

Urban Decline on Screen and Tourism Imaginaries Beyond the Tourist Bubble: A Conceptual Analysis of The Wire and Baltimore

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Meridia
Press

JBTM 2025,
Volume 1 (Issue
2): 71-84

ISSN (print):

3101-3260

ISSN (online):

3101-1950

Received:

December 1, 2025

Revised:

December 8, 2025

Accepted:

December 15,
2025

Published:

December 22,
2025



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Abstract

Film-induced tourism has been widely examined in relation to iconic destinations and positive place branding. However, significantly less attention has been paid to audiovisual productions that portray urban decline, social exclusion, and institutional failure, where tourism impacts tend to be indirect, unofficial, and ethically contested. This gap is particularly relevant in post-industrial cities whose global visibility is shaped not only by promotional strategies but also by critical media representations. This article adopts a conceptual approach combined with a critical case study to examine how the television series *The Wire* contributes to the construction of alternative urban tourism imaginaries in the city of Baltimore. Drawing on an integrated review of the literature on film-induced tourism, dark tourism, and slum tourism, the study explores how *The Wire* functions as a symbolic catalyst that challenges the dominant “tourist bubble” narrative traditionally associated with Baltimore’s Inner Harbor and visitor-oriented urban regeneration strategies. Rather than attempting to quantify tourism demand, the analysis focuses on the symbolic, discursive, and governance dimensions through which representations of urban decline and social inequality shape destination perceptions and potential tourism practices. The study offers actionable insights for destination managers and policymakers dealing with non-institutionalized tourism dynamics shaped by critical audiovisual representations in post-industrial cities.

Keywords: Dark tourism; Slum tourism; Urban tourism; Destination management; Baltimore.

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<https://doi.org/10.64976/jbtm.12>



1. Introduction

Film-induced tourism has become a well-established area of research within tourism studies and destination management, highlighting the ability of films and television series to shape destination images, increase international visibility, and stimulate tourism flows linked to iconic settings (Beeton, 2005; Hudson & Ritchie, 2006; Connell, 2012). Much of this literature has focused on contexts in which audiovisual representations project positive or idealized images of places, facilitating their integration into place branding and tourism promotion strategies.

However, considerably less attention has been paid to audiovisual productions that depict urban decline, social inequality, and institutional failure. In such cases, tourism impacts rarely materialize through official promotional strategies or easily measurable increases in visitor numbers. Instead, they emerge through the construction of alternative tourism imaginaries that are often controversial and ethically problematic. Despite the growing body of research on film-induced tourism, little is known about how critical audiovisual representations of urban decline influence tourism imaginaries and destination management in post-industrial cities. While the literature on dark tourism and slum tourism has partially addressed tourist interest in spaces associated with suffering and marginalization, these perspectives have seldom been systematically integrated with film-induced tourism research or with urban destination management.

This gap is particularly relevant in post-industrial cities that have pursued visitor-oriented urban regeneration strategies concentrated in specific enclaves, commonly described as “tourist bubbles,” which remain disconnected from broader urban social realities (Friedman et al., 2012). Baltimore represents a paradigmatic case in this regard. While the Inner Harbor has been promoted as a symbol of urban revitalization and tourism appeal, the city has gained a very different form of global visibility through the television series *The Wire* (2002–2008), widely recognized for its critical portrayal of urban decline, socio-spatial segregation, and the institutional dynamics of contemporary capitalism (Dreier & Atlas, 2009).

In this context, this article adopts a conceptual approach combined with a critical case study to examine how *The Wire* contributes to the construction of alternative urban tourism imaginaries in Baltimore. The main objective is to analyse how audiovisual representations of urban decline operate as symbolic catalysts for forms of tourism located at the intersection of film-induced tourism, dark tourism, and slum tourism, and to discuss the implications of these imaginaries for destination management, urban tourism governance, and ethical debates surrounding the commodification of marginalized urban spaces. By doing so, the article seeks to expand the analytical scope of film-induced tourism research from a management and public policy perspective, in line with the aims of the *Journal of Business and Tourism Management*.

2. Literature review

2.1. Film-Induced Tourism and Destination Image Construction

Film-induced tourism has been widely acknowledged as a phenomenon capable of shaping destination images and influencing tourists’ decision-making processes. Early studies emphasized the role of films and television series as powerful agents of indirect promotion, capable of generating awareness, familiarity, and emotional attachment to places (Beeton, 2005; Kim & Richardson, 2003). Unlike conventional marketing campaigns, audiovisual productions operate through narrative

immersion and symbolic meaning, allowing viewers to establish affective connections with the settings portrayed on screen.

Much of the existing research has focused on destinations that benefit from positive or idealized representations, such as scenic landscapes, heritage cities, or culturally appealing urban environments. Recent tourism management research emphasizes the relevance of community-based and sustainability-oriented approaches as mechanisms to address social, ethical, and governance challenges in tourism development (Kumar & Sharma, 2025). Empirical studies have examined the effects of audiovisual exposure on destination image, visit intention, and tourism flows, as well as its integration into destination branding and marketing strategies (Hudson & Ritchie, 2006; Connell, 2012). Recent reviews of tourism research highlight the growing centrality of sustainability-related values and perceptions in shaping contemporary tourism discourses and visitor expectations (Rodríguez et al., 2025). In these contexts, film-induced tourism is commonly framed as a clear opportunity for destination management, facilitating the development of themed routes, location tours, and place-based promotional initiatives.

However, this dominant approach presents notable limitations. First, it tends to assume a predominantly positive relationship between audiovisual representation and tourism attractiveness, overlooking productions that convey critical, negative, or uncomfortable images of destinations. Second, it prioritizes quantitative measurements of impact, such as visitor numbers or economic benefits, which limits the analysis of symbolic, discursive, and non-institutionalized tourism phenomena. As a result, the tourism implications of audiovisual narratives depicting urban decline and social inequality remain underexplored.

2.2. Dark Tourism and Tourist Interest in Spaces of Suffering

The concept of dark tourism provides a relevant theoretical lens for examining tourist interest in places associated with death, suffering, violence, and collective trauma. Lennon and Foley (2000) introduced the term to describe the growing attraction to sites linked to tragic events, emphasizing the role of modernity and media in shaping such experiences. Subsequently, Stone (2006) proposed a spectrum of dark tourism, distinguishing varying degrees of “darkness” according to factors such as temporal distance from the event, interpretative intent, and levels of commercialization.

Research on dark tourism has explored both visitor motivations and the ethical and managerial challenges involved in commodifying suffering. Identified motivations include the search for authenticity, educational purposes, moral reflection, and, in some cases, morbid curiosity (Sharpley, 2009). From a management perspective, scholars have highlighted the need to balance interpretative responsibility, respect for affected communities, and market demands.

While early dark tourism studies focused primarily on historical sites such as battlefields, memorials, or concentration camps, more recent work has expanded the concept to include contemporary urban spaces where violence and suffering are ongoing structural conditions. This extension is particularly relevant for post-industrial cities characterized by inequality, crime, and institutional failure. Nevertheless, the integration of dark tourism perspectives with film-induced tourism research remains limited, especially regarding the governance and management of urban destinations shaped by critical media representations.

2.3. Slum Tourism, Ghetto Tourism, and the Commodification of Urban Marginality

Slum tourism and ghetto tourism constitute another important body of literature for understanding tourist interest in marginalized urban spaces marked by poverty, exclusion, and segregation. Although such practices have historical precedents in nineteenth-century European and North American cities, contemporary research has largely focused on cases in the Global South, including favela tourism in Brazil and township tours in South Africa (Frenzel et al., 2012).

Scholars have debated the social, ethical, and economic implications of slum tourism. Some studies emphasize its potential to generate income, visibility, and opportunities for marginalized communities when developed under participatory and regulated models (Freire-Medeiros, 2013). Others warn against the risks of voyeurism, territorial stigmatization, and the reproduction of unequal power relations, particularly when tours are designed primarily for external consumption.

Table 1. Comparative overview of tourism typologies.

| Tourism Typology | Core Focus | Main Visitor Motivations | Management and Ethical Challenges |
|-------------------------|---|--|--|
| Film-Induced Tourism | Audiovisual locations and mediated place imagery | Emotional attachment, fandom, narrative immersion | Risk of over-commercialization; dependence on media exposure |
| Dark Tourism | Sites associated with death, suffering, or trauma | Moral reflection, curiosity, search for authenticity | Ethical representation of suffering; interpretive responsibility |
| Slum / Ghetto Tourism | Marginalized urban neighborhoods | Desire for “real city” experiences, social awareness | Voyeurism, territorial stigmatization, community exclusion |

Source: Authors’ elaboration based on Beeton (2005), Lennon and Foley (2000), Frenzel et al. (2012)

From an urban tourism management perspective, slum tourism raises significant governance challenges related to regulation, legitimacy, and community involvement. These practices often operate outside official destination strategies, creating tensions between local authorities, tourism operators, and residents. In the context of cities in the Global North, ghetto tourism highlights the persistence of urban inequalities and the complex relationship between media representation, tourist curiosity, and social responsibility.

2.4. Post-Industrial Cities, Tourist Bubbles, and Urban Tourism Governance

Urban tourism in post-industrial cities has frequently been associated with visitor-oriented regeneration strategies aimed at economic revitalization and competitiveness. Within this framework, the concept of the tourist bubble refers to the creation of spatially concentrated tourism enclaves characterized by safety, accessibility, and detachment from broader urban social problems (Judd, 1999). These spaces offer controlled and consumable tourism experiences aligned with official destination narratives.

Critical urban scholars have linked this model to neoliberal forms of urban governance, in which tourism is mobilized as a tool for economic growth, often at the expense of social equity and spatial justice (Harvey, 1989, 2001). In the case of Baltimore, Friedman et al. (2012) demonstrate how sustained investment in the Inner Harbor has produced a well-defined tourist bubble that coexists with extensive areas of urban decline and social exclusion.

From a destination management perspective, these dynamics raise questions about the sustainability and legitimacy of urban tourism strategies that prioritize selective visibility. The emergence of alternative media narratives that expose marginalized urban realities further complicates governance processes, challenging destination managers to respond to tourism imaginaries beyond their direct control.

2.5. Critical Synthesis and Research Positioning

The literature review reveals a clear fragmentation between studies on film-induced tourism, dark tourism, slum tourism, and urban tourism governance. Film-induced tourism research has largely focused on positive representations and measurable outcomes, while dark tourism and slum tourism studies have examined suffering and marginality from critical and ethical perspectives, often without systematically considering the role of audiovisual media as a triggering force. Similarly, urban tourism studies have addressed tourist bubbles and regeneration strategies without fully integrating media-driven destination imaginaries.

This fragmentation justifies the need for integrative approaches capable of capturing how critical audiovisual productions, such as *The Wire*, generate forms of tourism interest located at the intersection of these literatures. In the case of Baltimore, the series not only challenges the official tourism narrative but also raises specific managerial and governance issues related to non-institutionalized tourism practices and ethical representation. Building on this synthesis, the following section develops the conceptual framework guiding the analysis of the case study.

3. Conceptual Framework

This section constitutes the main conceptual contribution of the article by integrating fragmented strands of tourism literature into a coherent analytical framework. By bringing together insights from film-induced tourism, dark tourism, and slum tourism, the framework provides a structured approach to understanding how critical audiovisual representations of urban decline generate alternative tourism imaginaries and pose specific challenges for destination management and urban tourism governance.

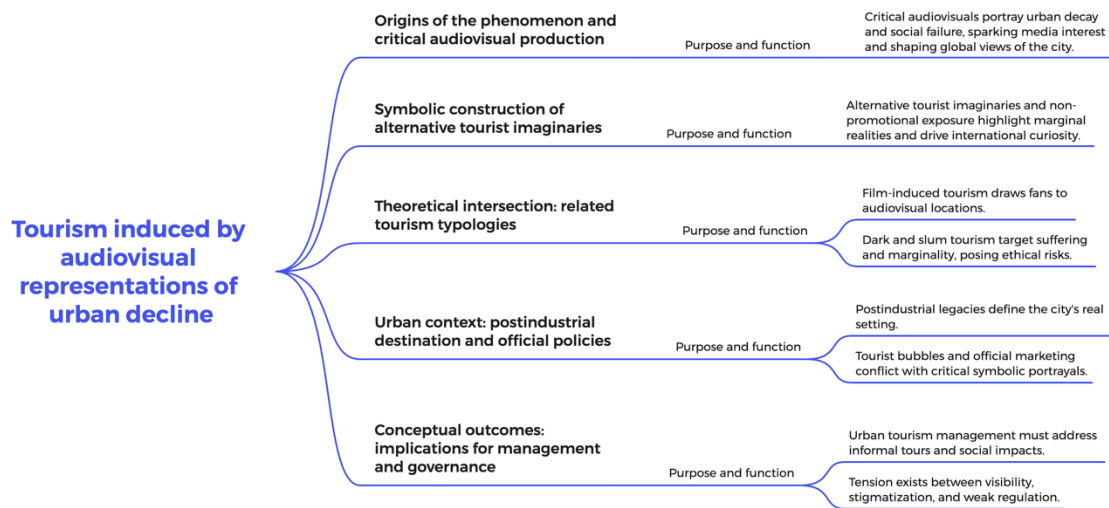


Figure 1. illustrates the conceptual framework developed in this study, showing how critical audiovisual representations, like *The Wire*, serve as symbolic catalysts for the construction of alternative tourism imaginaries located at the intersection of film-induced tourism, dark tourism, and slum tourism

3.1. Audiovisual Representations and the Construction of Urban Tourism Imaginaries

The conceptual framework developed in this study is grounded in the assumption that audiovisual productions do not merely influence destination image, but actively contribute to the construction of tourism imaginaries, understood as sets of symbolic representations, narratives, and expectations that mediate the relationship between potential visitors and urban space. Unlike conventional approaches to film-induced tourism, which emphasize implicit promotion and destination branding, this framework recognizes that critical or negative representations may also generate tourism interest, albeit in non-traditional and difficult-to-institutionalize forms.

Television series with a strong territorial anchoring and long-form narratives, such as *The Wire*, possess a distinctive capacity to construct complex urban imaginaries. Their serialized format allows for in-depth portrayals of cities, institutions, and social inequalities, shaping audience perceptions of urban space beyond iconic landmarks and tourist enclaves. These representations do not seek to attract visitors explicitly, but they may operate as symbolic catalysts for alternative tourism practices oriented toward the exploration of the “real city,” rather than the city promoted through official tourism channels.

3.2. Beyond Conventional Film-Induced Tourism.

The proposed framework conceptualizes the tourism implications of *The Wire* as a phenomenon located at the intersection of three strands of tourism literature: film-induced tourism, dark tourism, and slum tourism. Rather than treating these perspectives separately, the study adopts an integrative approach that captures the hybrid nature of tourism interest generated by audiovisual representations of urban decline.

From a film-induced tourism perspective, *The Wire* enhances Baltimore’s global visibility and associates the city with a distinctive narrative. However, unlike widely studied cases, this narrative

does not align with destination promotion objectives or aspirational place images. The relevance of dark tourism emerges here, as the attraction lies in representations of violence, inequality, and institutional failure, which may appeal to tourists seeking authenticity, understanding, or confrontation with uncomfortable social realities.

At the same time, the focus on marginalized neighborhoods, public housing projects, street corners, and spaces of exclusion connects with the literature on slum and ghetto tourism. In the case examined, however, these practices rarely take the form of formalized or regulated tourism products. Instead, they manifest as diffuse and informal forms of urban exploration and cultural consumption. The framework therefore conceptualizes tourism associated with *The Wire* as a hybrid continuum, rather than as a clearly delineated tourism typology.

3.3. The Tourist Bubble and the Emergence of Alternative Urban Narratives

A central component of the conceptual framework is the tension between official tourism imaginaries and alternative urban narratives generated by critical audiovisual productions. In post-industrial cities, destination management strategies have often concentrated on the development of tourist bubbles that offer safe, controlled, and consumable experiences, spatially and symbolically disconnected from broader urban problems.

The Wire disrupts this logic by foregrounding spaces, actors, and dynamics systematically excluded from official tourism narratives. As illustrated in Figure 1, this disruption does not dismantle the tourist bubble, but it generates symbolic frictions that expand the range of imaginaries associated with the destination. These frictions may translate into forms of tourist curiosity oriented toward marginal, contested, or non-promoted urban spaces, thereby challenging conventional assumptions in destination management.

3.4. Implications for Destination Management and Urban Tourism Governance

From a management perspective, the framework highlights the complex dilemmas faced by public and private actors in urban tourism governance. On the one hand, ignoring critical audiovisual narratives may be ineffective in an era of global media circulation and transnational cultural consumption. On the other hand, their uncritical incorporation into official tourism strategies raises ethical, social, and reputational risks, particularly when vulnerable communities and marginalized spaces are involved.

The proposed framework therefore shifts the analytical focus from impact measurement to governance capacity, emphasizing regulation, community engagement, and ethical responsibility. Rather than framing tourism induced by *The Wire* as either an opportunity or a threat, the framework conceptualizes it as a phenomenon that reveals deeper structural tensions between tourism development, urban inequality, and media representation in post-industrial cities.

3.5. Framework Synthesis

Overall, the conceptual framework positions *The Wire* as a symbolic catalyst for alternative urban tourism imaginaries that operate beyond conventional film-induced tourism and the logic of the tourist bubble. These imaginaries emerge at the intersection of film-induced tourism, dark tourism, and slum tourism, and are characterized by their fragmented, non-institutionalized, and ethically ambiguous nature. This framework provides the theoretical foundation for analysing the case of

Baltimore, enabling an examination of how representations of urban decline shape destination perceptions and pose specific challenges for destination management and urban tourism governance.

4. Baltimore as a critical Case Study

4.1. Baltimore, Urban Regeneration, and the Consolidation of the Tourist Bubble

The case of Baltimore is not intended to be statistically representative, but illustrative of broader dynamics affecting post-industrial urban destinations shaped by critical media representations. As a critical case, Baltimore allows for an in-depth examination of how alternative tourism imaginaries emerge in tension with official destination narratives and visitor-oriented regeneration strategies.

Baltimore has been widely examined in urban studies as a paradigmatic example of a post-industrial city that has relied on tourism and leisure as tools for economic regeneration. Since the late twentieth century, local urban policies have prioritized the transformation of the Inner Harbor into a visitor-oriented enclave through sustained investment in cultural, commercial, and sports infrastructures. This process has led to the consolidation of a “tourist bubble” characterized by accessibility, perceived safety, and a spatial and symbolic disconnection from broader urban social problems (Friedman et al., 2012).

From a destination management perspective, the Inner Harbor has functioned as the central pillar of Baltimore’s tourism branding strategy, projecting an image of urban revitalization and consumption-oriented attractiveness. However, this model has been criticized for its limited redistributive effects and its tendency to obscure persistent socio-spatial inequalities, particularly in the city’s eastern and western neighborhoods. In this context, urban tourism governance has largely focused on reinforcing selective visibility, privileging enclaves aligned with promotional narratives while marginalizing alternative representations of the city.

4.2. The Wire and the Construction of an Alternative Urban Narrative

In contrast to Baltimore’s official tourism narrative, the television series *The Wire* (2002–2008) has contributed to the construction of a radically different representation of the city. Across its five seasons, the series portrays Baltimore as a complex assemblage of institutional dysfunction, structural inequality, and urban decline, where crime and violence are presented as outcomes of broader economic and political dynamics rather than isolated social pathologies (Dreier & Atlas, 2009).

Within the conceptual framework proposed in this study, *The Wire* functions as a critical audiovisual production that enhances Baltimore’s global visibility while simultaneously destabilizing its dominant tourism imaginary. The city itself emerges as the central protagonist of the narrative, with attention shifting away from tourist enclaves toward marginalized neighborhoods, public housing projects, decaying port areas, and failing educational institutions. Although the series does not aim to promote the destination, it generates a deep sense of familiarity with urban spaces that are typically excluded from official tourism discourses.

4.3. Alternative Tourism Imaginaries and Non-Institutionalized Practices

The global circulation of *The Wire* has contributed to the emergence of alternative urban tourism imaginaries associated with Baltimore, as illustrated in Figure 1. These imaginaries do not necessarily translate into formal tourism products or institutional strategies, but rather into diffuse forms of

tourism interest that combine cultural consumption, urban curiosity, and symbolic engagement with the “real city.”

From an analytical perspective, tourism interest linked to *The Wire* can be interpreted as a hybrid phenomenon located at the intersection of film-induced tourism, dark tourism, and slum tourism. On the one hand, the series functions as a trigger of destination recognition, consistent with film-induced tourism dynamics. On the other hand, the attraction lies precisely in exposure to uncomfortable urban realities such as structural violence, poverty, and institutional failure, which resonates with dark tourism motivations. Finally, the focus on marginalized neighborhoods and spaces of exclusion aligns with debates surrounding slum and ghetto tourism, albeit in the absence of regulated or formalized tourism offerings.

These practices largely operate outside formal tourism governance structures, making them difficult to identify, measure, or manage. At the same time, their existence exposes the limitations of destination management models that overlook the role of critical media narratives in shaping tourism imaginaries.

4.4. Destination Management Tensions and Urban Tourism Governance Challenges

The coexistence of the Inner Harbor tourist bubble and the urban imaginaries generated by *The Wire* poses significant challenges for destination management in Baltimore. Strategically, local authorities face the dilemma of whether to acknowledge or ignore a globally circulating narrative that lies beyond their direct control but nonetheless influences destination perceptions. While the uncritical incorporation of such narratives into official tourism strategies risks reinforcing territorial stigmatization and ethical concerns, their complete exclusion limits the capacity to respond to non-institutionalized tourism practices.

From an urban tourism governance perspective, the Baltimore case highlights the need for more integrative and reflexive approaches that consider the impact of audiovisual representations on destination management. Rather than viewing tourism associated with *The Wire* as an anomaly, the conceptual framework suggests interpreting it as a manifestation of deeper structural tensions between tourism development, urban inequality, and mediated representations in post-industrial cities.

4.5. Case Study Synthesis

The analysis of Baltimore as a critical case demonstrates how *The Wire* contributes to the construction of alternative urban tourism imaginaries that challenge the logic of the tourist bubble and raise fundamental questions for destination management and governance. Rather than producing conventional tourism impacts, the series amplifies marginalized urban realities and acts as a symbolic catalyst for hybrid, fragmented, and ethically ambiguous forms of tourism interest. This case study illustrates the analytical value of the proposed conceptual framework and sets the stage for a broader discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of tourism induced by critical audiovisual representations.

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical Contribution:

The findings derived from the conceptual analysis and the Baltimore case study contribute to extending current understandings of film-induced tourism beyond dominant approaches focused on implicit promotion and positive destination branding. As illustrated in Figure 1, this study demonstrates that *The Wire* does not generate conventional tourism impacts but instead functions as a symbolic catalyst in the construction of alternative urban tourism imaginaries located at the intersection of film-induced tourism, dark tourism, and slum tourism.

This integrated perspective addresses a key gap identified in the literature. While film-induced tourism research has largely assumed a positive relationship between audiovisual representation and destination attractiveness (Beeton, 2005; Hudson & Ritchie, 2006), studies on dark tourism and slum tourism have examined tourist engagement with suffering and marginality from critical and ethical viewpoints, often without systematically considering the role of audiovisual media as a triggering mechanism (Lennon & Foley, 2000; Frenzel et al., 2012). The case of *The Wire* illustrates that critical representations can generate meaningful forms of tourism interest, even when they are fragmented, informal, and ethically ambiguous.

From a theoretical standpoint, the article expands the scope of film-induced tourism by incorporating contexts of urban adversity and non-promotional narratives. Rather than conceptualizing tourism impact solely in terms of visitor numbers or economic benefits, the study emphasizes symbolic processes through which mediated representations shape destination perceptions and potential tourism practices.

5.2. Alternative Tourism Imaginaries and Tensions with the Tourist Bubble

The discussion of Baltimore highlights a structural tension between official tourism imaginaries concentrated within the Inner Harbor tourist bubble and the alternative urban narratives generated by *The Wire*. This tension reinforces critical perspectives on urban tourism governance in post-industrial cities, where visitor-oriented regeneration strategies tend to privilege selective enclaves while excluding broader social realities from destination narratives (Judd, 1999; Friedman et al., 2012).

Within this context, *The Wire* operates as a mechanism of visibility for the “non-touristic city,” expanding the range of meanings associated with Baltimore. While the series does not replace or redefine the official tourism strategy, it introduces symbolic frictions that may translate into alternative tourism interests oriented toward marginalized, contested, or non-promoted urban spaces. These dynamics challenge conventional assumptions in destination management, particularly those based on spatial containment and narrative control.

5.3. Implications for Urban Destination Management

From a destination management perspective, the findings suggest that ignoring critical audiovisual representations is unlikely to be effective in the long term. In an era of global media circulation and transnational cultural consumption, such narratives operate beyond the direct control of destination managers while exerting a significant influence on external perceptions of cities.

At the same time, the study cautions against the uncritical incorporation of these narratives into official tourism strategies. The commodification of urban suffering or marginality may reinforce processes of territorial stigmatization and generate conflicts with local communities, as highlighted in the slum tourism literature (Freire-Medeiros, 2013). The conceptual framework proposed here points

to the need for intermediate management approaches that acknowledge alternative tourism imaginaries without automatically translating them into formalized tourism products.

5.4. Urban Tourism Governance and Ethical Dilemmas

The Baltimore case also underscores the ethical dimension of urban tourism governance. Tourism practices associated with *The Wire* are characterized by moral ambiguity, as they involve the observation and symbolic consumption of spaces shaped by inequality and social exclusion. This raises fundamental questions regarding who benefits from tourism, who bears its social costs, and what responsibilities public and private actors hold in regulating such practices.

From this perspective, the article reinforces the importance of integrating ethical considerations into urban tourism planning and governance, particularly in post-industrial cities. Rather than framing tourism induced by critical audiovisual representations as either an opportunity or a threat, the study conceptualizes it as a phenomenon that exposes deeper structural tensions between tourism development, urban inequality, and mediated representations.

5.5. Contributions and Future Research Agenda

Overall, the discussion highlights three main contributions. First, the article proposes an integrative conceptual framework that extends film-induced tourism research to contexts of urban decline. Second, it demonstrates the analytical value of conceptual and qualitative approaches for examining tourism impacts that are not directly quantified. Third, it offers a management- and governance-oriented interpretation that is particularly relevant for complex urban destinations.

These contributions open several avenues for future research, including empirical investigations of visitor motivations linked to critical urban narratives, comparative studies with other destinations shaped by similar audiovisual productions, and the exploration of governance models capable of ethically and sustainably engaging with alternative tourism imaginaries.

6. Conclusions and Implications

6.1. Main Conclusions

This article has examined the role of audiovisual representations of urban decline in shaping alternative urban tourism imaginaries, through a conceptual analysis and a critical case study of the television series *The Wire* and the city of Baltimore. Moving beyond dominant approaches to film-induced tourism that focus on positive destination images and quantifiable impacts, the study demonstrates that critical audiovisual productions can generate meaningful, albeit non-conventional, forms of tourism interest.

By integrating the literature on film-induced tourism, dark tourism, and slum tourism, the article has developed a conceptual framework that captures the hybrid and symbolic nature of tourism imaginaries associated with representations of urban adversity. The case of Baltimore illustrates how *The Wire* functions as a symbolic catalyst that challenges the logic of the tourist bubble and expands the range of meanings associated with the destination. Rather than producing direct increases in tourist arrivals, the series contributes to reshaping perceptions of the city by foregrounding social inequality, institutional failure, and marginalized urban spaces.

6.2. Implications for Destination Management and Urban Tourism Governance

From a destination management perspective, the findings suggest that urban tourism authorities must acknowledge the influence of critical audiovisual narratives on destination perception, even when these narratives fall outside official promotional strategies. Ignoring such imaginaries may limit the capacity of destination managers to understand and respond to emerging, non-institutionalized tourism practices.

At the same time, the study cautions against the uncritical incorporation of narratives of urban decline into formal tourism products. The commodification of suffering and marginality may reinforce territorial stigmatization and exacerbate tensions with local communities. In this context, urban tourism governance should move beyond enclave-based strategies and adopt more reflexive and ethically informed approaches that prioritize regulation, community engagement, and social responsibility.

Table 2. Implications for Urban Destination Management and Governance

| Management Dimension | Key Challenge | Implications for Practice |
|------------------------------|--|---|
| Destination image management | Presence of unofficial and critical narratives | Need to acknowledge alternative tourism imaginaries beyond official branding |
| Tourism regulation | Emergence of informal and media-driven tourism practices | Development of regulatory frameworks addressing non-institutionalized tourism |
| Community relations | Risk of stigmatization and social conflict | Inclusion of local communities in tourism governance and decision-making |
| Ethical responsibility | Commodification of urban decline and marginality | Adoption of ethically informed and socially responsible tourism strategies |

Source: Author elaboration.

The article also highlights the limitations of tourism development models centered on tourist bubbles, suggesting the need for more inclusive and nuanced destination narratives that better reflect the social complexity of post-industrial cities.

In practical terms, this implies the need for regulatory frameworks addressing informal or media-driven tourism practices, mechanisms for community participation in tourism-related decision-making, and strategies for managing unofficial destination narratives without reinforcing territorial stigmatization or social exclusion.

6.3. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study is subject to limitations inherent in its conceptual and qualitative approach. It does not aim to measure empirically the tourism impact of *The Wire* in terms of visitor numbers, economic effects, or employment generation, but rather to analyse the symbolic mechanisms through which audiovisual representations influence tourism imaginaries. While this approach responds to a significant gap in the literature, it also points to the need for complementary empirical research.

Future studies could explore visitor motivations and experiences related to critical urban narratives, conduct comparative analyses with other cities shaped by similar audiovisual productions, or examine governance models capable of engaging ethically and sustainably with alternative tourism

imaginaries. Such research would further enhance understanding of the complex relationships between tourism, media representation, and urban inequality.

6.4. Final Contribution

Overall, this article contributes to expanding the analytical scope of film-induced tourism research by incorporating contexts of urban decline and critical media representations that have been largely overlooked in the literature. By proposing an integrative conceptual framework and applying it to the case of Baltimore, the study offers theoretically grounded and managerially relevant insights for scholars, destination managers, and policymakers concerned with the challenges of urban tourism governance in post-industrial cities.

Acknowledgements

N/A

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(Title, Abstract and Keywords in Spanish)

El declive urbano en pantalla y los imaginarios turísticos más allá de la burbuja turística: un análisis conceptual de *The Wire* y Baltimore

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Publicado el 22 de diciembre de 2025.

Resumen

El turismo inducido por el cine ha sido ampliamente examinado en relación con destinos icónicos y estrategias positivas de construcción de marca de lugar. Sin embargo, se ha prestado considerablemente menos atención a las producciones audiovisuales que representan el declive urbano, la exclusión social y el fracaso institucional, donde los impactos turísticos tienden a ser indirectos, no oficiales y éticamente controvertidos. Esta laguna resulta especialmente relevante en ciudades posindustriales cuya visibilidad global no se configura únicamente a través de estrategias promocionales, sino también mediante representaciones mediáticas críticas. Este artículo adopta un enfoque conceptual combinado con un estudio de caso crítico para analizar cómo la serie televisiva *The Wire* contribuye a la construcción de imaginarios turísticos urbanos alternativos en la ciudad de Baltimore. A partir de una revisión integrada de la literatura sobre turismo inducido por el cine, turismo oscuro y turismo de barrios marginales, el estudio explora cómo *The Wire* funciona como un catalizador simbólico que desafía el relato dominante de la “burbuja turística” tradicionalmente asociada al Inner Harbor de Baltimore y a las estrategias de regeneración urbana orientadas al visitante. En lugar de intentar cuantificar la demanda turística, el análisis se centra en las dimensiones simbólicas, discursivas y de gobernanza a través de las cuales las representaciones del declive urbano y la desigualdad social configuran las percepciones del destino y las prácticas turísticas potenciales. El estudio ofrece aportaciones aplicables para gestores de destinos y responsables políticos que afrontan dinámicas turísticas no institucionalizadas, moldeadas por representaciones audiovisuales críticas en ciudades posindustriales.

Palabras clave: Turismo oscuro; Turismo de barrios marginales; Turismo urbano; Gestión de destinos; Baltimore.

<https://doi.org/10.64976/jbtlm.12>