible to identify logistical aspects of the routes and observe the behaviors of tourists, guides, and members of the local community.

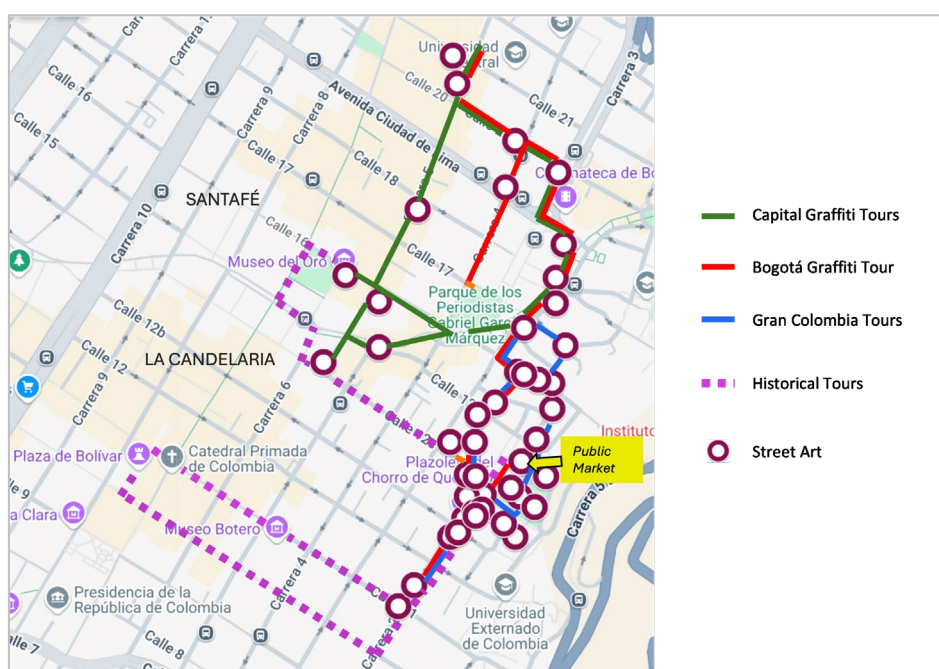


Figure 1: Street art tours and historical tours routes in Bogotá's historic center. Author's own creation on Google Maps

In-person surveys with tourists: Ninety-six in-person surveys were completed with participants in street art tours and historical tours using two different questionnaires. Participant observation during the tours helped establish trust with tourists, thereby facilitating the administration of a survey at the conclusion of each guided visit. Two distinct self-administered questionnaires were employed for participants in each type of tour.

It is important to note that the sampling process for the tourist surveys may involve a potential bias, as it focuses on tourists participating in street art and historical tours, excluding self-guided tourists or those engaged in other types of tours or activities.

Table 2: Tourist surveys' main questions and scales

| Survey | Section | Questions/Scales |
|----------------------------------|--|--|
| Participants in street art tours | Motivations for participating in the tour. | Multiple-choice question |
| | Level of satisfaction with the tour (including logistical aspects) and the tour guide's performance. | 5-point Likert scale (5 = Very Satisfied) for 16 unique statements |
| | Perceived benefits of the tour for tourists and the local community. | 5-point Likert scale (5 = Strongly Agree) for 8 unique statements |

| Survey | Section | Questions/Scales |
|----------------------------------|---|---|
| | Perception of environmental conditions of the tour (including noise, air pollution and overcrowding). | 3-point Likert scale (5 = Strongly Agree) for 5 unique statements |
| Participants in historical tours | Tourist attractions that motivated the visit to Bogotá | Multiple-choice question |
| | Satisfaction with La Candelaria's main tourist attractions, including street art. | 5-point Likert scale (5 = Very Satisfied) for 6 tourist attractions |
| | Perception of street art potential to improve Bogotá's image as a destination | 5-point Likert scale (5 = Strongly Agree) for 5 unique statements |

3. Results

3.1 Participants in Street Art Tours

The tourist survey sample included 38 participants in street art tours. Most respondents rated the street art tour they attended and its logistical aspects positively, using a 5-point Likert scale (figure 2).



Figure 2: Evaluation of street art tours in Bogotá.

Respondents also perceived that street art tours benefit both participants and the local community. Using a 5-point Likert scale (5 = Strongly Agree), 97% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that street art tours contribute positively to the local community. Similarly, more than 90% of respondents stated that these tours offer an authentic experience and unique perspectives on local culture, as well as opportunities to learn about local history. Additionally, 76% of respondents indicated that the street art tour helped improve their perception of Bogotá (figure 3).

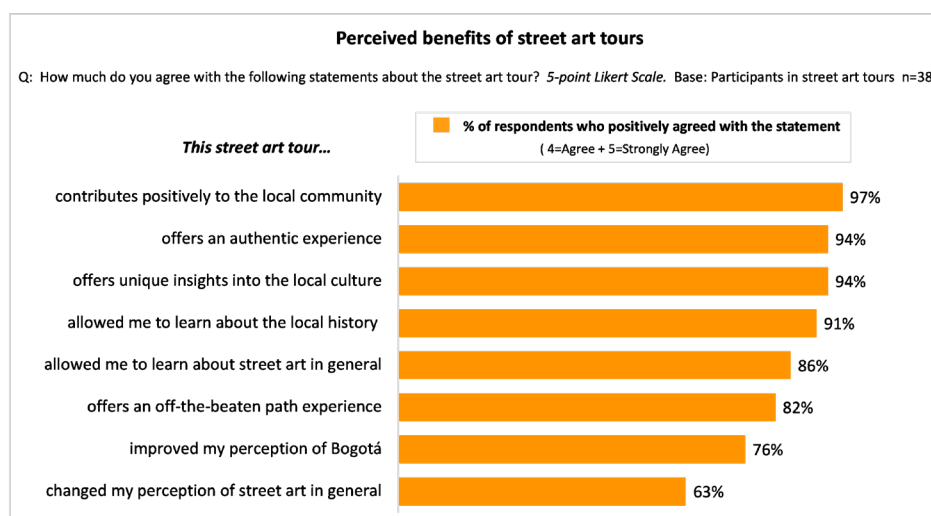


Figure 3: Perceived benefits of street art tours in Bogotá.

3.2 Participants in Historical Tours

The tourist survey included a sample of 58 participants in historical tours. Respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with Bogotá’s street art and five main attractions in the historic center using a 5-point Likert scale (5 = Very Satisfied). Results indicate that 91% of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with street art, a level comparable to the satisfaction reported for some of the city’s principal and traditional attractions (figure 4).

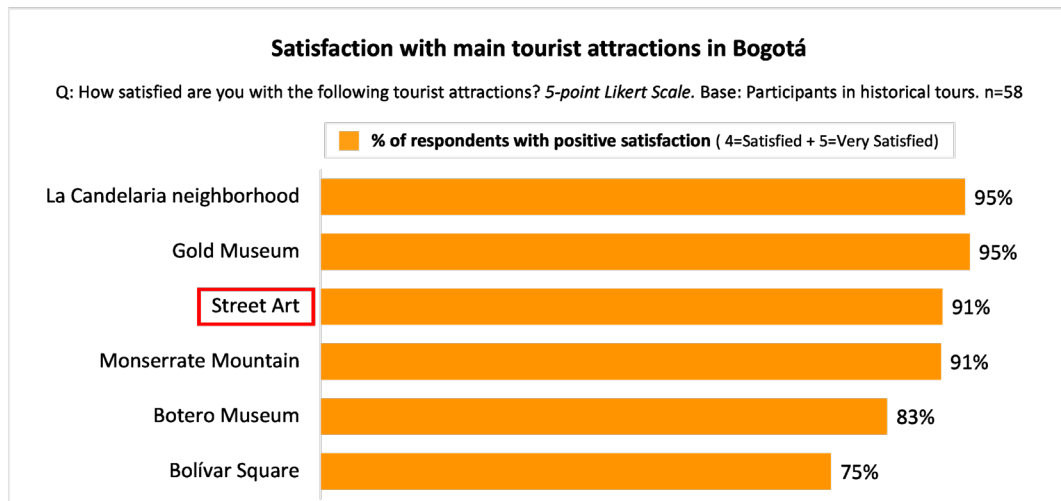


Figure 4: Satisfaction with main tourist attractions in Bogotá.

Regarding other benefits of street art, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with five statements using a 5-point Likert scale (5 = Strongly Agree). A total of 86% of respondents indicated that Bogotá’s street art helped them understand local history and culture, and 81% agreed that it improved their image of Bogotá. Moreover, over half of the respondents (54%) believed that street art enhances the quality of life of the host community and distinguishes Bogotá from other tourist destinations. Additionally, 51% perceived street art as one of the city’s best tourist attractions (figure 5).

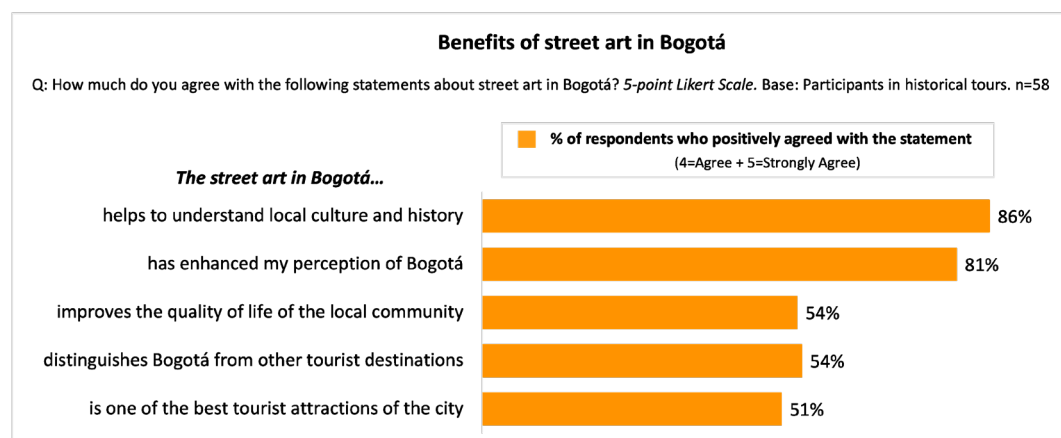


Figure 5: Perceived benefits of street art in Bogotá.

3.3 Street Art Tours Companies

According to the interviews with the founders and tour guides of street art tours companies, the main challenges for street art tourism initiatives are the lack of entrepreneurial training among operators, the country’s low level of bilingualism, the limited institutional promotion of street art as a tourist attraction, and the rigidity of regulations requiring formal certifications to work as a guide, which excludes many artists. One interviewee expressed: *"If Bogotá is known as a graffiti city, why not give artists the opportunity to be the guides, instead of people who have nothing to do with culture."*

Some participants noted that the perception of insecurity in areas outside the historic center limits the possibility of conducting tours in other parts of the city. One interviewee stated: *“Tourists generally stay in La Candelaria and in the areas they have been told are safe for them, and they do not venture into other neighborhoods.”* Additionally, participants indicated that another challenge for street art tourism is the variability in public administration’s attitude toward graffiti, which depends on the mayor in office and can negatively affect companies offering such tours.

Apart from the street art tours in La Candelaria, there are community tourism projects based on street art, such as Breaking Borders in the Egipto neighborhood (adjacent to the historic center) and Bogotá Colors Tours (in the district of Ciudad Bolívar), which provide direct benefits to the local community—for example, by employing young people and former gang members as tour guides. The cofounder of Breaking Borders explained that the tours they offer have improved safety in the area, promoted the development of other local economic enterprises, and helped change the social dynamics of the community while reducing the stigma associated with marginalized areas of the city: *“We are pioneers in Bogotá in developing community tourism in the toughest neighborhoods, because our neighborhood used to be considered a dangerous area, marked by violence and crime. Now, we have been bringing foreigners here for nine years; it is something very beautiful.”*

3.4 The Local Community

According to members of the La Candelaria community interviewed, residents are accustomed to tourism and graffiti, which have long been present in the area. However, over the past decade, they have witnessed a shift from graffiti to a legal practice and the rise of tourism. Many community members believe that the murals have beautified the neighborhood and stimulated the growth of local businesses. One vendor from the public market stated: *“Street art helps all the businesses here in the market and La Candelaria grow. We have grown thanks to tourism and thanks to all the arts, because foreigners really like art.”*

Some participants also consider that street art tourism has served as a tool for social transformation, enabling young people to move away from illegal activities and integrate into cultural and tourism projects. For others, the murals in La Candelaria reflect the identity, history, and traditional culture of the city and may have even influenced the type of tourism the area attracts—shifting from party-oriented tourism to a more cultural focus. *“That mural changed the use of space and tourism in this square. There has always been a lot of tourism in the neighborhood, but much of it used to focus on partying and excess. It was not common to see entire families and such large tourist groups before.”*

Additionally, some community members noted that changes in the sector’s aesthetics and the growth of tourism have improved security, emphasizing an increased police presence for visitor protection, which also benefits residents. Regarding the negative impacts of tourism, residents identified gentrification (the transformation of neighborhoods and displacement of original communities through the influx of wealthier residents) and touristification (the conversion of spaces to serve tourism, altering local life and economy) as threats but did not associate these phenomena directly with street art tourism. Overall, they believe that tourism in the sector brings more benefits than risks to the local community.

3.5 Street Artists

In 2011, the city government established Local Graffiti Roundtables in each district, creating spaces for dialogue between artists and authorities. These groups are self-managed and receive no direct government funding, though they can access public resources through grants and competitions. According to the leader of the Local Graffiti Roundtable of the Historic Center, these groups face challenges such as low participation among graffiti artists and diverse interests among their members. While some artists oppose using street art for advertising and commercial purposes, others view it as a legitimate way to earn financial compensation for their work.

Regarding tourism, the leader of the Local Roundtable stated that many artists criticize tour companies for profiting from street art without benefiting the artists and for guides providing visitors with incorrect or incomplete information about the works and their authors: *“Tours almost never contact the artists who created the interventions. They make up stories about the murals for tourists but do not take the artists into account.”* However, most street artists prefer to focus on their art and have neither the interest nor the time to become certified and work as guides on these tours.

Nevertheless, most of the artists interviewed support community tourism in neighborhoods such as Egipto and Ciudad Bolívar, where street art has helped generate job opportunities and foster social inclusion. One artist

stated: *“I think it’s great that tours are organized in these spaces because they also help change the perception foreigners have of these neighborhoods, which are often associated with insecurity and negative aspects. These kinds of tours transform that image and teach residents that there are other ways to earn a living.”* Likewise, some artists believe that street art tourism should expand beyond La Candelaria and the historic center to decentralize tourism benefits and share the history and culture of less visible communities.

As for female participation in Bogotá’s street art scene, although the number of women in the sector has increased in recent years, they remain a minority, reflecting a global trend. Female street artists interviewed cited local factors such as sexism and the greater risks—both real and perceived—that women face when painting in public spaces. Additionally, they mentioned that women often bear more family responsibilities, which limits their time available for painting. Even so, some female artists view these challenges as a source of empowerment and emphasize that many local women artists have achieved national and international recognition: *“These sexist dynamics put us in very difficult situations. But at the same time, I feel they empower us a lot too, like ‘I can do this.’ When I paint, people notice the energy and instead approach me with respect and admiration.”*

3.6 Public Administration

Since 2012, the public administration of art and culture in Bogotá, represented by the Secretariat of Culture, Recreation and Sports (SCRD) and the District Institute of the Arts (IDARTES), has promoted the responsible practice of graffiti through regulations, artists incentives, access to approved walls for painting, and pedagogical strategies. According to a senior official of IDARTES interviewed for this study, these measures have facilitated the professionalization of street artists, encouraged the creation of elaborate murals, and contributed to positioning Bogotá as an international benchmark in this field.

The official explained that between 2016 and 2019, the Mayor’s Office of Bogotá promoted street art as a tourist attraction by creating the large-format mural area known as “Distrito Grafitti,” with significant participation from international artists. However, after the Covid-19 pandemic, priority shifted to supporting local artists and promoting street art interventions across all city districts, aiming to improve public spaces as a means of fostering social transformation within local communities. Large areas of street art interventions were also developed along road corridors visible to visitors. The interviewee further noted that the current public administration continues to strengthen the Open Museum of Bogotá, aiming to showcase the city’s street art internationally through initiatives such as artist exchange agreements and the Virtual Museum of Street Art and Graffiti project: *“One of the specific objectives of the Open Museum of Bogotá is to make Bogotá a key destination on the Latin American tour that any tourist interested in learning about the continent’s artistic practices should undertake.”*

Regarding street art tourism, the representative from IDARTES stated that the institution acknowledges the tourist potential of these artistic expressions. Although it occasionally offers free guided tours as part of its cultural appropriation initiatives, it does not collaborate with private street art tour companies. The entity does not consider street art tourism a direct cause of gentrification; on the contrary, it has observed growing interest among communities in various neighborhoods to participate in the co-creation of murals with artists and in developing tours as a source of income.

The District Institute of Tourism (IDT) promotes tourism in Bogotá and supports specific community-based tourism projects that contribute to local development, including some involving street art interventions. A senior official from IDT interviewed for this study explained that the institution has recently presented street art initiatives at sector events, highlighting the work of street artists who have fostered economic development in their communities through murals: *“For the IDT, it is important to position tourism as a driver of development; therefore, community projects have been supported, such as the ‘Casas de Colores’ in Ciudad Bolívar and ‘Calle del Color,’ which have used art and tourism to boost the local economy and generate opportunities for social development.”*

Additionally, the Local Mayor’s Office of La Candelaria supports participatory processes with street artists through the Graffiti Roundtable. According to the official responsible for tourism development in La Candelaria, the local community values tourism—including street art—as a source of income and supports its growth: *“Community members welcome tourists because this is literally a tourist locality. Most businesses here depend on tourists and visitors from other areas of the city.”*

4. Discussion

Based on the research findings, the following section presents an assessment of multiple dimensions of sustainable development in Bogotá's street art tourism and highlights key challenges and opportunities.

4.1 Economic Sustainability

According to the interviewees, street art tourism in La Candelaria and Bogotá's historic center has positively contributed to the development of local businesses and enterprises, such as restaurants and handicraft sales. In addition, it has generated employment, particularly in community-based tourism, where residents themselves become guides and hosts.

Participants in street art tours in Bogotá report high levels of satisfaction, which is a key factor in the economic sustainability of this tourist activity. Likewise, survey results indicate that street art helps improve the city's image as a tourist destination, differentiating it from other Latin American cities, and has the potential to contribute to the growth of cultural and creative tourism.

Nevertheless, the findings suggest that the economic sustainability of street art tourism in Bogotá faces several potential challenges. One of the most significant is that street artists—who create the core resource for street art tours—do not receive direct economic benefits from this activity. Structural barriers may also limit street artists from working as tour guides, such as strict regulations for guide certification and low levels of bilingualism, particularly English proficiency. Furthermore, the continuity of street art tourism largely depends on the institutional stance toward these artistic expressions, which may vary according to the public administration in power, introducing uncertainty regarding the viability of tourism projects based on street art.

4.2 Social Sustainability

The social component appears to be one of the strongest pillars of street art tourism. According to interviewees from the local public administration, the co-creation methodology between artists and the local community has fostered greater appropriation of street art, strengthening the sense of identity, pride, and community cohesion. Additionally, the members of the local community interviewed perceive that street art and its associated tourism have contributed to improving security in their neighborhoods.

The findings suggest that community-based tourism provides the greatest social benefits to the local community, serving as a tool for inclusion, particularly for young people in vulnerable situations. By engaging in artistic and tourism projects, these young people may find alternatives for personal and professional development, distancing themselves from contexts of illegality. Likewise, street art tourism can help change the negative perception of traditionally stigmatized areas, transforming them into safer spaces associated with creativity and self-improvement.

4.3 Cultural Sustainability

The study indicates that street art tourism in Bogotá fosters cultural sustainability, as murals not only enhance the urban landscape but also help preserve and disseminate local history, identity, and culture, serving as a vehicle for collective expression and the construction of historical memory. Survey participants, including those who joined street art tours and historical tours, reported that street art in La Candelaria facilitated their understanding of local history and culture. Furthermore, when international tourists share photographs of Bogotá's murals on social media, they may contribute to expanding the global audience for local artists.

4.4 Environmental Sustainability

Street art tourism in Bogotá offers potential environmental advantages. As it is mainly conducted on foot or by bicycle, it produces limited carbon emissions, aligning with the principles of sustainable mobility. Moreover, this type of tourism may encourage the cleanliness and conservation of public spaces by fostering community appropriation of these areas. Consequently, the environmental impact of street art tourism in Bogotá could be comparable to that of traditional cultural tourism in the city's historic center. It does not require large-scale infrastructure or generate significant waste, making it an environmentally friendly option.

4.5 Territory Management and Governance

For the past fifteen years, Bogotá's local government has implemented public policies promoting "the responsible practice of graffiti and street art" through regulations, incentives, and pedagogical strategies. It has also introduced participatory governance mechanisms, such as "graffiti roundtables," which provide artists with a platform to engage with public institutions. Local communities have participated in designing artistic interventions through co-creation laboratories.

Additionally, the public administration supports community-based tourism projects aimed at local development, contributing to the decentralization of tourism beyond the traditional neighborhood of La Candelaria. However, street art is not yet officially recognized as one of the city's main tourist attractions, which may limit its development potential and result in the underutilization of a significant tourism resource.

Although not exclusively linked to street art tourism but to tourism in general, Bogotá faces potential risks of gentrification and touristification, particularly in La Candelaria. Effective planning and regulation at both district and local levels are essential to prevent tourism growth from displacing original residents and altering neighborhood social dynamics, which could compromise the authenticity and sustainability of the city's tourism sector.

5. Conclusion

Research findings indicate that street art tourism in Bogotá contributes positively to the well-being of host communities. Furthermore, the results suggest that street art possesses significant tourism potential beyond specialized tours and visitors with a strong interest in the subject. It can enhance the city's image, differentiate it from other destinations, and attract cultural tourists more broadly. It also provides an opportunity to diversify traditional tourist products through an activity perceived as authentic and distinctive, enabling visitors to engage with local history and culture from a unique perspective. To capitalize on this potential, public administrations at both local and national levels could strengthen the promotion of street art in Bogotá and encourage the development of tours in areas beyond the historic center, many of which already feature notable interventions that remain underutilized for tourism purposes.

Furthermore, this study indicates that public administration plays a fundamental role in the sustainability of street art tourism by regulating and promoting tourism activities and developing infrastructure and mobility services that enable tourism development in new urban areas and help disperse visitor concentration. Additionally, the sustainability of street art tourism might be strengthened through coordinated collaboration among public administrations, the private tourism sector, local communities, and street artists. Such comprehensive cooperation is essential to mitigate potential negative impacts of tourism and foster inclusive development.

5.1 Limitations

This study has potential limitations. First, the small sample size of surveys and interviews restricts the generalizability of the findings to a broader population. Second, the sample was overrepresented by tourists participating in street art and historical tours, which may not accurately represent the experiences of tourists engaged in other types of activities. Finally, the geographic scope of the fieldwork was limited to Bogotá's historic center, hindering the extrapolation of results to other destinations.

Future studies may include larger and more diverse samples of tourists and tourism stakeholders. Additionally, expanding the geographic scope beyond Bogotá to include multiple destinations would enhance the generalizability of the findings and enable comparative analyses across different urban and cultural contexts.

Ethics Declaration

This research was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles established in the Code of Integrity in Research of the University of Barcelona, which follows the guidelines of the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and the confidentiality of their data was guaranteed throughout the process.

AI Declaration

I used M365 Copilot to translate the paper's original text from Spanish to English. The generated output was then revised and edited by me. No content generated by AI tools has been presented as my own work.

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