Constructing Paradise: Tourism Advertising and the Politics of Representation in the Caribbean

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Introduction

Tourism is one of the fastest-growing industries in the world, often celebrated for its economic contributions and its capacity to facilitate cultural exchange. Beyond being a leisure activity, it constitutes a global system of mobility, exchange and representation. At the same time, tourism is a deeply political and cultural practice, and the ways in which destinations are imagined and marketed reflects and reproduces wider power structures. Picture a group of students (in their twenties, male) who decide to take a trip at the end of their studies. They choose a country in the global South, for economic reasons, backpacking in Thailand is an option, or maybe vacationing in an island in the Caribbean. In their decision process several factors are involved: the sites they can visit, the gastronomy, the beaches where they can swim, the local culture they can be immersed in, the beauty of the local women they can admire. It is in that thought process that existing stereotypes and constructions of certain places are kept alive. Scholars have long shown how tourism carries legacies of colonialism, power hierarchies and inequalities, framing certain destinations as "exotic" sites of consumption for predominantly Western visitors (Culler 1981, Urry 2002, Enloe 2014) . The students' choices are also influenced by travel magazines and agencies, resort companies, tourism boards, and how these tourism promoters frame certain countries highlighting certain aspects. In order to attract tourists, who are simultaneously consumers, they use natural sites, languages, cultures and people and brand them for economic gains. As tourism becomes intertwined with capitalism, touristic experiences become packaged as products to be sold, and in this packaging process, the local population becomes instrumentalised as well, represented as attractions to be consumed.

The Caribbean provides a particularly relevant case to study these dynamics. Following the economic crises that accompanied decolonization in the 1960s, many Caribbean nations turned to tourism as a primary development strategy. This shift was encouraged by international organizations, including UN agencies and the World Bank, which promoted tourism as a means for small island states to achieve economic growth and integration into the global capitalist system (Kempadoo 2004, 115). However, a large share of this income leaves the region and goes into the hands of foreign corporations. Indeed, as scholars show, tourism deepens economic dependency and reinforces unequal global relations between the Caribbean and wealthier nations (Kempadoo 2004; Greenwood 1989; Hall 2009). These inequalities are not only shaped by financial structures but are also embedded in long-standing racial, gendered and class hierarchies. Historically, colonialism and slavery produced sharp social differences

based on phenotype and ethnicity, distinctions that continue to shape Caribbean societies well into the twenty-first century (Kempadoo 2004, 31).

This context is central to understanding the ways in which the Caribbean is marketed and consumed as a touristic destination. The imagery promoted in brochures, advertisements and campaigns often draws on racialization and sexualization which positions women's bodies as central to the region's appeal. These representations construct different forms of femininity, tourist and local, through contrasting but interconnected roles. Women are portrayed as symbols of beauty and pleasure, whether as sexualised objects or caring service providers. These representations romanticize the cultural and racial "Other", capturing what scholars describe as the notion of exoticism, a process through which non-Western cultures are idealized and eroticized within Western imaginaries (Enloe 2014; Urry 2002). This practice of hyper sexualization and objectification often intersects with matters of race and class, presenting women as both representatives of national culture as well as objects of desire for foreign consumption. Women are not simply participants in tourism economies but are often constructed as part of the attraction itself, their bodies helping to materialise fantasies of escape and indulgence. While these portrayals sometimes operate in nuanced ways, they continue to reproduce racialized and gendered stereotypes that sustain global systems of inequality. At the same time, it maintains an economic system where the financial benefits of tourism rarely flow equitably to local women, even as their bodies and labour are central to the industry's functioning.

Ultimately, this thesis asks: How do Spanish travel agencies (*Nautalia Viajes, Viajes El Corte Inglés, and Halcón Viajes*) visually construct the Caribbean in their tourism advertising? More specifically, the sub-question explores in what ways do these visual representations reproduce or challenge gendered, racialised and postcolonial hierarchies within tourism discourse?

The rationale for this research lies in the need to better understand how global tourism marketing reproduces gendered and racialized narratives through visual representation. While existing scholarship has explored this economic and social dimensions of tourism in the Caribbean, less attention has been paid to how the region, and in particular women, are visually constructed in promotional materials aimed at European audiences. This thesis addresses that gap by analysing three major Spanish travel agencies: *Nautalia Viajes*, *Viajes el Corte Inglés* and *Halcón Viajes*, and their depictions of the Caribbean in their advertising campaigns. Spain's colonial history and its contemporary role as a key European tourism market make its

portrayals of the Caribbean particularly revealing. By focusing on how these agencies visually market the region and its women, this study examines the mechanisms through which exoticism, femininity and racial difference are produced and circulated, contributing to a broader understanding of how visual culture sustains global inequalities within tourism.

The main objective of this thesis is to critically examine how Spanish travel agencies construct and represent the Caribbean in their tourism marketing campaigns, through a gendered lens. By analysing promotional materials produced by three major Spanish tourism agencies, this research explores the visual and discursive mechanisms through which women are sexualized, exoticized and incorporated into the symbolic appeal of the Caribbean. The study aims, first, to identify the representational strategies used across these agencies' advertisements: the imagery, the narratives and language used to frame the ads, and how these contribute to the objectification of women. Secondly, it examines how gender and race intersect in these portrayals, showing how women's bodies are positioned as central to the region's imagined allure. These representations will be situated within broader historical and social processes, particularly the colonial legacies, racial hierarchies and gendered labour divisions that continue to shape global tourism. Ultimately, the research seeks to expose how destination promotional marketing reproduces or challenges postcolonial dynamics of power, contributing to wider debates on the commodification of culture and the gendered nature of tourism promotion, filling a gap in the literature by geographically focusing on the Caribbean context. The study is guided by the following questions:

- Through what visual and symbolic mechanisms do Spanish travel agencies portray women in the Caribbean?
- How are women's bodies sexualized and exoticized within these representations, as part of the region's touristic appeal?
- In what ways do these portrayals draw on colonial and racialized imaginaries of the Caribbean?
- What do these visual contributions reveal about the intersection of gender, race, and global power in tourism?

This thesis is structured as follows: the introduction situates the study within a broader context of global tourism, and presents the research questions and its relevance. The literature review

is organised around different key themes: tourism and power in relation to the commodification of culture, the tourist gaze and the construction of "the Other", tourism marketing as a system for producing visual desire, and the gendered dynamics of tourism. Together, these sections establish the theoretical and conceptual framework and identify the gap this research addresses. The methodology chapter outlines the qualitative visual approach adopted, explaining the use of semiotic and discourse analysis for examining tourism advertisements. After that, the analysis chapter presents the findings, structured around four themes: the construction of the tourist, representations of female passivity, portrayals of local populations and the ways in which the Caribbean is visually assembled and perceived by audiences. The discussion chapter brings these findings into dialogue with the literature, reflecting on their implications for gendered and racialised power relations in tourism marketing. Finally, the conclusion summarises the key arguments, reflects on the study's limitations and suggests directions for future research.

Literature review

The literature explored in order to arrive at this research topic includes theoretical perspectives from postcolonial studies, feminist scholarship and tourism research to trace how colonial histories, capitalist structures and visual culture intersect in the production of contemporary tourism. The review is organized around three main themes: the first explores how tourism commodifies culture and reinforces existing inequalities, the second focuses on the tourist gaze and the construction of the "Other", analysing how representation, authenticity and desire are shaped by visual and ideological frameworks, and the third theme addresses the gendered dimensions of tourism, revealing how women's labour and sexuality are crucial to sustain not only the industry but also its imagery.

It is first important to explain the commodification of culture, which refers to the transformation of cultural practices, traditions and identities into marketable products, in this case for tourist consumption (Greenwood 1989). In the Caribbean, it is often beaches, music or food which become marketed as consumable attractions, but because this research has a gendered approach, we extend the process to women's bodies, as they become part of the region's "brand". Closely linked then is the concept of objectification, where women are reduced to symbols or bodies to be looked at and consumed. This often takes the form of

sexualization, as women are depicted in poses, clothing or contexts that emphasize sexual availability and sensuality. Such representations are not neutral, but grounded in the colonial legacies of the region, where hierarchies of race, gender and class still structure both labour and desire. In this mix, the notion of exoticism appears, as it captures the simultaneous romanticization and domination of cultural difference. Exoticism constructs the Caribbean as a place of bodily pleasures and authenticity, but it also states it as inferior compared to the modern, industrialized Global North. Women's bodies, particularly those of Afro-Caribbean descent, become symbolic of this exotic appeal.

Tourism, power and the commodification of culture

Tourism is inherently linked to the cultural context in which it occurs. There is no tourism without the mingling of cultures, and culture is very often at the centre of the reasons for visiting a certain destination. As tourism intertwines with the neoliberal capitalist system, foreign cultures become commodified. This means that cultural elements such as traditions, rituals and practices are turned into marketable products that can be consumed by tourists who seek "authentic" experiences. Greenwood (1989, 171) argues that with this process, tourism provides a considerable stimulus to the local and national economy, but at the same time, it results in an increasingly unequal distribution of wealth, where local communities benefit little from the economic boost tourism brings, while the tourists get to consume the cultural "goods". This is not just about land and labour; it also extends to the identities of the people whose cultures are put on display for profit. As culture becomes something to be consumed, the countries and communities that rely on tourism for economic and political stabilization often feel the need to refashion their cultural identities to attract tourists (Babb 2012, 47). This process is not always an organic evolution of culture, but often implies the need to cater to the expectations of the tourist market. A market that has one main target consumer, the Western, upper-class male. Therefore, the perception and gaze of the tourist cannot be examined without considering the concepts of power and knowledge on which it is grounded (Hall 2009, 210). Daily encounters between the tourists and the locals reproduce racialised and gendered hierarchies (Mackie 2000). In the context of Global South countries, it is local workers (often racialized) who provide services such as cooking, cleaning, serving food and drinks, childcare, entertainment, and even sexual services, while tourists from the Global North are the ones who enjoy these services (Mackie 2000; Ngocoya 2016, 41). Tourism is frequently framed by its proponents (colonizing countries) as a tool for cross-cultural understanding, economic

cooperation and awareness of other places, with claims that it can foster positive international relations (Ngcoya 2016, 39). From an international relations perspective, tourism is often framed optimistically as a vehicle for development, intercultural understanding and even peacebuilding. Tourism acts as a "connecting factor for the formation of human interactions between nations" (Jalalpour and Shojaeifar 2017, 68), or at least this are the presuppositions of marketing, "which focus almost exclusively on the beneficial aspects of tourism" (Dashiri 2014, cited in Jalalpour and Shojaeifar 2017, 69). However, in practice, the industry reveals asymmetrical power relations embedded in global politics and economic systems, as multinational capital often supports this inequalities. In fact, in the small, everyday scale that is the encounter between tourists and locals, broader patterns of global power are being mirrored and reproduced. The inequalities, hierarchies and dependencies observed in these micro-interactions reflect and reinforce the dynamics of international relations between the Global North and South. In this sense, tourism becomes a site where soft power, economic influence and cultural dominations intersect. While it is promoted in IR literature as a force of cooperation and development, in practice it reproduces structural colonial hierarchies.

In the Caribbean, these global dynamics of tourism and commodification take on particularly visible and entrenched forms. As Kempadoo argues, "it is difficult to conceptualize tourists in the Caribbean as marginal to the economy, landscape, or social life in the tourist destination, irrespective of whether they have sex with a local person" (Kempadoo 2004, 116). Tourism is not merely an external economic force but a defining feature of social and cultural life, as it shapes identities, values and hierarchies. Jonathan Culler's (1981) distinction between the active "adventurer" and the passive "tourist" is useful in understanding this dynamic. The Caribbean is marketed precisely for this type of passive tourism, an experience of leisure, beaches and luxury resorts where visitors are encouraged to "do nothing" while others serve and entertain them. As Kempadoo describes, "to travel the Caribbean means to take a vacation, to indulge in a fantasy for a few days or weeks, to 'do nothing' for a while and have others care and cater to every need and fancy, in a setting that positions the tourist in a privileged position vis-à-vis the local working person." (2004, 121). This promise of effortless relaxation is built upon "long-standing economic, gender and racial relations of power between tourist and local" (Kempadoo 2004, 121).

These patterns are reinforced by the great scale and nature of tourism in the region. There is an incessant flow of millions of arrivals who visit the Caribbean primarily for the enjoyment of

the "sun, sand and sea" experience, one that has come to characterize holidays in the Caribbean (Daye 2008, 1). Whether to a greater or lesser extent, most countries in the region are dependent on tourism as a key engine of economic growth. The tourism industry's appeal for developing Caribbean nations lies not only in its capacity to foster GDP growth but also in its potential to generate employment, increase foreign exchange earnings and attract capital investment (Daye 2008, 2). Thus, tourism in the Caribbean functions both as an economic imperative but also a social phenomenon, which intertwines the lives of the locals with the fantasies which the tourists bring.

At the same time, this dynamics unmask deeper asymmetries of power. The structures that position tourists in situations of comfort and privilege also create vulnerabilities for local populations, setting the stage for more explicit forms of exploitation. In particular, the logic of sex tourism intensifies these inequalities and unveils how the Caribbean tourism industry functions not only as a leisure industry but also as a continuation of colonial dependency. Here, Western privilege and power are re-enacted through everyday acts of service and consumption. The region functions as a playground for the Global North, a space where labour, sexuality and the bodies of Caribbean people, especially women, are commodified to satisfy tourist fantasies of the exotic and the sensual (Kempadoo 2004, 134). In this sense, the logic of sex tourism simply amplifies what is already embedded within the broader tourism industry. Sex tourism exemplifies how exotic sexual experiences are constructed for consumers in ways that reproduce global North-South imbalances, turning local women's bodies into marketable symbols of both desire and exoticization. Ultimately, as Kempadoo concludes, Caribbean destinations offer Western men a stage upon which to reassert colonial masculinity and dominance (Kempadoo 2004, 135), illustrating how tourism continues to reproduce historical hierarchies of race, gender and power beneath the cover of pleasure and escape.

These dynamics not only reveal the material and economic dimensions of power embedded in Caribbean tourism but also expose how ways of seeing, the visual and symbolic framing of the region and its people, play a central role in sustaining such hierarchies. Understanding how tourists are taught to look at and interpret the Caribbean, and how this gaze constructs the "exotic Other", is therefore essential to unpacking the deeper cultural mechanisms through which gendered and racialized inequalities are reproduced.

The tourist gaze and the construction of 'the Other'

By viewing tourism as a symbolic system, we can better understand how it functions both as a cultural practice and as a mechanism of power, where (gendered) identities and cultural practices are shaped, marketed and consumed as signs. In tourist destinations, landmarks, attractions and landscapes become sites where "power, identity, meaning, and behaviour are constructed, negotiated, and renegotiated according to socio-cultural dynamics" (Pritchard and Morgan 2000, 885). This means that tourists do not encounter destinations as neutral observers, instead, they arrive carrying the social and cultural frameworks that shaped them, and through their interpretations and behaviours they often reproduce those same norms and hierarchies in the places they visit, thereby helping to sustain existing global inequalities. Within this framework, the tourist gaze becomes a central concept: it demonstrates how the act of looking is never neutral but embedded in general, racialized and class-based hierarchies (Urry, 2002). As several scholars argue, this gaze often carries implicit masculine and Western ownership that determines who looks, who is looked at, and how (Urry, 2002; Pritchard and Morgan, 2000). Given that Europe generated 57% of the world's international arrivals in 2022 (World Tourism Organization 2024, 18), the figure of the tourist is still largely imagined as European, therefore the tourist gaze reflects this positionality, shaping representations of places and people through a predominantly Eurocentric lens. Although Mackie (2000) contends that perhaps too much emphasis has been placed on the gaze rather than on the embodied practices of tourism and the production of desire, the gaze remains crucial for understanding how tourism images and narratives are visually constructed. The persistence of colonial nostalgia in tourist sites demonstrates a connection between the colonial and the tourist gaze, as they intertwine and rely on framing the "Other" as a subject of fascination and control.

As Cynthia Enloe (2014, 56) observes, tourism is not only about physical movement but also an ideological practice, shaped by ideas and assumptions about womanhood, manhood, education and identity. The tourist gaze, therefore, does not merely observe, it interprets and classifies people and practices according to pre-existing hierarchies. Similarly, Culler (1981,127) explains that the tourist views everything as a sign of itself, a perspective that transforms encounters into moments of recognition that reaffirm, rather than challenge, preconceived expectations. This means that rather than opening up to unfamiliar meanings or alternative interpretations, tourists tend to filter their experiences through the assumptions they already hold, reinforcing rather than questioning existing narratives. Within this semiotic logic, women often become central cultural signifiers: their bodies and performances are not interpreted as expressions of an individual identity, but read as symbols which confirm the

tourist's imagined version, meaning they become simultaneously commodified as spectacles for visual consumption.

Nuñez provides a complementary perspective through acculturation theory, which hypothesizes that when two cultures come into contact, even temporarily, each inevitably borrows elements from the other (1989, p. 266). However, the author emphasizes that such exchanges are rarely equal; factors such as the nature of the contact situation, the social profile of the participants and their respective levels of cultural and economic power usually result in asymmetrical borrowing (Nuñez 1989, 266). This asymmetry is ingrained into tourism. While tourists may appear to engage with "local" culture, the terms of exchange overwhelmingly favour the visitor. As Greenwood notes, while tourists seek "authenticity", their consumption of this commodified local culture often reinforces their sense of social superiority, as their encounter with the "exotic" validates their own cultural sophistication (1989, 183).

This pursuit of authenticity reflects a broader modern desire to recover what is imagined as lost, a world that has not been corrupted by industrialization or global modernity. As a result, tourism "others" non-Western destinations by portraying them as timeless, traditional, and closer to nature. The Caribbean, like many former colonial regions, is marketed precisely through these narratives of authenticity and exoticism: a place where modern visitors can temporarily escape the complexities of their world and indulge in fantasies of cultural difference. In doing so, tourism reproduces the colonial logic of representation, transforming both sites and people into consumable symbols that reaffirm Western modernity's sense of self.

Tourism marketing and the visual production of desire

The tourist gaze does not emerge in isolation, but rather through the expectations, fantasies and semiotic frameworks that are produced and reinforced by images circulated through tourism marketing. Advertising becomes one of the primary sites where the tourist ways of seeing a destination are cultivated. At the same time, it functions as a signifying system, a cultural language that privileges particular narratives, values and definitions, ultimately placing certain representations in positions of hegemony within a country's advertising discourse (Desmarais 2007, 208). These hegemonic meanings then become part of the interpretation tourists carry with them, shaping how they understand the places and people they encounter. Understanding the gaze therefore requires examining the visual and ideological system that generates it. Advertising is not just a reflection of social reality but also a powerful ideological practice that

constructs and circulates it. As Dyer observed, advertising projects the values and aspirations of the consumer economy, socializing audiences into the belief that lifestyles and identities can be purchased alongside material goods (1982, 63). Similarly, Leiss and Botterill emphasize that advertising functions both as a discursive and representational practice through which cultural and economic change is mediated (2005, 16). Because advertisements must communicate rapidly and effectively, they rely on visual scripting: facial expressions, poses and gestures that, as Goffman described, become forms of "*hyper-ritualization*" (Dyer 1982, 77). These conventions encourage the stereotyping of gender, race and nationality, as women are routinely depicted as sexualized or in domestic roles, whilst men are depicted as authoritative or dominant (Dyer 1982, 78).

Understanding these portrayals requires examining not only how women are positioned within advertisements but also how such representations relate to their material position within patriarchal systems (Dyer 1982, 93). Research shows that advertising continues to shape gender socialization, reinforcing norms that dictate appropriate behaviour for men and women (UNICEF 2022). Even campaigns that attempt to embrace female "liberation" often reproduce objectifying imagery by equating empowerment with overt or "modest" sexuality (Dyer 1982, 153). The success of advertising depends less on logic than on the fantasies it offers: a "dream world" in which products and people acquire symbolic meanings detached from material reality (Dyer 1982, 152). Lifestyle advertising thus constructs social identity through idealized scenes of consumption where people, objects and settings are grouped together and sold as desirable and pleasurable (Leiss and Botterill 2005, 194). This notion of pleasure is deeply entwined with the logic of tourism marketing, particularly in the Caribbean, where tourism is sold as a fantasy of sensual indulgence and leisure. Promotional materials promise relaxation and enjoyment through imagery of beaches, cruises and bathing, perpetuating the familiar model of "sun, sand and sea" tourism. Caribbean sexuality, as Kempadoo observes, has become a central resource in this visual economy. Postcards, travel brochures, airline campaigns, and hotel advertisements frequently feature black and brown women and men to market the region globally, with women often "scantily dressed and sensually posed, inviting the viewer to 'taste' the Caribbean" (Kempadoo 2004, 21). These images commodify both places and bodies, offering the Caribbean as an ideal place of enjoyment.

Therefore, tourism advertising reproduces clear gendered and racialized orders, since men are typically represented through action, power and ownership, while women are portrayed as

passive and available (Pritchard and Morgan 2000, 889). Similarly, "images of women continue to be portrayed in their traditional stereotypical roles: domestic, sexy, helpless, noncompetitive, shy and passive" (Sirakaya-Turk & Sönmez 2000, 353). Such visual hierarchies do not simply mirror existing stereotypes, but are part of a "dialectical process of making and remaking them" (Pritchard 2001, 89). The visual narratives embedded in tourism marketing are not isolated from the material realities of the industry. The same hierarchies that structure advertising imagery are mirrored in the organization of tourism itself. The portrayal of women as passive, sensual and available corresponds to the labour roles and power relations that underpin tourism economies. Understanding how these symbolic representations translate into everyday practices and social relations within the tourism sector is therefore essential to examining the gendered dynamics of tourism.

The gendered dynamics of tourism

The tourism industry has long been shaped and structured to cater primarily to male tourists, influencing the ways in which women - especially those from other cultures and ethnicities - are represented and objectified. Historically, as Enloe (2014, 48) notes, femininity has been associated with domesticity and proximity to home, while masculinity has symbolized exploration, adventure and freedom, as embodied in the figure of the traveller discussed above. This dichotomy underpins the gendered nature of tourism itself: men are imagined as active explorers, while women, both local and foreign, are cast as passive participants in the touristic experience. In colonial and postcolonial contexts, the sexuality and identity of white, heterosexual men have been constructed as active and dominant, in opposition to the perceived passiveness and receptivity of non-Western women. Ann Laura Stoler's work demonstrates that sexual desire in colonial situations is never "natural", but rather produced within specific systems of dominance and subordination, actively managed by colonial states and reinforced by formal and informal violence (Mackie, 2000).

This historical construction of gendered and racial hierarchies continues to shape the global tourism industry today. Even the imagery used to market destinations reveals these dynamics: landscapes are often feminized, depicted as wild, seductive and available for consumption (Pritchard and Morgan 2000, 892). Women, similarly, are positioned as part of the destination's allure: figures of sensuality rather than autonomous individuals. Within the tourism labour structures, this dynamic manifests itself materially. Women are often concentrated in positions that extend their traditional domestic roles *(*"chambermaids, receptionists, waitresses, cooks

and tourist vendors") which, as research indicates, reflects persistent gendered divisions across tourism employment (Duffy, Kline 2015, 78). These structural inequalities mirror the broader global hierarchies of race, gender, and class that the industry both relies upon and reproduces.

Sex tourism offers one of the clearest illustrations of how these dynamics converge. As Pritchard and Morgan (2000, 888) argue, sex tourism is not an isolated phenomenon but an outcome of a deeply gendered international system. It emerges from three interlocking factors: (1) a population rendered economically vulnerable, which drives women to participate, voluntarily or forcibly in the sex trade; (2) male tourists socialized to view women of colour as more sexually available or submissive; and (3) political and economic institutions that "encourage men to travel to countries specifically to purchase the sexual services of local women*"* (Pritchard and Morgan 2000, 888). In this sense, tourism is not simply a leisure activity but an avenue through which gendered and racialized power relations are enacted and sustained. The Caribbean offers a particularly stark example of these processes. The region's tourism industry depends heavily on the commodification of women's labor and sexuality. Here, the intersection of race, gender and economic dependency produces a space where male tourists, mostly from the Global North, are "freed from standards of behaviour imposed by respectable women back home*"* (Enloe 2014, 56). The eroticized image of the Caribbean woman as exotic, sensual, and available reflects not only the legacy of colonial sexual politics but also the ongoing global inequalities that tourism both conceals and reinforces. Thus, tourism processes are gendered at every level, in their construction, presentation and consumption (Pritchard 2001, 79), perpetuating a system that privileges Western masculinity while commodifying the bodies, labor and landscapes of women in the Global South.

The literature reviewed demonstrates that tourism in the Caribbean (and more broadly in the Global South) cannot be separated from the intertwined dynamics of gender, race and power. Existing scholarship has shown how women are simultaneously symbolized and exploited within this system, serving both as the labour force that sustains the industry and as the imagery that markets and promotes it. However, while considerable attention has been given to the socio-economic and historical aspects of these dynamics, less focus has been placed on the visual and discursive mechanisms through which they are perpetuated in contemporary tourism marketing. Specifically, the ways in which women's bodies are represented, sexualized and exoticized in visual campaigns have not been sufficiently unpacked in relation to postcolonial and gender theory. The analysis section of this research seeks to address this gap by analysing

tourism advertisements promoting the Caribbean, exploring the visual strategies and semiotic tools through which femininity, race and desire are constructed and sold to a global audience.

Methodology

Building on the critical concerns identified in the literature, the methodology adopted for this research is designed to examine how these representational dynamics materialize within visual tourism campaigns. This section outlines the analytical framework, data selection criteria and interpretative tools used to investigate the visual production of gendered and racialized meanings in Caribbean tourism advertising. By grounding the methodological choices in the theoretical debates highlighted above, the analysis that follows seeks to make explicit the links between broader structures of power and their visual reproduction in contemporary promotional media.

Conceptually, this thesis is situated at the intersection of tourism studies, gender and postcolonial theory. The analysis employs a feminist postcolonial theoretical lens, drawing on feminist theories of objectification (Enloe 2014; Pritchard and Morgan 2000), postcolonial critiques of representation (Kempadoo 2004; Hall 2009; Urry 2002) and intersectional approaches to race, gender and class (Lugones 2007; Babb 2012). This framework is helpful in highlighting how tourism imagery does more than sell destinations. It reproduces global hierarchies rooted in colonial histories and gendered power relations. Feminist theory emphasizes how women's bodies are instrumentalized within patriarchal systems, while postcolonial theory interrogates the cultural logics of "othering" and exoticism that emerge from imperial projects. Combining these perspectives allows for a critical examination of how Caribbean women are portrayed as both hypervisible and voiceless within tourism discourse. Intersectionality is also essential here, since women are not only sexualized as women but racialized at the same time, positioned within a matrix of inequalities (Lugones 2007) that reflect both local histories and global tourism economies. This theoretical framework also draws from semiotic approaches to tourism (Culler 1981), which emphasize how tourists read destinations as signs. Advertisements are not passive images but semiotic systems, where women become signs (of authenticity or exoticism). By combining semiotics with feminist postcolonial critique, the thesis can interrogate how these signs function ideologically, shaping both tourist expectations and local realities.

To address the research questions, this thesis adopts a qualitative visual methodology (Rose 2016), combining semiotic and discourse analysis to examine how Spanish tourism marketing companies construct the Caribbean and its women. The analysis focuses primarily on approximately twenty video advertisements by three major Spanish travel agencies: *Nautalia Viajes, Viajes el Corte Inglés*, and *Halcón Viajes*, which serve as influential actors shaping how Spanish audiences imagine Caribbean destinations. Because some of the campaigns are in Spanish, the author's mother tongue, the translations provided in the analysis will be done by the same. The methodological lenses of this study are semiology and discourse analysis, and two modalities are being explored: the compositional and the social. Firstly, we observe what is there, what is being shown in the advertisement and what are the components of the video. But as Rose (2016) argues, semiology is important because it provides ways of understanding how the structure of images provides cultural meaning (p. 145). Therefore, the observation part has to be followed by the interpretation of the connotations of what is being shown. That can only happen with the information of the background context or knowing certain set rules and codes that give the signs meaning. So, semiotic approaches enable the researcher to comprehend the mechanics or poetic of, in this case, video ads, whilst discursive approaches study the politics of representation and its effects and rammifications (Pritchard 2001, 82). This is a relevant combination for this exploration, and after describing the elements and signs of the advertisements, the next step is to analyse the visual discourse which they display. Rose (2016) describes discourse as a particular knowledge about the world which shapes how the same is understood and how things are done in it (p. 187). A discursive formation happens everytime one can find a regularity, which can be a particular order, correlation, positioning... (Rose 2016, 188). Accordingly, elements that are shown in a recurrent manner troughought the ads are forming discourses which the audience interprets a certain way, specially having in mind that images and narratives coming from sources with authority (in this case, travel agencies with great economic and marketing influence in Spain), are likely to be more productive (Rose 2016, 187). Inevitably, discourse intertwines with power, as they can both be found everywhere. This thesis deals with discourses that have historicall been very much intertwined with power. Discourses of coloniality, gender and race appear recurrently in the advertisements analysed, and although they might not appear in obvious ways, they are still present and construct realities that have real-life effects. This combination of methodological approaches allows the analysis to move from simply identifying what the advertisements show, towards discovering how images work symbolically and discursively to construct meaning.

All throughout, the analysis will remain reflexive, acknowledging the researcher's positionality and the interpretative nature of visual analysis. This study recognizes that interpretations are shaped by cultural background, theoretical commitments and personal assumptions. At the same time, the aim of the examination of the materials is to expose and critique the structures of power underlying these portrayals. The project demonstrates how exoticism, objectification and colonial legacies intersect in a region where tourism is a dominant industry. The contribution lies in clarifying not just that women are objectified, but how specific visual and textual mechanisms (poses, clothing, language and symbols) produce this effect in Caribbean contexts. Theoretically, the research tests and extends feminist and postcolonial approaches in combination with visual semiotics. It examines how these theories gain nuance when examined through the Caribbean's specific histories of race, slavery and colonial exploitation. This synthesis offers a more intersectional account of tourism representation than what is often found in the literature. At the same time, the methodology used will demonstrate how visual methodologies can be useful for International Relations and gender studies. Analysing marketing materials as central instruments of the global economic system which produce and normalize inequalities.

Analysis of visual materials

The analysis section of this thesis aims to explore how visual tourism marketing, in the form of short ads, portrays the Caribbean. The videos analysed all come from the YouTube pages of three Spanish tourist agencies: *Nautalia Viajes*, *Halcón Viajes* and *Viajes El Corte Inglés*. These are major companies in the country, combined they account for more than 2.000 offices, and something that all of their web pages[1] have in common, and that proved relevant for the study, is that they have a specific page set up for traveling to the Caribbean. This demonstrates that it is a well-sold, popular destination in the Spanish market, and justifies the pertinence of the agencies' choice. More than twenty ads were reviewed and because the agencies collaborate with hotel and resort companies as well as some of the countries' tourism boards, these were also included in the analysis, together with those ads specifically designed by the companies.

[1] Halcón Viajes 'Abre Tu Franquicia Halcón Viajes: Únete a Una Marca Con 50 Años de Historia'. n.d. Accessed 25 November 2025. https://www.halconviajes.com/paginas/franquicias., Nautalia Viajes '¿Quién Es Nautalia? - Nautalia Viajes'. n.d. Accessed 25 November 2025. https://www.nautaliaviajes.com/informacion/nautalia.htm., Viajes El Corte Inglés '¿Quiénes somos? - Viajes El Corte Inglés'. n.d. Accessed 25 November 2025. https://www.viajeselcorteingles.es/quienes_somos.html.

This brought some nuances to the research, since differences and conclusions could be drawn on the way of advertising depending on the marketer. It is acknowledged that the Caribbean is a big region, and each of the countries has its own distinct cultural and historical background. The tourist agencies that were taken into account mostly market bigger and more popular countries like the Dominican Republic, Cuba or México, although the page were they do so is specifically labelled as "Caribbean". A concluding remark that was taken from this is the fact that marketing strategies often homogenize a region and use similar patterns and stereotypes to sell it, flattening the region's cultural and historical diversity into a single marketable imagination. Over time, these repeated images do more than simplify the Caribbean, they also create a cycle in which tourists' expectations and choices are shaped by what has already been circulating in advertising and media. As Urry (2002, 7) notes, these images constitute a closed system of illusions, guiding the selection and evaluation of potential destinations. In the Caribbean context, promotional materials frequently feature "coconut-fringed beaches, lush vegetation, brightly dressed islanders, smiling hosts and relaxed, suntanned visitors" (Daye, Chambers & Roberts 2008, 20), icons which have been repeatedly observed through this analysis. Such representations not only construct an idealized vision of the region but also ensure that these fantasies are continually reproduced and consumed by possible future tourists. Stereotyping operates as a cognitive shortcut, it reduces complex realities into simplified manageable forms, which in turn facilitates the functioning of global industries like tourism, where supply and demand rely on shared, recognisable images (Daye et. Al 2008, 21). At the same time, marketing strategies also rely heavily on binary oppositions, which simplify difference by framing it through reductive, hierarchical contrasts, since they attribute superiority and worth to one side over the other (Parasnis 2022, 14).

To provide a certain coherence to the analysis, the notes and reasoning taken from the video ads were divided into certain recurrent topics observed. Therefore, the findings will be explained separately, firstly talking about how the tourist itself becomes constructed, then centring the exploration on a gendered perspective, the concept of female passiveness shown in the advertisements, followed by a reading of how race is portrayed in the videos. These themes will provide an intersectional review of the materials. After that, there will be a section about how the region is constructed and perceived by tourists themselves, analysing how the audience assembled the Caribbean in their minds after observing the ads.

Constructing the tourist subject

In the advertisements analysed, there are two ways in which visitors to the Caribbean are portrayed: the tourist and the traveller. In the first place, *Nautalia Viajes* did a campaign in 2024 with the slogan "*That's what happens when you're on vacation*." The advertisements within the campaign are intended to have a humorous tone, but at the same time reveal interesting insights into how tourists in the Caribbean are perceived. One of the ads shows a visitor at the Chichen Itza pyramid in Mexico, wearing an ancestral indigenous Mayan mask. The voice-over says: "*Offend the Gods with a simple gesture, and absolutely nothing occurs. That's what happens when you're on vacation*" (Nautalia Viajes 2024). This narrative is implying that being on a holiday, especially in the Caribbean, exempts the visitors from everything, as if there were no consequences for their actions. The tourist here is portrayed as clueless, clumsy and ignorant of the country it is visiting, isolated from the host environment and the local people, finding satisfaction in inauthentic manufactured attractions and neglecting the 'real' world outside (Urry 2002, 7). Another advertisement (Nautalia Viajes 2023) from the same campaign shows again the Chichen Itza monument, as the voice-over narrates the fact that it is an ancient site which has endured for many years and is worth seeing. The ad cuts to a woman lying in a bathtub in what seems to be a resort, suggesting that, because the hotel provides unlimited services (swimming pools, spas...) it is fine if you miss visiting the pyramid. Again, it is portraying the tourist as a passive visitor, one that does not care about the history and culture of the country it is visiting, and would rather relax in the resort. This kind of tourism is very particularly advertised when it comes to the Caribbean, a beach, sun-filled, leisurely kind of travel.

On a different side, some advertisements depict visitors as active subjects of exploration. As so, they are defined as travellers, rather than tourists. A specific campaign from the tourism board of Panama in 2017 adopts this notion as its slogan: "*For travellers, not for tourists*" (Nautalia Viajes 2017b). The scenes in the ad show a couple exploring the mountains, the "savage" and unknown of the rainforest and engaging with indigenous communities, selling a romantic ideal in the promise of accessing the "real" or "unspoiled" nation (Culler 1981, 131). A different tone from what we saw previously is adopted, as it is telling the visitor to "find oneself", while exploring the country and testing oneself against the unknown (Leiss 2005, 541). The figure of the "traveller" here, as implied by the slogan, is constructed in opposition to the tourist, as someone who seeks out encounters, challenges and experiences (Culler 1981, 129). In the Caribbean context though, the character of the traveller is a new construction, since the region is still strongly associated (and marketed) with packaged resorts and all-inclusive

vacations, precisely the form of tourism that Culler critiques as it renders travel a commodity. The bottom line is that although some campaigns attempt to differentiate themselves through narratives of adventure and authenticity, they are still drawing on ideological and colonial imagery, as they romanticise the distinctness of the destination for the ultimate commercial purpose of selling it.

It has to be noted that something that was observed in the ads, specifically some of the most recent, is the fact that diversity is increasingly being taken into account. Although stereotypes are still very much present in most advertisements, some campaigns are trying to change the narrative. An example of that is the fact that tourists are not all presented as white anymore, which is something frequent of older ads, and although we see few non-white visitors, there is some representation being shown (Halcón Viajes 2023). Daye identifies an increasing inclusion of locals and diverse ethnic groups in traditional tourist settings, a practice that can work to destabilise the binaries exposed earlier as well as those of the Western tourist and the racialised "Other". By featuring a wider range of bodies and ethnicities, while decentring images of locals in purely service-oriented roles, these newer advertisements are helping undermine the polarity that is often embedded in Caribbean tourism marketing (Daye et.al 2008, 37). Nonetheless, these shifts remain unsettled, and often coexist with enduring visual tropes that continue to reproduce inequalities under the guise of diversity.

Gendered visual scripts

Upon entering the Caribbean page of *Viajes El Corte Inglés*[2], the viewer is greeted by an image of a woman in a bathing suit, lounging next to a palm tree, a visual cue that introduces the broader pattern of this section: portraying women in passive, available and leisure-centred roles. The slogan reads: "energize yourself in *paradise*" (my emphasis), a linguistic sign often used in tourism promotion for the Caribbean region, boasting tropical attributes and all-year-round vacationing (Daye et.al 2008, 21), as it becomes transnationally "invoked as a signifier of sun, sand and sea hedonistic holiday experiences" (Daye 2008, 19). This idea is often used to construct tropical sites in a homogenic way, meaning that you could interchange the Caribbean with any other destination capable of replicating the same idyllic attributes (Daye 2008, 22), those of sensuality and luxury, in order to serve market demand for these experiences. Within this framework, the sexualised, passive female figure serves as a key visual

[2] This was taken into consideration on November 2025, because the object is a web page, the image might have changed.

anchor. As Calderón and Rodríguez note, tourism marketing "persisted in the use of sexualized representations of women to capture the attention of male tourists", perpetuating objectification within the tourist context (2024, 139). Women are positioned as the "embodied objects of the sexualized gaze" (Jordan 2007, 94), a gaze which is privileged, male and heterosexual, and one that fits into the paradisiac fantasy of the destination. Therefore, discourses of sensuality and sexuality frequently frame the marketing of the Caribbean, suggesting that bodily pleasure is a central component of the tourist experience (Pritchard and Morgan 2007, 161).

Because of this model of sun, sand and sea which is predominant in the promotion of the Caribbean, it gives a reason for advertisements to depict women in beach settings. The dominant female image in tourism brochures being that of a sexually attractive, 'decorative' woman (Pritchard 2001, 88), a tourist whose body is slim, tanned, young and Caucasian (Small 2007, 87). This means women are very often pictured in bathing suits sunbathing, laying on the beach, relaxing with their eyes closed (Nautalia Viajes 2018d, at 0:02-05, 0:25-28, 1:16, 2:13, 3:10)... images where it is apparent that they are enjoying themselves, and giving an overall sense of pleasure. In scenes where you cannot see women's faces, their bodies become then central to the advertisement, and because they are often shown in bathing suits, they become quite exposed, as their sexuality is used to sell the destination (Parasnis 2022, 25). In fact, many scenes present bodies from the back, for example standing in front of a waterfall (Nautalia Viajes 2018a at 2:24, Nautalia Viajes 2016c at 0:19) or snorkelling (Nautalia Viajes 2017b at 0:42); in this sexualising and objectifying nature, their figures are given more importance than anything else. The objective of these images showcasing attractive women is not only to cater to a male gaze, but also to encourage viewers to imagine themselves within that idealised scene, to see themselves as the attractive, desirable tourists depicted in the advertisements (Parasnis 2022, 26).

Amongst the passive depictions, a common one is that of tourists getting massages, and although sometimes heterosexual couples are shown, women are more frequently pictured (Nautalia Viajes 2019 at 0:52, Nautalia Viajes 2018e at 0:35, Nautalia Viajes 2016a at 0:14). The scene shows how these touristic destinations become configured as stages designed for indulgence, where one can elude the established social conventions (Calderón and Rodríguez 2024, 137), through the emotional labour that is provided mostly by women. In the tourism and hospitality sectors, women's jobs are typically concentrated in the three Cs of catering, cleaning and caring, meaning that they become responsible for meeting the bodily and emotional needs

of guests (Veijola and Valtonen 2007, 18). At the same time, this picture gives us a lens through which we can explore the racial dynamics that accompany the depiction of women, as it is frequent that the masseuse is a local, non-white woman, while the receiver is a white woman. In the dichotomy of pleasuring and pleasured, local women are often the former whilst white tourist women form the latter. Parasnis explains that visual codes often associate blackness with servitude and whiteness with luxury (2022, 9), and these scenes clearly portray this clear differentiation between how local and tourist women are characterized. The same author argues that the advertisements actually continue a pattern rooted in colonial imagery, since black women are still shown performing stereotypically "feminine" domestic tasks (in this case, giving a massage), often dressed in uniforms that mark them as service workers. In contrast, white women are positioned as the ones receiving care and comfort, and their relaxed portrayal reinforces the idea that white femininity is naturally linked to privilege (Parasnis 2022, 10). The racial connotations are also exposed in their physical appearance, in their hair (Nautalia Viajes 2018d at 2:08) and clothing, and in their bodies: tourist women are often portrayed in slim, thin bodies, which very much fit into traditional Western beauty standards, but local women embrace different body shapes, where these ideal standards are not always met.

The nuances of women displayed alone or in company also have implications worth analysing, especially in the Caribbean setting where couples are a common theme of advertising. Heterosexuality is seen as the norm, as without exceptions, all couples are formed by a man and a woman, and depictions of LGBTQ+ couples are very rarely found. The pairs are seen engaging in different activities, which means that, to break the female passivity mentioned before, there is the need to show a male figure. We saw above how women remain to be presented in two dominant roles: as caretaker (providing labour in this case) or as a sex object (as seen in the sexualising beach scenes), whereas men are more likely to be shown in empowered professional roles or enjoying leisure (Leiss 2005, 444). This reproduces the established gendered division noted in tourism brochures, where men are typically portrayed as active, powerful and possessive, whereas women are represented as passive, accessible and owned (Pritchard and Morgan 2000, 889). In the ads analysed, this pattern is repeatedly affirmed. When sports are involved, women are always accompanied by a men, whilst the latter can be shown alone in active roles like paddle, surfing, golfing... (Nautalia Viajes 2019 at 0:37, 0:45). A specific *Nautalia Viajes* advertisement (Nautalia Viajes 2017b at 0:42-45) shows this binarism very clearly: two men are jumping from a waterfall into the water as two women (implicitly their partners) watch and cheer from a distance. Other repeated scene to prove this

is that of a couple on a boat, where the man is the one driving while the woman sits on the front relaxing, and the ones where the couples are dancing, the man is often leading the dance, and making the woman turn. In these situations, men are never dancing together, but women often are (Nautalia Viajes 2018a at 1:14-22, Halcón Viajes 2024 at 0:10, Halcón Viajes 2018a at 0:28), either with a man or in a group of women, the latter often done in a seductive manner which satisfies a heterosexual male gaze. If we analyse how the couples are touching each other, men are very often holding women (Nautalia Viajes 2018d at 1:17, 2:34, 3:14), proving Erving Goffman's study of gender displays, where he exposed that women often appear childlike, smaller, less functional and focused (Leiss 2005, 284), which would explain why they need men's hold and guidance. These images also examplify what Calderón and Rodríguez (2024, 137) describe as seemingly harmless archetypes that reduce women to mere decorative and desirable objects while men appear in dominant, assertive postures, reinforcing masculine control over both space and female bodies. Following this theme, the portrayal of the nuclear family is also a recurring image in the advertisements, where the father is assuming the active role, and the mother the passive one. For example, the man carries and plays energetically with the children (Nautalia Viajes 2018d at 1:37, Nautalia Viajes 2016b at 0:17), something that the woman rarely does, instead, her function is to takes pictures, pose and smile for the camera (Halcón Viajes 2024 at 0:02). In an ad about Cancún in Mexico, a kid narrates the fun activities he does with his father, even those that her mother does not allow him to do (Nautalia Viajes 2017a), which suggests that men are the ones for adventure, while moms are expected to be more careful or restrictive.

Taken together, the recurring visual patterns exposed in this section confirm how tourism advertising continues to rely on traditional gender scripts. The underlying logic remains, women are framed as decorative, and emotionally oriented figures, while men occupy the roles of agents, explorers and decision-makers. In this sense, the advertisements reproduce the same gendered templates that have been circulating in mass media for a long time, based on stereotypes and casting women as domestic, sexy, helpless, noncompetitive and passive (Sirakaya-Turk and Sönmez 2000, 353). The persistence of these portrayals in contemporary Caribbean tourism campaigns demonstrates how deeply embedded these conventions remain, and how powerfully they continue to shape the ways women are imagined, consumed and made visible within global tourism discourse.

Representation of local populations

A recurring pattern across the advertisements is the way local Caribbean people are portrayed. Most advertisements analysed were designed by Western marketing professionals, meaning that local people did not have a say on how they were represented, therefore often becoming externally represented as the "Other" (Nelson 2005, 133), and often reduced to stereotypical, simplistic and stigmatized characters (Parasnis 2022, 14). When locals appear, they are almost exclusively framed through a racialized lens and positioned at the margins of the narrative rather than at its centre. Although these depictions may reflect the ethnic profile of many Caribbean populations, their repetitive use, combined with the consistent contrast between non-white locals and largely white tourists, invites critical scrutiny. As the places advertised are something that is marketed to be enjoyed by tourists, the people who live there are often represented as incidental or even irrelevant (Nelson 2005, 131), and their presence typically characterized and described as cheerful and hospitable. Such visual conventions construct locals not as autonomous subjects, but as cultural symbols whose primary function is to please, welcome or serve the visitor. As an illustration, an advertisement from the board of tourism of the Dominican Republic shown on the *Nautalia Viajes* YouTube page, displays several images of local people doing picturesque things like painting, selling balloons... at the same time their body language is welcoming, cheerful and inviting. They are always smiling, with their arms open, waving or giving a thumbs-up; in conclusion, they are always ready to serve the tourists, and always in a good demeanour (Nautalia Viajes 2016d at 0:15). At some point, we see a close-up of a smiling local woman, and the background song sings the lyrics: "*your* (the Dominican Republic's) *smile when you see me* (the visitors)" (Nautalia Viajes 2018d at 0:30), implying that tourists will always be received with a smile from the local people. Through concepts like the "Myth of the Unrestrained", the local people are framed as available to satisfy the hedonistic desires of Western visitors, creating a liminal space for experiences which would be unattainable in their structured, "civilized" home societies (Urry 2002, 3). While these portrayals attract tourists with promises of escape and adventure, they also simplify and stereotype the region, reducing it to a mere playground or peripheral space devoted to pleasure (one given by the residents), rather than recognizing its complex social and cultural realities (Daye et al. 2008, 23-24).

It is also important to analyse the appearance that is given to local people by the advertisements, since the "modest" clothing sharply contrasts with the polished outfits worn by tourists. In one advertisement (Nautalia Viajes 2018b at 0:07) visitors appear in elegant, colourful attire, followed by a scene featuring two local fishermen on a small boat, dressed simply. This

juxtaposition reinforces a visual hierarchy between tourists and locals, creating a narrative where economic precarity and humble lifestyles are framed as picturesque and romanticizable elements of Caribbean authenticity. This follows Culler's notion that authentic experiences can only be found in the past, or else in other regions or countries, and consequently, when "othered" cultures are seen as rooted in the past, they are constructed as more authentic (Culler 1981, 132). Such imagery also constructs local poverty as charming rather than structural, transforming the socio-economic inequalities in these countries into aesthetic attractions. This romanticisation extends beyond the advertisements themselves, since we can also observe it in the interview materials produced by *Halcón Viajes*. In an interview (Halcón Viajes 2018b) done to a Spanish celebrity which had been invited to visit the Dominican Republic, she recalls her favourite moment of the trip: encountering a "humble" surf school with limited resources. She describes the locals there as having "so much hope and desire to grow", narrating their lack of material wealth as inspirational rather than symptomatic of broader inequalities. These comments reproduce a familiar colonial discourse, where locals are positioned in a master/servant power relationship, where they serve as "spectacles" to be experienced and consumed by the tourists (Parasnis 2022, 11). Local hardship is framed as endearing, whilst resilience is celebrated without acknowledging the historical and economic conditions that produce such vulnerability.

Beyond that, most representations of Caribbean inhabitants in the advertisements analysed fall within the domain of service labour. Local people are repeatedly shown performing roles that cater to tourist pleasure and comfort: serving food and drinks, giving massages, selling clothing and jewellery on the beach, playing music or running small beachfront stalls (Nautalia Viajes 2018d at 0:39, 1:52, 2:04, 2:08,). A pattern not incidental but tied to the structure of the tourism industry, where services are highly labour-intensive and thus rely heavily on inexpensive local labour (Urry 2002, 60). As a result, these scenes construct a visual narrative in which locals appear as facilitators of the tourist experience, reinforcing a gendered and racialized hierarchy between those who serve and those who are served. Locals are shown working, smiling and dancing for the benefit of visitors who swim, sunbathe and relax (Nelson 2005, 133). Even when the tourists are not physically surrounded by the native labour, their presence is still made evident in the promises made in the ad, in quotes like "all your needs met", "clean rooms" and "immaculate settings" (Hasseler 2008, 23). These portrayals also rely on a form of emotional labour as mentioned in the previous section, where locals' (and especially women's) smiles, warmth and willingness to please become skills sold for a wage (Veijola and Valtonen 2007,

16). Locals are therefore visually framed as "picturesque others", they are rarely shown in everyday clothing, with families or in non-tourism-related settings, reinforcing the natural/artificial duality in which these figures are taken to represent an authentic representation of the local population (Nelson 2005, 133). Thus, in promotional imagery, people in the Caribbean become relevant only when they serve a function within the tourism economy, either as attractions or facilitators of the tourist experience (Nelson 2005, 136).

Another recurring motif in the advertisements is the use of Carnival imagery, which is one of the most emblematic cultural celebrations in the Caribbean. In these videos (Nautalia Viajes 2018c), local women are featured dancing in elaborate Carnival costumes, with bright colours, feathers and sequins that visually emphasize the spectacle. While Carnival is a genuine expression of Caribbean cultural identity, its selective representation here functions primarily as a visual attraction for tourists. The women are shown performing for the camera, their bodies becoming part of the entertainment offered to spectators both within the ad and externally to the tourist audiences. This reflects the broader process of cultural commodification discussed in the literature, in which cultural practices are packaged as consumable experiences for foreign audiences. In this dynamic, performances like the Carnival are transformed into symbols of "authenticity", where cultural identities are commodified, often leaving the communities who produce them in a contradictory position, since they are gaining economic value through its promotion, yet it is becoming exoticized and detached from their realities (Babb 2012, 37).

Audience perceptions and tourist expectations

A key point in Rose's framework is that "it is the viewer who makes sense of the advert, not the advert itself" (2016, 133). Advertisements encourage audiences to produce preferred readings, which means they will interpret them according to the ideological, political and commercial interests entrenched within the imagery (Rose 2016, 133). As mentioned in previous sections, in the context of Caribbean tourism advertising, the preferred reading is one that naturalizes the region as a colourful, welcoming paradise, marked by friendliness and gratitude toward foreign visitors. This interpretative process reflects Hughes' "*geography of the imagination*", in which "the fusion of tourist representations and marketing philosophy blurs the boundaries between the reality and fiction through the commodification of place imagery" (Jordan 2007, 93). So it is not only landscapes and host communities that are commodified, each person's engagement with tourism imagery also shapes their own embodied identity as a tourist. This becomes particularly clear in the campaign from 2018 by *Halcón*

Viajes, where some Spanish influencers and famous people were invited to visit the Dominican Republic and Cuba. After participating in the sponsored trips, they interviewed them and they explained their views and opinions on the destination, giving a perspective on how Spanish tourists view these countries, even after having visited them. In the interviews (Halcón Viajes 2018c), the influencers reproduced quite exactly the interpretative frame encouraged by the ads: they praised the colours, palm trees and sea, they described the country using words like "tropical" and the local communities as cheerful but also humble. As one influencer is recommending the city centre of Santo Domingo, she mentions the relevance of the place to understand the history and culture of Dominicans. She then admires the respect and appreciation they have for Spain and its people, and how they consider it their "mother nation". Unintentionally, this account of the country is romanticizing and reinforcing colonial discourses, as it is erasing the historical violence that came with it. At the same time, it is a reflection of the ideological order that the advertisements themselves are promoting, as seen previously, and is adding to the notion of the tourist as a passive, ignorant observer. Therefore, the interviews show the preferred reading in action, as the viewers internalise and reiterate the narrative that the advertisements purposely create, demonstrating how visual discourse can have a role in perpetuating colonial, racialised and gendered hierarchies.

Discussion

While the analysis focused on close readings of individual scenes and advertising choices, this discussion chapter "zooms out" to reflect on what these findings collectively reveal in relation to the research question: How do Spanish tourism agencies visually construct women in the Caribbean in their promotional materials? In moving from description to interpretation, the aim of this chapter is to consider the broader implications of the visual discourses identified and to position them within the larger theoretical conversations outlined in the literature review. By situating the advertisements analysed within a wider global scope, and a system of representations, the discussion clarifies how these images not only reflect but also participate in the production of meaning, shaping how the Caribbean is imagined, consumed and understood by the audiences of the ads. The findings indicate that the promotional materials are not only promoting a destination, but at the same time reproducing hierarchies that draw on colonial imaginaries and gendered stereotypes. There are some patterns that repeat: the framing of the tourist as a carefree (while also ignorant) consumer, the portrayal of women as passive

and available and the depiction of local people as service providers for the tourist's enjoyment. Together, these representations create a visual system that frames the Caribbean through an unequal perspective, portraying locals as reliant on or defined by the presence of tourists.

Across the advertisements some images consistently replay and overlap, patterns that work through the marketing strategy of reproducing a series of binaries and stereotypes. The advertisements construct distinctions between tourist/local, active/passive, white/non-white and server/served. Tourists, predominantly male, white and Western, are shown engaging in sports and adventure, whereas locals and women (especially local women) are depicted as passive, welcoming and oriented towards pleasing others. Such distinctions reiterate colonial narratives in which Western subjects appear as agents, while non-Westerners are rendered as background, service workers or exhibitional elements. At the same time, the attraction of the gendered, exotic Other remains central to the tourism marketing discourse, as it reinforces politics of domination embedded in the racialization and feminization of colonial spaces (van Eeden 2007, 202). The binaries sustain a wider process of "othering", since the Caribbean population is presented as rooted in the past (traditional, pre-modern), therefore more authentic, according to Culler (1981). In the same mechanism, local people are stripped of agency, their value within the advertisements lies in their function within the tourist's fantasy of authenticity and escape, rather than on their individuality or social reality. Women, although presented as Western visitors, are in a way also victims of "othering", since their role often coincides with that of the local. We repeatedly see in the advertisements how they are shown as passive actors, and although they are not serving as providers of labour like the locals are, they are still stripped of agency in respect to their male counterparts. This means that the ads reproduce the arrangement to which the central figure is still the white, upper-class male tourist, as it is the clear audience target. The elements that are shown in the advertisements then will be catered towards this gaze, in consequence, "othering" other subjects that might appear.

Another binarism that emerged in the ads shows the contrast between the "tourist" and the "traveller", a distinction already problematised in the literature review. The advertisements commonly promote the familiar Caribbean blueprint of effortless relaxation, a fantasy in which visitors are exempt from responsibility. As discussed earlier, this depiction is materially sustained by the labour of local populations, whose service, emotional availability and cultural performance makes the tourist fantasy of vacation possible. Despite that, some campaigns present the figure of the traveller as an active seeker of authenticity, though this identity is still

constructed within a commercial narrative that appropriates and romanticises cultural difference for profit.

Overall, the findings strongly support the literature review, showing that tourism advertising continues to reproduce a gendered and racialised order, even if its dynamics now appear in more subtle, visually refined forms. Spanish tourism ads construct the Caribbean through these idealised images that serve Western fantasies rather than reflect the region's realities. Mohammed (2009, 3) argues that, in an imperialist order, cultural formations, attitudes, beliefs and practices are equally important to territorial, political or economic interests in order to maintain authority. Visual definitions of the colonised territory are thus central to the formation of the Empire. Although Caribbean countries could not be named colonies anymore, the way in which the advertisements define and construct it very much reproduce patterns of an imperial past. The tourism ads continue to reproduce long-standing power between Spain and the Caribbean, even if colonialism is not mentioned nor an apparent topic in the marketing strategies. Its visual logics are more often semiotic and concealed in the stereotyping and reduction of the region. Because of that, tourism imagery ends up functioning as a form of cultural domination, it turns people and culture into parades and it hides the inequalities that sustain the industry. Therefore, they produce a world where colonial scripts are repeated, not through explicit assertions, but through optic suggestions, emotional tones and familiar narratives that the audience then learns to interpret as the "normal" Caribbean experience.

We see this pattern reflected on how women's bodies are also portrayed in the advertisements. The results are put in conversation with Kempadoo's argument that during colonisation, the Caribbean was framed as a space of sexual availability for European men, and that black women were positioned as objects of white male desire (1999, 31). The ads analysed did not reproduce these ideas openly, local women were most frequently portrayed as service providers, framed more as carers rather than sexualised. Instead, women tourist's bodies were the pawns of sexualisation, as the framing of the Caribbean as a site of "sun, sand and sea" vacation meant that they were pictured with little clothing. This shows that women and their bodies will repeatedly be used to attract, and sexualisation operates without making racial distinctions. Going back to Kempadoo's quote, the advertisements analysed were still positioning women (although in this case white tourists) as objects of white male desire. In fact, it has been argued that capitalism's use of the female body as a sexual object to market its goods has a significant role in the perpetuation of patriarchal relationships and sexist views

(Civelek 2023, 598). Subsequently, the ads naturalize specific gender roles: tourist women are shown as aesthetic objects, while locals appear mainly as service providers offering hospitality or emotional labour. Men, by contrast, are shown as active, athletic or guiding figures. This could be changed if women's participation were more present both in the tourism industry and in the making of the advertisements. By becoming part of the decision-making process, women could reshape how destinations are represented and challenge stereotypes (Pritchard 2007, 9). This raises important questions about the real-life effects of these visual portrayals: how stereotypes affect local women's identities and labour, how they shape visitor expectations, and how more equitable representations could emerge if local women had more control over how they are depicted.

It could be argued then that the language of advertising is not using racially coding mechanisms anymore and it is rather becoming more inclusive, depicting non-white subjects as active actors of the advertisements, and shown increasingly as tourists rather than as servicing locals. We could see this increase of representation and diversity as a strategy of marketing companies to sell their product within the neoliberal consumerist system, rather than to challenge existing inequalities. In fact, the underlying codes of patriarchy continue to shape many of the images through recurring signs such as poses, clothing, emotional expressions and arrangement of bodies. Therefore, tourism marketing here is displaying a progressive surface as a way for campaigns to appear modern, whilst the structure continues to be the same. In the end, the objective of marketing is to sell in a way that the tourist can identify the place that is being sold, in the case of the Caribbean, we argued that it was through lush vegetation and palm trees, clear beaches and bathing bodies. Although some advertisements are starting to rethink how they sell this destination and how they portray both the people that live there and the ones that visit it, campaigns still very much rely on these old binaries and stereotypes, in order to assure the familiarity of the spectator. That is when these representations turn people, places and nature into commodities driven by economic opportunity (Nelson 2005, 141). Because advertisements influence the roles of their target audiences as well as the values and attitudes of society (Civelek 2023, 596), they do more than sell holidays, they shape the tourist's expectations on what they will find when they go to the Caribbean. As we argued, the images reinforce simplified, exoticized and hierarchical images of the region, which will translate to viewers seeing the region as timeless, the locals as cheerful and available. This was observed in the interviews that were done to Spanish people that visited the Dominican Republic. It contributes to the ongoing "othering" of the local society and reinforces the idea that they are

rooted in the past, even their precarity becomes romanticised. The interviews also show that even after being in the destination these stereotypes continue, arguing that it is not only the advertisements which shape the region, but the region constructs itself physically in the same way, in order to create the optimal, expected experience for the guests.

By linking representations of tourists, women and local communities, the analysis highlights how longstanding binaries and stereotypes continue to organise the visual economy of Caribbean tourism. At the same time, the presence of limited shifts toward diversity and inclusion suggests a complex and contradictory landscape, where surface-level change coexists with deeply embedded structures of inequality. While these insights contribute to ongoing debates on tourism, representation and power, it is also important to acknowledge the scope and constraints of the study. This analysis is based on a selected sample of tourism advertisements produced by three major Spanish travel agencies. While these companies are influential and representative of mainstream tourism marketing in Spain, the sample cannot capture the full diversity of Caribbean tourism advertising or the practices of smaller agencies, independent operators or local tourism boards. As a result, the findings are understood as illustrative rather than exhaustive of the entire industry. The focus on the research is primarily on visual and discursive analysis, as stated on the methodology section, thus examining how meaning is constructed through images, narratives and representational patterns. The approach does not include empirical audience reception data, but the examination of power, gender and race relations within tourism marketing is done semiotically. Therefore, the study cannot account for how different viewers interpret, negotiate or resist these representations in practice, meaning during their visit to the region. Although interview materials and existing literature were used to give some insights on preferred readings, future research would benefit from incorporating other methods which interact with tourists themselves, such as interviews or surveys. A further limitation concerns the lack of direct perspectives from Caribbean communities themselves. The analysis examines how locals are represented but it does not include reflections from those who are being represented. An absence which mirrors the power imbalance discussed throughout the thesis, where local voices are often excluded form decision-making processes in tourism marketing. Agencies often frame the Caribbean as a homogenous region, and although the intention of the study was to highlight and comment on the purpose of this, further research could explore how these representations are experienced or challenged on the ground, and how they affect identities, labour relations and everyday life of local populations.

Building on these limitations, several directions for future research emerge. During the discussion, the increased focus on diversity from marketing agencies was emphasized. Thus, a historical comparative study across different decades of Caribbean tourism advertising could provide insights on how the visual tropes of gender, race and exoticism observed in the ads have evolved or persisted over time. Additionally, examining newer forms of marketing, particularly social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok or influencer's campaigns could reveal new opportunities for representation, perhaps more focused on the voices of local Caribbean people. Digital tourism marketing is increasingly blurring the line between personal expression and commercial promotions, thus this perspective could explore how local cultures become commodified through a different lens. Finally, future research could explore participatory or community-led tourism marketing initiatives, analysing whether greater involvement of local women and communities in decision-making processes leads to more equitable and less stereotypical representations. These approaches would help move the study beyond critique and towards imagining alternative visual narratives that challenge the gendered, racialised and postcolonial hierarchies embedded in the global tourism discourse.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine how Spanish travel agencies visually construct the Caribbean and its women in promotional materials, focusing on advertisements produced by *Nautalia Viajes*, *Viajes El Corte Inglés* and *Halcón Viajes*. By combining insights from feminist, postcolonial and tourism studies with a qualitative visual analysis, the research has shown that tourism advertisement is not a neutral or purely aesthetic practice. Rather, it plays a key role in shaping how destinations are imagined, how bodies are valued and how long-standing hierarchies of gender, race and power are reproduced within contemporary tourism culture.

The analysis demonstrated that the Caribbean is consistently famed as a consumable paradise aligned with Western fantasies of leisure, sensuality and escape. Through recurring visual prompts such as tropical landscapes, bodies in beach settings, staged cultural performances or encounters with service workers, the region is presented as stuck in time, carefree and detached from social or political complexity. These images invite the viewer to engage with the Caribbean primarily as a site of pleasure, reinforcing a tourist gaze that prioritizes consumption over understanding. In this sense, tourism advertising contributes to the construction of a

simplified and hierarchical imaginary in which the region exists mainly to serve external desires.

Women occupy a central position within this visual framing. Across the advertisements analysed, femininity is repeatedly marked through the dichotomy of sexual object and caregiver, communicating a sense of sexual availability, but also service and care. Tourist women are often framed as objects of pleasure, as their bodies become integrated into the "sun, sand and sea" narrative, while local women appear primarily as service providers, offering hospitality, emotional labour and cultural performance. Men, by contrast, are more frequently depicted as active and in control, whether as adventurous tourists or as guiding figures within leisure settings. These patterns naturalise gendered divisions of labour and reinforce unequal power relations between visitors and locals. The findings suggest that while racialised and colonial imagery has become less explicit, its underlying logic has not disappeared. Instead, racialisation and patriarchy operate through subtle visual cues such as body positioning or clothing. The increasing inclusion of diverse bodies within tourism advertising can therefore be read less as a structural shift towards equality and more as a surface-level strategy aligned with neoliberal marketing logics. Diversity is often used to enhance the appeal of the product rather than to challenge the deeper hierarchies that shape who is seen as a tourist, who is seen as labour, and whose culture is visible only when it becomes a spectacle.

By situating these findings within the broader literature, the thesis confirms and extends existing scholarship on the gendered and racialised nature of tourism representation. While previous research has highlighted the economic exploitation and symbolic marginalisation of women and local communities in the tourism economy, this study contributes by examining the visual and semiotic mechanisms through which these dynamics are maintained in contemporary Spanish tourism advertising. In doing so, it responds to the gap identified, showing how colonial imaginaries persist through familiar visual narratives. Advertisements rarely disrupt the dominant binaries that structure tourism imagery in the Caribbean, such as tourist versus local, active versus passive or modern versus traditional. These is done for the need to continue this recognisability and marketability of the region. But the implications of the thesis extend beyond the field of advertising analysis. Because tourism imagery shapes expectations, experiences and interactions, the representations examined here have real consequences for how destinations are consumed and how local populations are treated. By repeatedly portraying the Caribbean as a space of effortless pleasure sustained by cheerful and

compliant labour, tourism advertising risks normalising inequality and obscuring the social realities that underpin the industry. At the same time, it influences how tourists interpret their encounters, often reinforcing stereotypes even after direct contact with the destination.

In addressing the research question, this thesis has shown that Spanish travel agencies visually construct the Caribbean through a set of gendered and racialised codes that continue to position the region within a global hierarchy of power. While these constructions have adapted to contemporary sensibilities, they remain rooted in older colonial narratives that frame the Caribbean and its people as the "Other". Recognising these patterns is a necessary step towards questioning how tourism imagery might be reimagined in more equitable and inclusive ways. Ultimately, this research highlights the importance of critically engaging with visual culture in tourism. Advertising does more than sell holidays, it shapes imaginaries, identities and relationships between places and people. By making visible the assumptions embedded within tourism marketing, this thesis contributes to ongoing debates about representation, power and responsibility in a global industry that continues to rely on unequal transactions. Future research, particularly work that centres Caribbean voices, will be crucial in exploring how these visual narratives can be challenged and transformed.

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