



Tourism and auteur cinema. Almodóvar as a promoter of the image of Spain in France

Turismo y cine de autor.
Almodóvar impulsor de la imagen de España en Francia

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The aim of this study is to analyze how Pedro Almodóvar's cinema influences the perceived image of Spain by French viewers, considering the content of his films, the diversity of audiences, and the level of engagement of the spectators. **Methodology:** Twenty in-depth interviews were conducted with French viewers

who have a high knowledge of Almodóvar's cinema. The questions emerged from studies on narrative persuasion, audiovisual fiction tourism induced, and the image of tourist destinations. **Results:** Despite all the testimonies having extensive knowledge of Almodóvar's cinema, there are differences among types of viewers based on their familiarity with Spain, the level of consumption, and engagement. **Discussion:** The results are related to previous research findings on the effects of audiovisual fiction on destination images. A high degree of correspondence can be observed between the image projected by the films and the one perceived by the viewers, highlighting the importance of familiarity with the country, the relative influence of stereotypes projected in his cinema, and the inability to turn specific locations into icons. **Conclusions:** The study demonstrates an undeniable link between representation, audience type, reception, and the effect on the image. The high degree of coincidence between the image projected by Almodóvar's cinema and the one perceived by the viewers is related to their engagement with the films and their familiarity with Spain.

Keywords: Audiovisual fiction and tourism; Pedro Almodóvar; Projected image; Perceived image; Reception studies; Diversity of audiences; Stereotypes.

RESUMEN

Introducción: El objetivo de este estudio es analizar cómo el cine de Pedro Almodóvar influye en la imagen percibida de España por los espectadores franceses a partir de los contenidos de sus películas, la diversidad de las audiencias y el grado de implicación de los espectadores. **Metodología:** Se recurre a veinte entrevistas en profundidad a espectadores franceses con un conocimiento alto del cine de Almodóvar. Las preguntas surgen de los estudios sobre persuasión narrativa, turismo inducido por la ficción audiovisual e imagen de los destinos turísticos. **Resultados:** A pesar de que todos los testimonios tienen un amplio conocimiento del cine de Almodóvar, hay diferencias entre los tipos de espectadores en función de la familiaridad con España, el grado de consumo e implicación. **Discusión:** Relaciona los resultados con los hallazgos de la investigación previa sobre los efectos de la ficción audiovisual en la imagen de los destinos. Puede apreciarse un alto grado de correspondencia entre imagen proyectada por las películas y la percibida por los espectadores, la importancia de la familiaridad con el país, la relativa incidencia de los estereotipos proyectados por su cine o su incapacidad para convertir lugares concretos en iconos. **Conclusiones:** El estudio demuestra que hay un vínculo ineludible entre representación, tipo de audiencia, recepción y efecto en la imagen. El alto grado de coincidencia entre la imagen proyectada por el cine de Almodóvar y la percibida por los espectadores está relacionada con su implicación con las películas y su familiaridad con España.

Palabras clave: Ficción audiovisual y turismo; Pedro Almodóvar; Imagen proyectada; Imagen percibida; Estudios de recepción; Diversidad de las audiencias; Estereotipos.

1. Introduction

In the last ten years, studies on the effects of audiovisual fiction on tourism have undergone considerable changes. Since the works of Sangkyun Kim (2012a and 2012b), Sangkyun Kim and O'Connor (2011), or Sangkyun Kim and Wang (2012), it has become difficult to study the effects without considering the interaction processes between viewers/tourists and audiovisual fiction texts (Nieto-Ferrando et al., 2023). The degree of consumption of films and series, viewer involvement, the assessment of their attributes, or the socio-cultural characteristics of viewers themselves are unavoidable mediating variables. Similarly, an increasing number of researchers claim that understanding the effects of audiovisual fiction, mediated by reception, requires a prior analysis of the treatment of destinations in audiovisual texts (Dung and Reijnders, 2013; Nieto-Ferrando et al., 2021).

This paradigm shift has led to paying more attention to the inductive capacity of television series compared to films (Kim and Long, 2012; O'Connor et al., 2008). Seriality and the extensive duration of reception time generate greater engagement with characters, stories, and the places where they unfold in the audience. Additionally, the cumulative effect of repeated exposure to locations can be observed (Beeton, 2016). However, it is possible to identify groups of films that establish similar relationships with their viewers as series do. This is the case with the so-called "auteur cinema." It is based on attributing constant thematic and stylistic elements

"If the attribute theme/story can have a negative impact on the perception of Spain, it is neutralized by the characteristics of the narratives themselves and the other attributes of the films"

to certain directors that allow their works to be easily identified. Their stories, characters, staging, etc., combine redundancy and novelty. Hence, apart from seriality, a significant part of their attributes can be compared to those of series.

Starting from the need to focus on the content of audiovisual fictions and the interaction of viewers with them, this work aims to fill a research gap regarding the effect of auteur cinema on the image of tourist destinations. To achieve this, the effect of Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar's cinema on the perceived image of Spain by the French is analyzed.

The effect of films or series on the image of destinations is a key area of analysis in the relationship between audiovisual fiction and tourism.

Research distinguishes between the projected and perceived image of destinations. Between these two, there can be coincidences, negotiations, and rejections (Mercille, 2005). The projected image can be induced when it comes from advertising and, therefore, emanates from destination managers. But it can also be autonomous when it is not promotional or does not arise from the destination itself (Gartner, 1993). The complex process of financing and producing audiovisual fictions prevents them from being considered entirely autonomous or inductive. The perceived image is the set of impressions that audiences have of the destination based on the sum of beliefs, ideas, expectations, and feelings it evokes (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Gallarza et al., 2002). Audiovisual fiction can modify the perception of the overall image or some of its attributes, reinforce pre-existing images, or build new images based on connoted meanings derived from the representation of destination attractions in audiovisual fictions.

The choice of Almodóvar is because he is considered an "auteur," has a broad international projection, and many analysts highlight his close ties to what they call the "Spanish national identity" or "Spanish cultural identity" (Acevedo-Muñoz, 2003 and 2008; Allinson, 2001; Saavedra-Llamas and Grijalba-de-la-Calle, 2020). Beyond the simplification of applying these terms to a country where different cultures and identities coexist, the director has become an essential reference for the "Spain brand" at the international level, as Martínez-Expósito (2015) points out.

The choice to focus on the French audience is because France is one of the top three tourist source markets for Spain, according to the annual reports of Tourespaña, and it is a country that greatly appreciates Almodóvar's cinema, co-producing eight of his films. Eight of his feature films have also been nominated for the César Awards, with three of them winning: "*Tacones lejanos*" (1991), "*Todo sobre mi Madre*" (1999), and "*Hable con ella*" (2002). Additionally, several of his films have received recognition at the Cannes Film Festival. According to data from the Internet Movie Database, France surpasses Spain in box office revenue for films like "*Hable con ella*" (2002), "*Volver*" (2006), "*Los brazos rotos*" (2009), "*Julieta*" (2016), or "*Parallel Mothers*" (2021).

1.1. Audiovisual Fiction and Destination Image

1.1.1. Representation and Perception

The research considers that the inducing capacity of audiovisual fiction lies in the combination of the representation of places, appealing plots linked to these places, and interesting characters for viewers (Ananda et al., 2021; Bae et al., 2017; Macionis, 2004; Kim et al., 2019; Tkalec, 2017). The relationship between representation and perception is demonstrated by Hahm and Wang (2011) and Josiam et al. (2014), who discovered that the evaluation of certain attributes of destination image improves or worsens depending on how the destinations are represented.

The issue becomes more complex when the representation is considered negative. Shani et al. (2009) and Hudson et al. (2011) found that a negative plot generates a negative image of certain attributes but can be

compensated by the spectacular exposure of attractions associated with the destination, which, at the very least, enhances the affected attributes- such as nature and heritage, for example. When this compensation does not occur, a negative overall image is generated (Correia-Loureiro and Barbosa-de-Araujo, 2015).

Some research goes further and analyzes how the destination is represented in audiovisual fictions, as a necessary step to understand reception and effects (Reijnders, 2009; Luo et al., 2014; Pan and Tsang, 2014; Nieto-Ferrando, 2020; Gómez-Morales and Nieto-Ferrando, 2021). Furthermore, the introduction of reception studies in research has refocused some issues, such as the importance of assessing production attributes or the impact of negative representation on perceived image. Regarding assessment, Kim (2012b), Kim and Assaker (2014), and Wong et al. (2021) found correlations between the appreciation of attributes in films and series - theme/story, characters/actors, spaces/landscape, technique, and music- and their effect on various aspects of tourism. Wong et al. (2021) state that a positive attitude towards audiovisual fictions radiates to other aspects related to them, such as the celebrities involved or the places they showcase.

Regarding the distinction between representation and perception, Yang et al. (2017) draw on narrative persuasion theories (Green and Brock, 2000; Green et al., 2004) to argue that it is not so much the sense of representation- whether positive or negative- but rather the degree of pleasure that the viewer derives from their engagement that can impact the image of the represented destinations. However, Nieto-Ferrando et al. (2021) question whether engagement in fiction is sufficient to mitigate the effects of a negative representation when there is a close link between such representation and the present or past reality of the place where it is set, or when other media texts project a negative image of it. However, this does not necessarily deter tourists, as it can generate dark tourism- tourism in destinations or attractions associated with tragic events- as observed by Leotta (2020).

1.1.2. Familiarity

Numerous studies consider familiarity essential for a destination's image and intention to visit (Baloglu, 2001; Hu & Ritchie, 1993; Prentice & Andersen, 2000). Mackay and Fesenmaier (1997) argue that destinations benefit from an optimal level of familiarity, a balance between the known and the unknown. A high degree of knowledge/familiarity can harm a destination's image as it allows for the detection of its weaknesses. Ozretic-Dosen et al. (2018) demonstrate this by stating that Croatians whose familiarity with Turkey comes from visits or soap operas have a positive image of the country. This changes if their sources of information are more diverse, as it allows them to become aware of the country's political and social problems.

Familiarity focuses on the diversity of audiences due to their varying degrees of destination knowledge. This knowledge may be higher when the viewer/tourist is culturally close to the destination depicted in the audiovisual fiction. Cultural proximity is based on identity affinity between different groups, sharing to some extent a system of values, lifestyles, history, etc. (Singhal & Svenkerud, 1994).

However, studies that include geographic and cultural proximity as variables reach widely varying conclusions. According to Prebensen (2007), proximity to the destination increases knowledge about it and generates more solid images. Therefore, distance may allow for a greater effect of audiovisual fiction, as concluded by Hudson et al. (2011) or Dung and Reijnders (2013). However, Busby et al. (2013) confirm that cultural similarities can have an impact on the image and visitation motivations, after analyzing the effect of Turkish actors on American viewers with Middle Eastern ethnic origins. Similarly, Kim et al. (2007) conclude that with a positive attitude towards Korean soap operas, the change in the perceived image of the country and intentions to visit is greater among older Japanese individuals. They are more familiar with Korea, have experienced tensions between the two countries, and, therefore, start with a more negative image. The weight of a problematic and shared history predisposes the effect of soap operas to be greater in a specific age group.

1.1.3. Stereotypes

The proximity or cultural distance and the familiarity and knowledge they generate must be analyzed in greater depth and broken down into their different components to be useful in research. These factors are also related to the creation and consolidation of stereotypes associated with places.

Stereotypes are simple schemas shared by a group that help to understand and categorize reality before a deeper knowledge of it allows us to overcome them. However, as Hall (1980) states, they also simplify, essentialize, and naturalize people or places. The simplification inherent in stereotypes can influence the perceived image of destinations (Andsager and Drzewiecka, 2002; Rein et al., 1993)

Some research explores the relationship between stereotypes and tourists' expectations. Iwashita (2006) has studied stereotypes about "Britishness" and their importance in projecting a recognizable image of Great Britain through literary and audiovisual works. The author points out that British productions themselves rely on stereotypes to connect with the perceptions and expectations of the audience. Her analysis also demonstrates that a greater knowledge of the country does not eliminate simplifications. Justus et al. (2018) claim that tourists' satisfaction increases if their tourist experience aligns with the expectations generated by stereotypes.

Many stereotypes, when simplifying the non-Western one, contribute to creating images based on primitivism, irrationality, and exoticism (Bandyopadhyay and Morais, 2005; Caton and Almeida-Santos, 2008). However, this stereotyped image also affects the periphery of Europe, specifically southern Italy, Portugal, Greece, or Spain (Tzanelli, 2003; Cordeiro, 2011; Bencivenga et al., 2015). In the case of Spain, the origin of the simplified image of the country, based on iconography and a certain Orientalization of Andalusia, lies in the literary and artistic production of European romantic travelers in the 19th century (Poutet, 1995). These stereotypes have inspired numerous cultural productions, both native and international, and have even become a genre known as "españolada," which is evident in literature, performing arts, popular music, and cinema.

Beeton (2004) asserts that the dissociation between projected images based on stereotypes and other more "realistic" ones is counterproductive for tourism promotion. However, Nieto-Ferrando et al. (2023) propose complementarity between the two. According to the authors, the stereotyped image of Barcelona projected in cinema can be an attraction factor for audiences with limited knowledge of the destination because it would satisfy the expectations generated by a highly prevalent previous image outside of Spain. In a subsequent stage, the experience of Barcelona (an organic source of image) and conventional inducing sources (advertising) would help reshape that previous image.

1.1.4. Symbolic associations

The research has also analyzed the ability of audiovisual fiction to create awareness – or expand awareness – of the existence of a place when it lacks recognizable attractions (Croy, 2010; Tooke and Baker, 1996). In these cases, its image becomes linked to an audiovisual production through associations with the plot and its characters (Hao and Ryan, 2013). Riley et al. (1998) state that one of the effects of movies and TV series is to turn the places where they are filmed or set into what they call "icons." These icons are tourist attractions that gain relevance through associations with concepts, themes, or feelings resulting from the interaction of the place with the different elements of the narrative and the story, beyond the place's own characteristics. Some of these associations have their origin prior to their realization in an audiovisual fiction and may stem from stereotypes; others have acquired a certain degree of codification due to their presence in numerous films. This is the case with the romanticism associated with Swiss landscapes for Indian tourists thanks to Bollywood movies (Josiam et al., 2014).

The notion of an icon implies an increase in the viewer's work, as it requires them to move beyond the literal sense to explore the symbolic. Additionally, by relying on their cultural background, it refers to the diversity of audiences and their contextualized reception. It is difficult for a symbolic meaning attributed to a place to be universal. Kim and Assaker (2014) affirm that the icon also emerges from the positive evaluation of the

attributes of audiovisual productions – the theme, the story, the characters, and the settings – and from a high involvement of viewers in them. Transforming a place into an icon, apart from enhancing its image, also makes it a motivating factor for attraction (Singh and Best, 2004).

1.1.5. The Image of Spain in the Films of Almodóvar

Martínez-Expósito (2015) examines Almodóvar's cinema for its ability to project an international image of Spain based on a combination of modernity in customs and the recycling and re-signification of the country's cultural particularities. Much of the research on the director focuses on these same issues. Scholars of Almodóvar's filmography have highlighted the following themes related to Spanish culture and its stereotypes (Allinson, 2001; Camino, 2010; Yarza, 1999):

- References to the Catholic religion, highlighting its ritual dimension and the more aesthetic aspects of its iconography.
- The significance of family, particularly mother-daughter relationships. This does not imply treating the family with benevolence or that it is conventional or solely composed of biological ties.
- Interest in bullfighting and the aesthetic virtues of its iconography.
- Visceral characters whose actions are driven more by passion than reason.
- The iconography typical of the "*españolada*" genre. Beyond the bullfighting world, this is evident in the objects that populate the set design or in the attire of female characters, which sometimes allude to folk costumes.
- An abundance of stereotypical culinary references (gazpacho, potato omelet, etc.).
- Interest in Spanish popular music, such as chotis, pasodoble, or flamenco, sometimes used with ironic or parodic intent, especially in the early films.
- Costumbrismo in dialogues. Many characters use popular speech, sometimes exaggerated.
- The traumatic past. References to the Francoist dictatorship have increased in the latest films.

In addition to this, Almodóvar's films are closely linked to the so-called "movida madrileña" (a countercultural movement in Madrid) and the literary tradition of farce, astracanada, picaresque novels, and folkloric cinema, combined with global genres such as melodrama. The unique realization of melodrama, or "almodrama," along with its queer sensibility, has also been emphasized by researchers.

Saavedra-Llamas and Grijalba-de-la-Calle (2020) point out that these characteristics of Almodóvar's cinema project an image of Spain that aligns with the perception of Spain abroad, particularly in European countries, the United States, and the Far East, according to the Barometer of Spain's Image (BIE), 7th wave (Results from February-March 2017). Among the stereotypes highlighted are the weight of tradition, family, and religion, cultural aspects like bullfighting and flamenco, and they also mention gastronomy and tourist clichés like sun, beach, and partying. The same report highlights the perception of Spain as a very tolerant country, a characteristic that is also recognized in Almodóvar's work.

2. Objectives

The general objective of this study is to analyze how the films of Pedro Almodóvar influence the perceived image of Spain among French viewers. More specifically, it investigates how the content of his films, the

assessment of their attributes, the degree of consumption, the level of familiarity with the country, and the involvement of viewers contribute to the correspondence between the image projected by the films and the one perceived by the viewers, and whether this image is stereotyped.

3. Methodology

This study examines the effect of Almodóvar's films on the perceived image of Spain by French viewers, considering how they interact with audiovisual fictions. For this purpose, in-depth interviews were conducted, a method used by Buchmann et al. (2010), Dung and Reijnders (2013), Reijnders (2016), or Waysdorf and Reijnders (2018), among others, to analyze the impact of audiovisual fiction in different areas of tourism.

The questions were divided into two blocks, although interviewees were given a high degree of freedom to link various topics. The first block inquired about the involvement of the interviewees in Almodóvar's cinema and their susceptibility to narrative persuasion. Questions were asked about the level of consumption, the plausibility and realism of the films, their perceived complexity, or the persistence of the response – lasting impression and deep meaning. Questions were also posed regarding the cognitive, affective, and referential effects of Almodóvar's films and, in general, the effects of the films on their lives. Finally, respondents were asked to assess the attributes of his films. The questions were adapted from works on narrative persuasion (Busselle and Bilandzic, 2009; Green and Brock, 2000; Green et al., 2004; Green et al., 2008; Tal-Or and Cohen, 2016; Van Laer et al., 2014), involvement with characters (Sood and Rogers, 2000; Sood, 2002), or the evaluation of attributes of audiovisual fictions and their relationship with tourism promotion (Kim, 2012b; Kim and Assaker, 2014; and Wong et al., 2021).

The second block focused on the effects of Almodóvar's cinema on the perceived image of Spain. Information was sought on knowledge and familiarity with Spain, the country's image, whether it is influenced by Almodóvar's cinema, or if there is a certain alignment between the image projected by his films and the perceived image.

To select the testimonies, a call was made on social networks and forums for fans of Almodóvar's cinema, accompanied by a survey to obtain information on the degree of familiarity with his filmography and basic sociodemographic data. Eighty-nine people responded to the survey. Of these, 12 were considered suitable and agreed to the interview. From there, a snowball strategy was used to reach 20 testimonies. All interviewees had to be residents in France and have seen at least 70% of Almodóvar's filmography between 1991, the year of the release of "High Heels" and the beginning of his success in the country, and 2019 (Pain and Glory). The interviews had an average duration of 60 minutes and were conducted via videoconference in French or Spanish, according to the interviewee's preferences. The responses were coded using NVIVO 12. The testimonies of the interviewees were treated anonymously.

4. Results: involvement, effect, and evaluation

4.1. Consumers and consumption

Out of the twenty testimonies (15 women and 5 men), 90% have a university education, and 55% have postgraduate studies. All of them have visited Spain during vacation periods. Some have a close connection to the country due to their migrant backgrounds or previous residency experiences (7). Others have acquired this connection through their education, such as Spanish teachers, or through multiple visits (6). Finally, a third group has a more limited connection, restricted to occasional trips (7).

Despite all the interviewees considering themselves fans of Almodóvar's cinema, their levels of consumption vary. At the highest end are those who have watched all of his films since 1991, many of them multiple times (10). Some mention traveling to attend premieres, collecting his films on DVD (T1), or reading books about the filmmaker (T3). Four of them have not watched all of his films, although they have seen several of them multiple times. The rest (6) have a lower level of consumption. However, the vast majority of the interviewees discuss

Almodóvar's films with other viewers (18). T17 uses them in his Spanish classes. T19 and T20 promote his films through their website on Spanish cinema.

Almodóvar's cinema has motivated seven testimonies to visit locations in Spain, six of whom are avid consumers. Many of them state that they plan to visit or revisit these locations at an unspecified time in the future.

4.2. Verosimilitude, Accessibility, and Lasting Impression

The participants were asked whether they consider Almodóvar's cinema to be plausible and realistic, whether it is accessible, whether it has a profound meaning, and whether it leaves a lasting impression. Regarding the first point, most of the participants consider the films to be partly realistic or "true" (17), although the definition of their realism varies greatly. In fact, most of them consider it compatible with stylization (T1, T20), the use of stereotypes (T19), convoluted and interconnected stories (T5), situations taken to the extreme (T6, T14, or T16), or absurd characters (T1 or T3). According to T3, Almodóvar tells "very realistic stories with not very realistic characters." T13, T17, and T18 consider Almodóvar to be not very realistic. As T17 states, when a story is very convoluted and not very plausible, in France they say, "Look, it's an Almodóvar film".

Seventeen participants also assert that Almodóvar's films are complex or, at the very least, sophisticated, beyond their "air of simplicity" (T16). They always contain "a story within a story" (T1). In fact, for many participants, they have two levels of interpretation. T11, the granddaughter of exiled republicans, links the appreciation of these levels of interpretation to cultural issues: "Since I often go to the movies with my partner, who is French, I see that we don't appreciate the same things." This double interpretation infers the profound meaning of his films and the lasting impression they create. Almodóvar's cinema encourages reflection (T2, T9, or T15). Three participants use it to discuss topics such as tolerance, diversity, and sexual consent within their families. Additionally, the effort to understand its narrative complexity generates pleasure, especially upon re-watching (T10, T13, or T17).

4.3. Almodóvar in the lives of the viewers

Many of the testimonies link Almodóvar's cinema to their life experiences and various identities. This can be clearly seen with T3, who lived in Madrid as a student, is an artist, a family man, and homosexual. His films make him nostalgic for his youth, have a significant impact on his work, influence his understanding of family, and he felt seen through the visibility Almodóvar brought to homosexuality in the 1990s.

Five out of seven testimonies with a connection to Spain by origin feel nostalgia due to Almodóvar's cinema. For example, "What Have I Done to Deserve This?" reminds T1 of the working-class outskirts where his cousin lived. T4 lived in Madrid and frequented the typical environments depicted in his early films, which is why he knew many people similar to the characters: "I am myself an 'Almodovarian' person, due to my excesses, my passion." Close cultural ties also facilitate identification and enable them to meet people who resemble the characters in the movies (6 out of 7). Eight testimonies identify with the characters by gender—strong women, their relationships with their children, and the experiences they go through (T2, T7, and T16)—while two do so based on their sexual orientation.

Figure 1 illustrates the strong relationship between the degree of consumption and the various motivations behind identification. It also highlights the connection between the degree of familiarity and identification by gender, the ability to find characters similar to those in the movies in real life, or the lack of identification.

Table 1. Identification, Consumption, and Familiarity.

	Gender identification	Similar characters in terms of gender	Sexual orientation identification	Similar characters in terms of sexual orientation	Origin identification	Similar characters in terms of origin	Identification without constraints	Non-identification	No similar characters
Very high consumption	5	3	0	1	1	4	2	0	1
High consumption	3	1	2	2	0	1	0	0	1
Moderate consumption	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	2	3
Familiarity from origin	5	2	0	0	1	5	1	0	1
Acquired familiarity	1	1	1	2	0	1	1	0	1
Low familiarity	2	2	1	1	0	0	1	2	3

Source: Author's own work.

Regarding the importance of Almodóvar in the knowledge and attitudes of the participants, 11 of them claim to better understand their environment and be more equipped to face real-life situations similar to those shown in the movies. Almodóvar helps them to know themselves (T1), teaches about parent-child relationships (T8 or T12), or raises issues that were not previously considered, making viewers more tolerant: "It familiarizes us with people we don't usually encounter, such as prostitutes and transvestites" (T11).

Some participants say that Almodóvar has taught them how to deal with difficult moments in their lives (T5, T10, or T18) and to approach these situations with humor, as T10 asserts, an attitude they attribute to the unique character of the Spanish people. For T5 and T11, his films have a certain therapeutic capacity. According to T11, whose mother was of Spanish origin,

I often watch his movies when, for example, I'm feeling down, and I know they will help me. [...] A year ago, I lost my mother, and I dedicated a whole week to watching all of Almodóvar's movies. [...] I watch them in the original version because I understand them, and the music and the language do me good.

Almodóvar also reinforces or nuances previous attitudes and knowledge (2). T2 claims that it has expanded their level of tolerance: 'When you watch his movies, you inevitably understand madness, excessiveness. [...] You end up explaining feelings or actions that seem completely crazy to the intellect.' In other cases, the effect on their knowledge and attitudes is minimal (7), although it is recognized that it may have helped others—for example, 'coming out of the closet' (T4). T6 points out that they learned tolerance before discovering Almodóvar: 'I come from a fairly open intellectual environment [...]. I discovered Almodóvar because I'm a cinephile. But, as I read a lot, I went down that path through reading before finding Almodóvar.'

4.4. Valuations

The evaluation of the attributes of the audiovisual fictions considered to be tourism inducers is comparable: 13 theme/story, 14 characters/actors, and 14 space. However, with regard to the latter, the staging is emphasized more than the location. This is due to the predominance of indoor spaces in Almodóvar's cinema, a characteristic of melodrama.

Regarding the evaluation of characters, their strength, psychology, and sensitivity, especially of homosexuals and women, are positively considered (T1, T9, or T15). As for the story/theme, some testimonies focus on how they are presented, on the temporal narrative structure (T1), or on the ability to "move abruptly from a moment of intense emotion and gravity to one of mockery or a point of humor" (T13). However, most of the positive evaluations of this attribute revolve around the freedom to address topics such as sexuality, homosexuality, or religion (T6, T12, or T17) and their connection to Spanish society, culture, tradition, and traumatic history (T1, T11, or T18).

The evaluation of space barely mentions specific locations. However, when asked about their importance in relation to the story and characters, half of the testimonies consider them relevant. The importance of Castilian-Manchego landscapes (T16 or T17), Barcelona (T13 or T17), and especially Madrid, is highlighted: "It's not just a city, but a character" (T14). Some testimonies emphasize the relationship between the countryside and the city. The countryside, according to T1, is where the characters escape to rest, and where something always happens that provides crucial information for the story. For T7, "when you see Madrid, you feel the culture of the capital. Then, when you see the villages, the atmosphere is more familiar." T5 goes further by stating that "he uses the Spanish territory in many ways in the development of his story. Could he explain himself in another place?". The appreciation that Almodóvar's stories are linked to Spanish culture, and even that they could not happen elsewhere, is widespread and independent of the importance given to the specific location (18).

5. Discussion: from reception to the effect on the perceived image of Spain

5.1. Representation and Perception

The testimonies indicate a close relationship between representation and perception (15): Spain is portrayed as both a modern and traditional country in Almodóvar's films, and, in general, the testimonies perceive the country in the same way, although they may emphasize one aspect or the other.

Following Kim (2012b), Kim and Assaker (2014), Wong et al. (2021), and Yang et al. (2017), this can be explained by the fact that the testimonies are avid consumers of his films – some of them are extreme fans – and most of them have a high degree of involvement in his movies, relating them to their life experiences and positively valuing many of their attributes. The complexity or sophistication of Almodóvar's films does not hinder narrative involvement, and with it, the effect, since the testimonies are well acquainted with his narrative techniques. However, it is difficult to determine to what extent the confluence between projection and perception is an effect of the films themselves – as acknowledged by nine testimonies, although two deny any effect – or whether these films coincide with and reinforce a pre-existing perceived image. T17 makes it clear: "I found [in Almodóvar] the Spain I knew".

Four testimonies claim that there is no correspondence between the image they have of Spain and the one projected in Almodóvar's films. The reasons are diverse. T3 and T13 reject the stereotypes used in his films, although at the same time, T13 does not hesitate to characterize the country as passionate. In the other two cases, the only testimonies that claim to have a partly negative image, it is due to the contrast between the image projected by the films and their previous tourist experiences (T9) or word of mouth (T12). T12 starts from a negative image of the country, and the comments of acquaintances regarding the importance of tradition weigh more than Almodóvar's films. It is worth noting that these four have a lower degree of involvement with the films compared to the rest of the testimonies, taking into account all the variables that measure it. However, T3 and T13 have a high degree of familiarity, so the difference between representation and perception is based on stereotypes.

"The appreciation that Almodóvar's stories are linked to Spanish culture, and even that they could not happen elsewhere, is widespread and independent of the importance given to the specific location."

Regarding the attributes of the films, the stories, sometimes gruesome, barely condition the effect on the perception of Spain. The vast majority of testimonies state that the stories are inevitably linked to the country, but this connection is more symbolic – certain cultural aspects – than concrete. Additionally, when Almodóvar addresses traumatic episodes in Spain's history – which is positively valued by the testimonies – he does so at the sub-plot level. The main story focuses on interpersonal conflicts typical of melodrama. This, combined with the high degree of involvement of the viewers, the attractiveness of the characters, which fosters identification (12), and the poetic staging, also compensates for negative stories. Therefore, if the attribute theme/story can have a negative impact on the perception of Spain, it is neutralized by the characteristics of the narratives themselves and the other attributes of the films. This confirms the findings of Correia-Loureiro and Barbosa-de-Araujo (2015), Hudson et al. (2011), and Shani et al. (2009).

5.2. Familiarity

Most of the testimonials have expanded their knowledge about Spain thanks to Almodóvar's films. T5 owes everything they know about the country to his movies. On the other end, T1, the child of migrants, and T14, who studied Hispanic studies, have deepened their already profound knowledge of the country. The first has discovered certain aspects that only he, as a migrant, can appreciate. For the second, thanks to Almodóvar, Spain is much more than just beaches, nightclubs – tourist clichés – and Golden Age literature. Also, many descendants of migrants, with a high degree of familiarity with Spain, comment on the effect of Almodóvar among their compatriots. T4 states that Almodóvar has shown the French a country that is open, with cosmopolitan cities, that has overcome the constraints of the Franco era without losing its connection to tradition. "In France, people have seen Spain in a different light" (T11).

The effect of Almodóvar's films on the image of Spain is greater when there is less familiarity, and the primary source of knowledge about the country comes from these films. In fact, this is evident in the testimonials' recognition of the effect: 2 out of 7 when familiarity comes from origin, 2 out of 6 if it is acquired, and 4 out of 7 if it is limited. This would corroborate the claims of Hudson et al. (2011) or Dung and Reijnders (2013) regarding familiarity. However, in these cases, when another source of the image, such as word-of-mouth or tourist experience, has a negative impact on the image (T9 and T12), Almodóvar does not bring about a change in attitude towards the country; the tolerance and freedom in his films are even contrasted with the mentalities of real Spain.

The effect on the image among those who are more familiar with Spain is less striking but more complex. Here, interaction with other sources of the image is more relevant. Almodóvar's films can give new meaning to a previous experience that may have been negative, as in the case of migrants, imbuing it with a nostalgic aura. They can also help discriminate between information about Spain that reaches France to highlight the elements that align with the image projected by the films, such as the approval of progressive laws related to gender and LGBTQ+ communities (T4 and T7), which is more relevant as it starts from a situation with a strong traditional influence. Therefore, contrary to what Mackay and Fesenmaier (1997) and Ozretic-Dosen et al. (2018) suggest, an excess of familiarity does not necessarily hinder the development of interest in a place. If the degree of consumption, involvement, and familiarity is high, the effect of the films is powerful enough to reshape the meaning of other sources of the image.

5.3. Stereotypes

While there are few specific evaluations of places, and only half of the testimonials consider them important for the story and characters, almost all of them agree that the stories can only unfold in Spain. This determination is symbolic, as it does not depend on the physical characteristics of the locations and is sometimes based on the assimilation of cultural stereotypes that the films themselves use. The stereotypical perception of Spain generates in viewers a limited range of expectations about the actions that can take place in the country, hence the symbolic location determines what happens there.

Beyond the term "tradition," which is present in all interviews, nine testimonials describe their image of Spain using terms such as "passion," "extravagance," "intensity," "impetuosity," "effervescence," "tortured character," "natural madness," or "violent impulse." With the exception of T13, all these testimonials claim that their perception of Spain aligns with what Almodóvar portrays. Only one testimonial (T1) among those with familiarity from their origins shows a partially stereotypical perception. However, this stereotype is more common among those with acquired familiarity and those with limited familiarity. It is also related to a lower level of involvement with the films and the stereotypical perception of the country (7 out of 9).

However, it is important to note that a clear distinction cannot be made between a stereotypical and non-stereotypical image. Instead, there is a certain complementarity. This is most evident in people with greater knowledge of the country. T1, from a migrant family, has a complex image of Spain but does not hesitate to say that Almodóvar "shows the passionate side of Spain." T7, a Spanish teacher, mentions that "with Almodóvar, I discovered a less stereotypical Spain," but also describes the country as passionate. T8 can identify certain clichés in the films but believes that Spain has a unique level of "natural madness".

In other cases, such as T5, with limited familiarity and a high degree of involvement, there are no contradictions:

Spain has a very unique vibration. [...] There's a very defined telluric vibration that I feel as very particular. Yes, yes, the image portrayed in Almodóvar's films fits well with the image I have of Spain. [...] The energy that emanates from Spanish territory is so strong that it permeates the people, the inhabitants, and these are forces that can be violent. [...] Almodóvar, in his films, explains this connection between the land, the possession of forces, and the drive on the Spanish.

5.4. Symbolic Associations

It doesn't seem that Almodóvar's cinema has the ability to connote specific places/attractions with a new meaning, in the line of romantic associations with the covered bridges of Winterset (Iowa, United States) from "The Bridges of Madison County" (Eastwood, 1995) or the feminist connotations of Arches National Park (Utah, United States) in "Thelma & Louise" (Scott, 1991) as pointed out by Riley et al. (1998). In these cases, the associations arise from the text itself. In fact, it's the overall image of Spain that is associated with symbolic meanings. Many of the testimonies state that their image of the country, which aligns with what Almodóvar projects, is defined by a mix of modernity in mentalities – romantic relationships, women's empowerment, freedom, tolerance, etc. – and tradition. This is due to the representation and narrative regarding modernity, but in the case of tradition, it's also influenced by pre-existing meanings derived from stereotypes that the films themselves utilize.

6. Conclusions

This study has analyzed the effect of Pedro Almodóvar's cinema on the perceived image of Spain among the French audience. To do this, 20 in-depth interviews were conducted. All the testimonies have visited Spain, and many of them have a high or very high cultural familiarity with the country. Numerous studies have addressed the image of the country projected by his films and its relationship with Spanish culture. However, as far as the authors know, the effect of this on the audience has not been analyzed, especially considering the involvement of the viewers in his films. Hence, the relevance of this study.

It's a common practice in tourism research to consider the perceived image of places (destinations and attractions) essential in motivations and visit intentions, as well as in conditioning tourist experiences and contributing to destination loyalty. The image of Spain generated by Almodóvar's films has motivated seven testimonies to visit the country. The fact that the majority state that they will visit or revisit the locations of his films in the future indicates that this image also contributes to visit intentions and destination loyalty.

The main contribution of this research lies in deepening the understanding of the consequences for the effect of audiovisual fiction on the image of destinations for the diversity of audiences – in this case, depending on their degree of cultural familiarity – and their involvement in audiovisual fiction. The results show that there is an inevitable link between representation, audience type, reception, and the effect on the image. The high degree of alignment between the image projected by Almodóvar's cinema and that perceived by viewers is related to their involvement with the films and their familiarity with the country.

The effect on the image of Spain is more noticeable when familiarity is lower. But in these cases, it is also more easily counteracted if it contradicts other sources of image, such as previous tourist experiences or verbal communication. When familiarity and the degree of involvement are high, the image that emerges from the experience of different visits or information from other media synchronizes with that generated by the films; it is also less susceptible to the stereotypes that Almodóvar's films employ.

Almodóvar's cinema does not create symbolic associations with specific places represented. However, it has managed to associate Spain with modernity while maintaining a link with tradition. The weight of his films in the former association is decisive and is inevitably related to the themes and how they are treated in his films. Some testimonies compare the effect of his cinema with that of Luis Buñuel and Carlos Saura, equally renowned Spanish directors in France who project a darker image of the country. However, regarding the traditional image, it coexists with the effect of the films with previous perceptions, many of which are stereotypical. In fact, many testimonies state that, thanks to Almodóvar's films, their perception of Spain as a traditional country has been enriched with a more modern image.

From the discussion and conclusions of this study (and its limitations), future research directions can be derived. Firstly, more studies are needed to theoretically develop the concept of familiarity, its relationship with destination image, and the effect of audiovisual fiction on it, as well as to identify the different sources of familiarity: previous experiences, word of mouth, media, the audiovisual fiction itself, etc. Three levels of familiarity have been established here based on the testimonies' origin, education, and profession, and their importance is demonstrated. However, previous research that has used the familiarity variable has reached very contradictory conclusions.

Secondly, it is important to analyze the interaction between audiovisual fiction and other sources of image generation, such as word of mouth, destination experience, or other media content. As demonstrated, under certain circumstances, the image generated by Almodóvar's cinema can imbue pleasantly nostalgic memories of previous negative experiences, contribute to the selection of information consistent with it, but can also be contradicted by word of mouth.

Thirdly, the results of this research should be contrasted with the study of reception and the effects on the image of destinations by other directors considered auteurs, as long as their films frequently rely on cultural particularities of the places they are set in. This could be the case with films by Zhang Yimou or Woody Allen's films set in New York.

Finally, this work has focused on the effect of auteur cinema on the holistic image of Spain, given its tourism implications. A coherent development of this research could be the analysis of the effect of Almodóvar's films on specific attributes that make up the image of Spain as a destination, as well as on tourist motivations and experiences. Regarding the latter, some testimonies (T1, T2, or T10) show that they gave more meaning to their visits to Spain by drawing parallels with Almodóvar's films.

7. References

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