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Colourism in Commercial and Governmental Advertising in Mexico: 'International Latino', Racism and Ethics

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By employing a mixed methodology, in-depth interviews with different professionals involved in the development and implementation of advertising projects and a quantitative study (n = 500) of casting requests, in this article the expressions of colourist racism in commercial and governmental advertising in Mexico are analysed.

The present study is based on two main axes of analysis: (1) the frequency with which people with certain physiognomic traits are requested for advertising campaigns in Mexico; (2) the underlying logic that is implied in the selection of actors and models, depending on the nature and the contents of the campaigns.

It is concluded that this selection process is based on explicit colourist discrimination, one of the expressions of racism that is socio-historically linked to the construction of Mexican society and the nation. In this selection there exists a steady tendency to exclude people with 'indigenous' traits from commercial advertising, as well as people with dark skin tones, who are usually requested for governmental ads. However, the same trend also exists in commercial publicity in respect to people with stereotypical 'European' or 'Caucasian' traits, leaving 'international Latino' as the most requested profile and an ambiguous category that is far away from representing the bio-cultural diversity of the Mexican population.

These observed tendencies raise many ethical issues about symbolic and structural (re)production of *colourism* within Mexican society. Therefore, the social and ethical responsibility of advertising is also discussed with publicists and casting directors.

Introduction: why study racism in the mass media?

It could hardly be doubted that the contents of the mass media are one of the main areas where different stereotypes are (re)produced and massified. Children and adults learn them, which subsequently influences how people perceive and relate to each another. Consequently, the contents of the media are a symbolic space of informal learning. The media participates in the construction of collective imaginaries where people recognize themselves and which represent what they have a 'right to be', expect and desire (Durin and Vasquez, 2013: 21).

The society is symbolically nurtured with these imaginaries, 'learns' from them and reproduces them. These mental images are integrated into socio-cultural fields of action where an idea becomes an act, because we act based on our beliefs. In other words, our social practices are based on them and the imaginary, as a system of meanings and representations, guide the life of a society (Castoriadis, 1984).

On the individual-subjective level, the (re)production of certain social imaginaries in the media can be highly harmful. People that belong to social groups that are stereotyped as socially and/or economically disadvantaged tend to underestimate their abilities; something that often worsens in situations when they are reminded, through the media, about a distinctive feature of their group that places them at a disadvantage (Campos Vázquez and Medina Curtain, 2018). On the collective level, the (re)production of discriminatory and racist stereotypes in the media promotes their legitimacy, forming part of the ideological dimension of structural racism and exclusion, which later translates into concrete actions of inclusion and exclusion (Iturriaga, 2016: 49–55; 249–250).

In the present investigation, the analysis of racism is prioritised in a very particular media product which is the advertising. Due to its main function – to increase the consumption of the advertised product – ads can be considered as one of the main arenas for the construction and objectification of desire. Therefore, they simultaneously function as one of the principal instruments of the legitimation of stereotypes and the normalisation of exclusion. In addition to the message of the 'client', ads communicate a wide range of other messages, indirect and subliminal, that may have an even more profound effect on the public than the 'original' or planned message (Jones, 2014). One of those subliminal messages is the (re)presentation of the 'potential consumer' of the product that appears in the advertisement. The physical aspects of persons appearing in the ads could be interpreted as a visual imposition of an imaginary of corporeal aspects of a population, that participates in defining of what should be *preferred* or symbolically *despised*, what should be considered as *beautiful* or *ugly*. The imposition of this imaginary can later result in discriminatory attitudes and practices based on the physical appearance of the person.

Considering the importance of these subliminal aspects, it should be noted that in Mexico there is a certain lack of studies focused on the subject of racism in advertising, although it is a virtually omnipresent media product in everyday lives. The main spokesmen in this field have usually expressed themselves in journalistic notes and opinion blogs that, in spite of the fact that they talk about an issue of crucial importance for successful social cohesion, lack analytical depth when it comes to distinguishing the causes and effects of discriminatory representations in the mass media, based on certain 'phenotypes' that are defined by producers of media content and linked with different physical characteristics or parameters. The few existing studies on the subject (Jones, 2019; Sebrango et al., 2012), using semiotic analysis of advertisements, indicate that in Mexican advertising there is an explicit tendency to use actors and models with 'white' skin tones, while people with darker skin tones are assigned to roles that are associated with lower social classes and/or poverty. In addition, there is no representation of persons associated with African descent, although in Mexico there exists an Afro-Mexican population. Thus, there are two general questions in this research: to what extent are the visual advertising projects for Mexico based on colourist racism? And why do these types of corporeal representations, that might promote racism within Mexican society, prevail in Mexico's advertising?

The methodological basis of the present study consists of two complementary strategies: quantitative and qualitative. For the quantitative part, which corresponds to the first question, were quantified and analysed 500 casting requests over a period of one year. Casting

requests are text documents (sometimes with visual references) – elaborated between the client, the advertising agency and the production house – that indicate all the relevant details of the advertising project for which the casting is made. This includes the name of the product, dates of the casting and the filming ('shooting'), the types of media where the ad is going to be exposed, the region and the period of time of its exposure, the salary ('budget') that potentially hired actors and actresses are going to receive and the 'profile breakdowns' where sex, age and the phenotypes that are required for the campaign in question are described. The talent agency (or the booker) receives these casting requests and sends them (by e-mail or phone message) to its represented actors, actresses and models, meanwhile, based on this information, they decide whether to attend the audition. For the goals of the present research, from all of this information the most significant items are the 'profile breakdowns' where the stipulated skin tone, the colour of the eyes and the hair are indicated with the purpose to physically define the type of people that are welcomed to the audition. These three phenotypical parameters were quantified in relation to the type of the advertising (commercial or governmental) and the region of its exposure (Mexico or other countries). Thereby it was possible to describe the frequency with which people with certain physiognomic traits (skin tones, eye and hair colour) are requested for advertising campaigns in Mexico.

The qualitative part, which corresponds to the second question of this study, consists of ten individual in-depth interviews with different professionals involved in the realisation of advertising projects. During 2018 in Mexico City were interviewed three actors, two actresses, three castings directors, a director of commercials and a creative director of an advertising agency. The selection of these professionals was based on the 'snowball' method (a key informant suggests other key informants) and so designed to gather testimonies from different experiences and roles in the advertising business. I also find it important to indicate that their participation in this study was voluntary and with consent for anonymous use of the recorded interviews as textual quotes in the present article. Considering the objectives of this research, the use of qualitative methodology helps to acknowledge from different points of view the underlying logic that is implied in the selection of actors, actresses and models. In other words, the reasons why people with certain physical traits are auditioned for certain advertising projects and to discuss why people with certain traits are in greater demand in Mexico's advertising business. The use of this research strategy provides an opportunity to explore the 'hidden' or underlying logic of construction of the advertising discourse, especially through the selection of actors and models that together form the human image of the final advertising product. This methodological route also allows us to establish comparative patterns of representation between commercial and governmental publicity in Mexico and the publicity campaigns made for other countries.

Colourist racism in the socio-historical context of Mexico

The traits according to which we determine if a person belongs to a specific 'race' are usually defined by superficial parts of the body (the physical appearance), while the genes that determine the characteristics used in defining 'races' do not necessarily form a set of inherited traits that always present together (Harris, 1989: 112–122). Corporeal elements such as skin tone, hair type, the size of the lips, nose, etc., can be combined and inherited independently from each other. There is an enormous physical-bodily diversity within humankind and already two decades ago it was discovered that it is attributable to only 0.1% of genetic difference in our genome. In other words, the genetic composition of our species is identical for 99.9% of genetic traits (Auton et al., 2015; Collins and Mansoura, 2001), which means that

a classification of the humankind by 'racial types' or 'races' is more than useless, it is incorrect. Although 'races' do not exist as a biological category, these exist as social categories, where it intends to 'naturalise' differences and inequalities between various human groups within asymmetrical relations of power and domination. In other words, 'races' do not have to do much with the 'phenotypic differences' or 'purity of blood' between human beings, but with the stratification of these differences perceived as 'natural' with the goal to justify a system of social inequalities between different groups.

Although it is possible to talk about racism in general, there are different types of racism that have changed throughout history. Among these, the main has been 'scientific racism' ('race' as a biological differentiation) and 'cultural racism' (cultural difference as the basis of exclusion) (Wade, 2014). However, in the present text the main focus is on a third form of racism that has been present in the Americas for centuries: colourist racism or *colourism*.

Unlike the 'classic' or 'scientific' racism, in *colourism* the category of 'race' usually is not employed to legitimise a supposedly essential difference between individuals and groups, but instead, the category of 'colour' is applied. Nevertheless, for both categories the main reference points – although these are subjective, relational and contextual – are based on superficial physical features of a person. In this sense, *colourism* could be referred to as the 'racism of the phenotype' and it is also different from 'cultural racism' (or 'racism without races'), that is based on the belief of a supposed superiority between cultures. In *colourism* light skin tones are privileged and, unlike 'scientific racism', this form of discrimination also operates within the racialised groups (Hunter, 2007; Jones, 2000). That is to say, although people are going to experience a general exclusion and discrimination as members of a racialised group ('black', 'Latino', 'Asian', etc.), yet, even within these groups, persons with lighter skin tones will receive higher privileges.

In Mexico, two general types of racialized discrimination are usually emphasized: ethnic discrimination and Afro-Mexican discrimination. While ethnic discrimination already has a long and well documented history from era of colonization to the present, the second remains 'hidden' and is due to an invisibilization of the Afro-Mexican population (Espinosa, 2014). Both forms of discrimination are related to two important moments in the socio-historical construction of the Mexican nation: the colonial period (1521–1821) and the post-revolutionary (1917-1940) nationalist project called *miscegenation* ('mestizaje', in Spanish).

To these two mentioned forms of racialized discrimination *colourism* should also be added. Both in the United States, as in Mexico, *colourism* developed from the colonial era, when under the 'white' European domain, people who imitated such *whiteness* ideologically, aesthetically and culturally, were 'rewarded' socioeconomically (Burns, 2007: 40–41; Hunter, 2007: 238–239; Wade, 2007: 371). However, the implications of *colourism* in the organization of the population were different. In the case of Mexico, one of the most common aspects addressed in anthropological studies about the colonial period is the caste 'system', or the classification of the population of the New Spain as products of the unions between persons from different geographical origins: European, African and native to the region. Unlike other caste systems and regimes for administration of population diversity, based on segregation of different population groups in order to make impossible the physical contact between these groups, the 'system' of castes in New Spain was much more flexible and did not have a rigid hierarchical form (Gonzalbo Aizpuru, 2013). Therefore, it is more appropriate to speak about a caste 'discourse' as a doctrine or a set of ideological constructs that were developed within the colonial society and used as an instrument of power and social control (Campos Rivas, 2017; Gonzalez Undurraga, 2011). Within this discourse of castes, each group acquired a certain status where 'whiter' (Spanish and *criollo* or 'American Spanish') 'mixtures' used to occupy higher echelons in the social stratification, something that later was still present

in the identity construction of the Mexican nation via *miscegenation* (Trejo and Altamirano, 2016: 3–6).

According to the ideological premise of *miscegenation*, within the Mexican population there is no racial differentiation, only cultural, because *miscegenation* proposed a national project of a single 'mixed race' ('*mestizo*', in Spanish) in opposition to the category of 'indigenous'. In terms of symbolic exclusion, the *miscegenation* project provoked the invisibilization of the Afro-Mexican population on the national stage and, to a large extent, intensified the marginalization of indigenous ethnic groups in Mexico if they did not 'convert' themselves socioculturally in *mestizos* or '**of a mixed race**' (Alonso, 2004; Saldivar, 2014). In this sense, the *miscegenation* was not only a 'biological' process based on social categorization, but also a cultural process. Sometimes it could be exclusively cultural. The idea of a biological and a cultural mixture was prioritized in the policies of the Mexican State during the 19th century, coming to a notorious climax at the beginning of the 20th century. Alexandra Stern (2003) indicates a few points in common between the *miscegenation* project in Mexico and the 'scientific racism' of that era. Such '*mestizophilia*' dominated post-revolutionary Mexican State nationalism in cultural and biopolitical terms, emphasizing the importance of a selective immigration law, giving priority to 'whites' of certain European nations who were considered as 'easily assimilated to the Mexican', and which could lead to beneficial effects 'both for the species as for the economy' (Astorga, 1989: 195–196; Yankelevich and Chenillo Alazraki, 2009). There is still a question about the consequences that this discourse of castes and the nationalist project of *miscegenation* implies for contemporary Mexican society. In actual Mexican society, *colourism* is one of the predominant expressions of racism that has been socially installed in form of a *pigmentocracy*, as a system that favours a majority *whiteness* and legitimates asymmetrical power relations in socioeconomic and political contexts, based mainly on different skin tones (Navarrete, 2016).

In recent years, the relationship between socioeconomic stratification and physical characteristics of people has attracted interest amongst researchers. A physical feature such as the colour tone of skin can be the cause of different treatment between individuals, be that positive or negative. The degree of social mobility in Mexico is structurally related to skin tone: individuals with lighter skin tones tend to have higher levels of education, move more easily from lower to higher positions within social hierarchies and are more likely to stay in the top positions (Flores and Telles, 2012; Villarreal, 2010). Consequently, the problem of colourist racism and colourist classism within the Mexican society remains a serious concern. In addition, a peculiar feature of the Mexican society is the practice of an explicit 'silenced' or naturalized racism, executed through supposedly harmless jokes and everyday expressions that are often justified by being a part of an almost folkloric tradition (Moreno Figueroa and Saldivar, 2015), which only encourages the symbolic legitimization of racist attitudes and practices.

The present investigation commences from the point that the media also actively contributes to this legitimization, being a cultural product that, by creating certain representations and social imaginaries, has an impact upon the configuration of social relations at the everyday life level. In other words, the contents of the media are cultural products at a macro or structural level that are involved in the social construction of meaning at the micro or subjective level.

In search for the ambiguous: The casting of the 'international Latino'

The quantitative part of this study is based on the analysis of casting requests and 'profile breakdowns' for visual image advertising. These casting requests are handled by the 'talent agencies' who later send them to people who work in the modelling and acting sectors, and

are represented by the agencies. The peculiarity of the 'profile breakdowns' is the fact that they contain a more less specific corporeal descriptions – usually, the skin tone, the colour of eyes and hair –, of people who are welcomed to attend the casting, in order to reduce the number of people who want to be auditioned to a specific group that meets the physical constraints of appearance.

For the goals of this research, the advertising projects in this research were divided into two different fields: (1) commercial advertising, destined for the promotion of commercial brands, and (2) governmental or political advertising, intended for the promotion of political parties and/or governmental institutions (ministries, social support programs, etc.). However, both serve the same purpose: to advertise a product, whether it is a commercial brand or a political party, with the goal to elevate consumption or preference for it. In other words, to captivate the greatest number of possible consumers and audience-voters.

For the empirical analysis in total were revised five hundred casting requests received from two 'talent agencies', within a period of one year from July 2017 until July 2018. It is important to mention that within the same casting request different profiles can be mentioned simultaneously, therefore, the sum of the percentages in several of the following figures is above 100%, because statistically speaking, they are based on multiple options.

The majority of casting requests (79%) were for advertising projects for its exhibition in Mexico (and within these, the vast majority [94%] for commercial advertising and only 6% for governmental advertising), while the fifth part (21%) of the total were for exposure in other countries, including global advertising campaigns. With this data it is possible to conclude that in the most cases, the work as an actor, actress or a model in advertising in Mexico is for 'national' projects and only sometimes for international or foreign campaigns.

The most pronounced difference between advertising projects for Mexico and the worldwide or foreign campaigns is the demand for the profile 'multiracial/international' (**Figure 1**), which means that people of virtually all profiles are welcomed. In the 'profile breakdowns' it
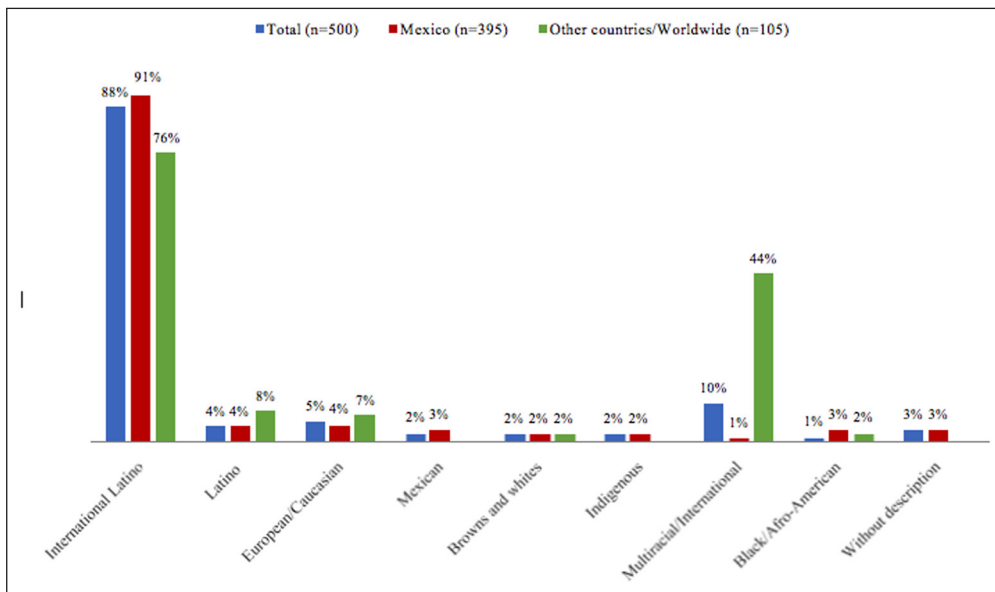
Figure 1: Requested phenotypes for advertising projects cast in Mexico.
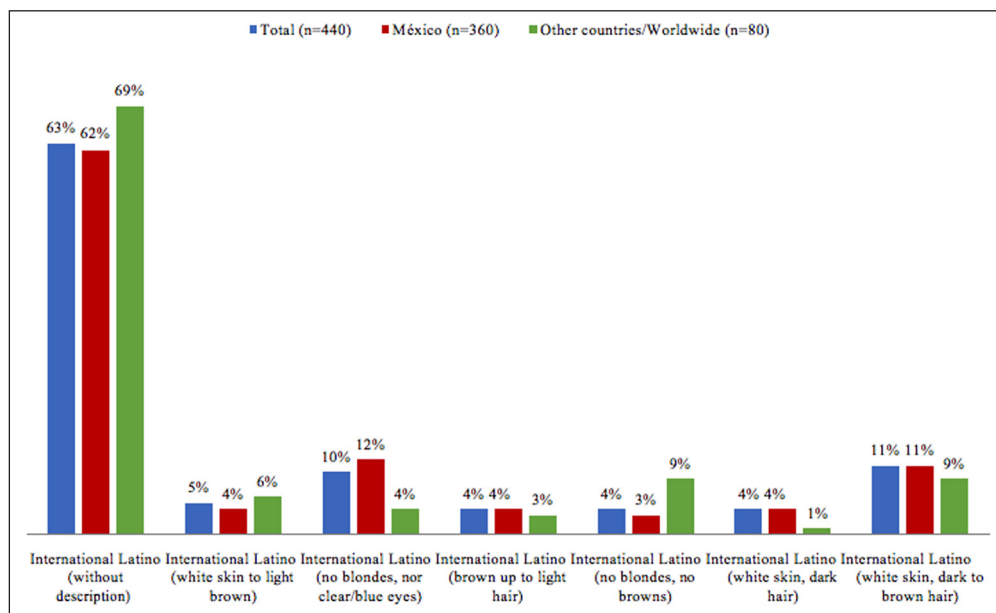Source: Own elaboration.

is explained in the following ways: 'any ethnicity, African American, Latino, oriental, white, Nordic, Caucasians, etc.', 'German, Russian, African American, Asian, Caribbean, Hindus, any ethnicity (white, Nordic, redheads, African American, oriental)'. In these descriptions an ambiguous language is employed that blends references to 'races', ethnicities and nations, in conjunction with physical characteristics of people. Therefore this example does not imply a racial taxonomy in its classical or historical expression, but rather a hybrid classification is used, based simultaneously on racialization, ethnicization and phenotyping. It also should be noted that 'multiracial' or 'international', regardless of the term, is the most inclusive category in relation to human diversity, but even so, it excludes profiles associated with the American indigenous population.

For Mexican advertising projects, only in 3% of the cases the requested phenotypes are not indicated, while almost the same percentage demand 'European/Caucasian', 'Latino' and 'Mexican' actors, as well as 'indigenous' and 'browns and whites'. In other words, all the aforementioned profiles are in the lowest demand bracket, while the most requested profile is 'international Latino', especially for national advertising projects (91%) when that is compared to projects for other countries (76%).

Usually for both national and international projects, there is no mention of the physical characteristics that 'international Latino' involves (**Figure 2**). However, in more than one-third of all the 'profile breakdowns' reviewed, descriptions appear of how 'international Latino' looks and doesn't look like.

According to these descriptions, 'international Latino' is defined in a somewhat ambiguous way, although it is simultaneously in the highest demand in the industry. Phenotypical descriptions of this profile can be divided into two categories: (1) those that are based on exclusion and (2) those that are based on inclusion. In the descriptions that correspond to the logic of exclusion, the following phenotypic parameters are mentioned: 'no white/blonde, no brown', 'no white/blonde, nor clear/blue eyes', 'no blondes, no afros, no redheads'.


Figure 2: Phenotyping of 'international Latino' in advertising cast in Mexico.
Source: Own elaboration.

Among the descriptions corresponding to the second logic, 'international Latino' is described in the following ways: 'white skin/light brown', 'white skin, dark hair' and 'white skin, dark to brown hair'. It should be emphasized that this second logic is based on a false inclusion, or rather a subtle exclusion when the required phenotypic characteristics are mentioned, instead of mentioning those that are not accepted.

The other objective that is proposed in this study is to inquire about the difference in the requested profiles between commercial and governmental advertising in Mexico. In most of the advertising projects, whether for the commercial brands or the political parties and institutions, the most requested profile continues to be the 'international Latino', however, with some differences (**Figure 3**). Political advertising, unlike commercial advertising, in some cases (25%) permits the inclusion of 'indigenous' profile or people with 'indigenous features'. However, the representation of this sector of the population, according to the descriptions in the 'profile breakdowns', is intended to be somewhat clichéd: 'indigenous women with a blouse ad hoc', 'man, indigenous type, dressed as traditional craftsman', 'has to speak Nahuatl' (a language spoken by one of the largest ethnic groups in Mexico), 'indigenous people and peasants', etc.

Also, for political advertising, unlike commercial advertising, there is a more frequent request for 'Latino' (13%) and 'Mexican' (21%) profiles, both characterized by darker or 'brown' (*'moreno'*, in Spanish) complexion, and a somewhat binary profile 'browns and
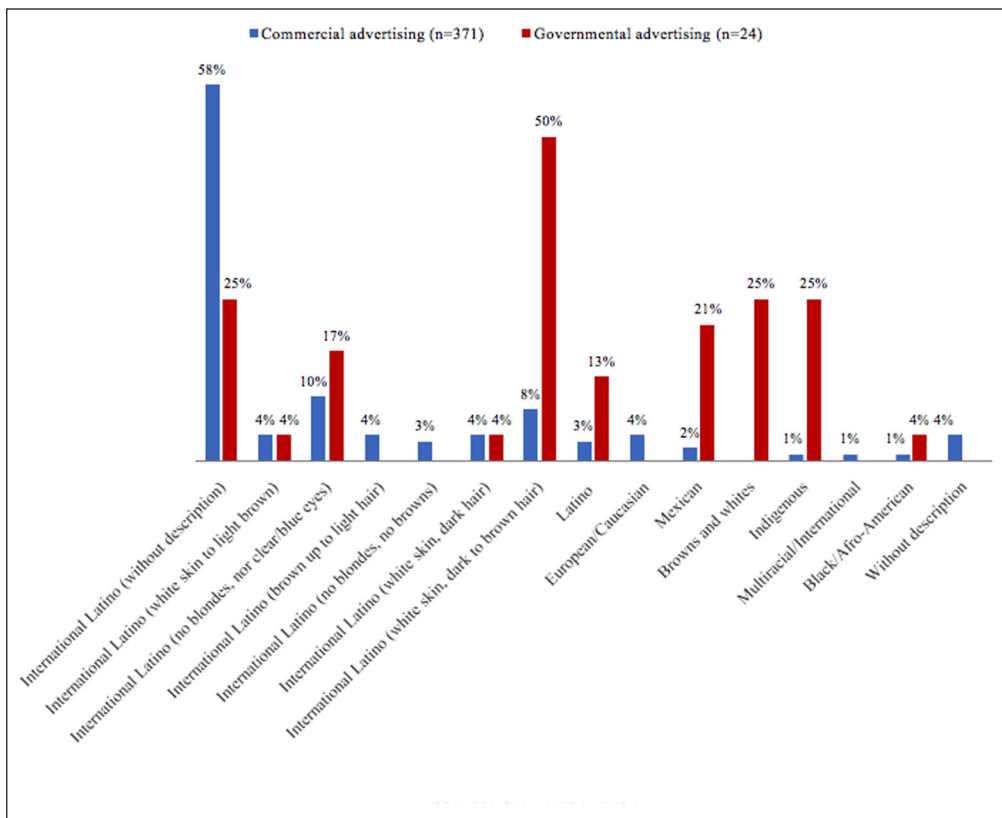
Figure 3: Requested phenotypes in advertising for Mexico.
Source: Own elaboration.

whites' (25%). This is hardly surprising if we consider that political advertising seeks greater identification with the Mexican population as its potential electorate, and thus it embraces a little bit more of the diversity of its population, although it is still extremely limited, often stereotyped and exclusionary in general terms. At the same time, it should be recalled that the projects of commercial advertising are considerably more common compared to political advertising, which says a lot about the few employment opportunities in this niche among people who are not classified as 'international Latino', which predominates in national commercial advertising almost totally.

What is 'international Latino' and why it matters?

The descriptions of the most requested profile in advertising for Mexico rotates around a dominant corporeal *whiteness* ('white,' 'light brown'), that is without reaching a too European' representation in stereotypical terms ('no blondes', 'no blue eyes'). The paradox in this case is that 'international Latino' is not only a profile that could hardly represent the diversity of the Mexican population, but also it is a quite ambiguous category (being neither too 'blonde', nor too 'brown'). At the same time, this category is sufficiently internalized within the advertising industry in Mexico, if we take into account all the 'profile breakdowns' where this profile is mentioned without a more detailed or phenotyped description, which is common. Only by the pure name 'international', it might be assumed that it is not 'national Latino', but some kind of generalized 'Latino' that possibly involves a representation of *miscegenation*, but distancing from brown skin tones and closer to stereotypical 'Iberian European'.

> *How did you find out what international Latino is?*
> It really has been after committing many errors. I have been batted from many castings and that's how I learnt to identify where my profile is. There are many castings where just international Latino is convened and that's it. And sometimes it is specified that you can't be brown or blonde, or have blue eyes, they want something like a middle point.
> **Actor, 39 years old**

> *Where does the international Latino denomination come from?*
> The first time I heard it was when I was doing a campaign in Brazil, in the early 1990s. Part of the filming was done in Argentina, but in Brazil the requirements were defined as 'we want them to be international Latino'. What is that, right? And the answer was that from Mexicans to Argentines and Brazilians can identify with it, that we are different from the rest of the world. So, the international Latino is the following: white complexion, dark hair. Someone that can be from any Latin American nationality.
> *And why there is so much demand for the international Latino profile in Mexico?*
> I think it is a way to represent the whole population. I think it should be that. I think it is a democratic position of having a bit of everything.
> **Creative director of an advertising agency, 55 years old**

In these testimonies it is mentioned that 'international Latino' is a category invented by the advertising industries marketing, which is later apprehended in practical terms by trial-and-error. In the case of actors, it is even more pronounced: they have had to learn what type of phenotypic restrictions this profile involves by asking and/or being rejected at the castings. At the same time, it is a denomination that has existed in the Latin American advertising industry for more than 25 years and is based on a generalization of the phenotyped imaginary

of a Latin American person ('from Mexicans to Argentines and Brazilians can identify with it'). According to this imaginary, the person with whom Latin Americans should identify themselves is of a 'white complexion' and 'dark hair'. Leaving aside the topic of phenotypical generalization of the Latin American and Mexican population, and returning to the point about the colonial discourse of castes, 'white complexion, dark hair' could hardly be associated with *mestizo*, but rather with *criollo*. In other words, 'international Latino' is not only distant to the majority of the Mexican population in terms of skin tone diversity, but also represents a systematic and symbolic exclusion of *mestizo*, reinforcing the imagery of a 'Europeanized Latin Americanity', which in colonial terms would mean the representation of the dominators: people born in Mexico of a Iberian-European origin.

> *What is an international Latino?*
> It is something to be interpreted, isn't it? Because international Latino is, what do you like? Andy Garcia, Al Pacino, Robert de Niro, that would be the international Latino. It is different from Mexican Latino, browner people who are chosen for characters as a peddler, a construction worker, also for announcements of government programs, the Popular Health Insurance, and that sort of thing, right? Therefore, its [*Mexican Latino*] medium-low class people.
> **Casting director, 56 years old**

> *What is an international Latino?*
> It cost me a lot to understand what international Latino is, but as far as I understand, it refers to someone who has the characteristics of a Latino, but is not a brown Latino which would evoke the lower class. It is a Latino with light brown or white skin, dark or olive colour eyes, maximum. With hair of all tones of chestnut, as long as it is chestnut to black. And a white Mexican with black hair, but with clear or blue eyes is no longer an international Latino, but is more like a dark European.
> *And what is the Mexican Latino?*
> A brown skin person that speaks with a neutral accent, that is, not northern, nor of the coast. It is usually addressed to the common people and not to someone who is going to buy something like a 2019 model car, but to someone who is going to buy the cheapest milk. There they use Mexican Latino.
> **Actor, 34 years old**

The previous testimonies glimpse another angle of colourist racism, an angle associated with the socioeconomic stratification and its representation in phenotypical terms. One of the common phrases in Mexico to silence and/or naturalize racism is: 'it is not racism, it is classism'. However, observing that the advertising discourse reproduces the imaginary about certain skin tones in relation to purchasing power (or socioeconomic status), this expression should be 'it is not only racism, it is also classism'. People with brown and dark skin tones are usually represented as belonging to the lower classes, meanwhile as the skin tone 'lightens', the phenotypic representation 'ascends' up the socioeconomic stratification. It is not only an essential characteristic of commercial advertising in Mexico, but also a fundamental difference between commercial and governmental advertising:

> In Mexico in the 1970s, you didn't see brown skin persons in TV commercials. But then there was a very important campaign for a government program that basically had to do with a way that social assistance should be in Mexico. Those that don't have a paved road to the school. You saw a family, a village where all the people were real. And it

was the first time when you saw real people on TV, people you see every day crossing the street. I think that was the moment when that stigma that we were carrying in the publicity was broken a bit. Of course, here I am talking about governmental advertising that has always been very clever in trying to portray real people.
Creative director of an advertising agency, 55 years old

If 'international Latino' predominates in commercial advertising, in governmental advertising, especially of social support programs, 'Mexican Latino' is taken into account, associated with lower strata and dark skin tones, as well as the 'indigenous' profile. Also, it is within political advertising that 'real people' are often portrayed whom 'you see every day crossing the street.' So 'international Latino' is really quite distant from the Mexican population in its daily life. Perhaps, therefore, in the casting requests you see suddenly appear phrases like 'aspirational people' or 'aspirational class', making a symbolic reference to something that one is not, but would or should want to be.

> I wouldn't even dream of being in a commercial of 'Liverpool' [*a chain of mid-to-high end department stores in Mexico*] because the message is aspirational and they play with the unconscious of people. That is, if I put on that shirt and that belt, those pants and those shoes of that shop, then I'm going to look more like that green-eyed Argentinian. Even if I'm not! So, I'm not going to announce it, it's going to be announced by the green-eyed Argentinian. The target is me, but the target for certain brands cannot advertise to the target. And I think that formula has worked since the 1970s and no one is going to risk doing it differently.
> **Actor, 34 years old**

> *Do people in Mexico feel identified with these international Latinos?*
> I don't think they feel identified, definitely. It's nothing but bombing us with that aspirational stuff. Like, if I buy those jeans, I'm going to look like the girl in the commercial. If I buy that car, I'm going to go to those amazing places, right? Although I never will. I mean, they're just marketing strategies.'
> **Actress, 30 years old**

This symbolic 'aspiration' or the 'scenario of the *desire*' – both in terms of social class and skin tone – is clearly based on a certain definition of the *beautiful* and the *ugly*, where the *beautiful* and the *desired* in corporeal terms is oriented towards a dominant *whiteness*, which is also the definition of colourist racism. Thus, the majority of the diverse Mexican population are symbolically excluded from this imaginary and therefore finds itself in a disadvantageous position. It can also be concluded that 'international Latino', in addition to being the profile of the highest demand in advertising for Mexico, is a representation of an imaginary that indirectly fosters the ideological dimension of racism and exclusion in Mexico, which potentially can nourish concrete behaviours of inclusion-exclusion.

'In respect of discrimination and racism, there is a general one'
Whilst the two general questions of this study (whether and how advertising in Mexico is one of the media products that indirectly promotes racism) have been answered, I would now like to focus on the opinions and experiences by the people who participated in this research. Most participants of this study considered the area of advertising in Mexico as racist, which means that they are forced to work or seek employment in a field that involves various

limitations not associated with the person's talent, but with their superficial physical aspects, particularly, *colourist* aspects.

> *Do you think the advertising realm is racist?*
> I think so. Look, I recently made a casting for a beer campaign and so they wanted good actors. I presented them a guy who is just the international Latino, dark brown hair, lighter than mine, then a whiter guy, a bit shorter. But I proposed to them several actors, very, very good actors, really, good. And they did not choose a single brown one.
> **Casting director, 56 years old**

> *Is the advertising field discriminatory in relation skin tones?*
> In respect of discrimination and racism, there is a general one. For example, for me it's racism that they don't accept browns in certain commercials, although it's also racism when they just want browns and reject light-skinned blondes. So, it's a general racism, really.
> **Actor, 39 years old**

The *colourism* in advertising in Mexico is somewhat peculiar: on the one hand, the rejection of the dark toned persons is very apparent, while on the other, the inclination towards *whiteness* also has its limits. It is the skin tone, while other phenotypic categories that are employed in *colourism*, such as eye and hair colour, cannot be too 'light' or risk being associated with the stereotypical imaginary of European as something foreign to Mexican population. These previous testimonies show a certain awareness of racism in the advertising in Mexico, meanwhile in the last quote there is almost a certain naturalization of it ('its a general racism'). From there the next question arises: how normalized is this situation at the individual-subjective level?

> *How important is the skin tone in advertising?*
> For the products here in Mexico, it's fucking impossible to get chosen. For napkins, for diapers, for sugar, well, those are such a basic thing, right? For insurance, cars, banks, right? I have done commercials for banks in the United States, for foreign airlines, 'Lufthansa', world brands, 'Volkswagen' for Germany. The truth is that I don't even go to castings for Mexican brands anymore. Well, you just learn from that feeling when they tell you: 'No!'
> **Actress, 30 years old**

Apparently, actors and actresses are those who have to experience colourist racism in the media in an explicitly significant way, as long as they are not classified as 'international Latinos'. Their job opportunities and income by exercising their profession are at risk and these people, even if they are Mexican, are limited to attend castings that are not meant for Mexico. In this sense, it is worth remembering that the advertising projects for foreign countries form just one fifth of all casting calls, while the majority of advertising projects are precisely for their exhibition in Mexico.

'If there's racism, it's out there', or what about the ethics?
This analysis demonstrates in a very apparent manner that the selection of actors and models for advertising projects in Mexico is based explicitly on phenotyping. In the case of advertising targeted for Mexico, this phenotyping is much narrower, generally prioritizing people with 'white' skin tones, dark brown hair and dark eyes, denominated as 'international Latino'.

The causes of this '*international Latino'-centrism* can be explained by linking it sociohistorically with the colonial era and, particularly, with the colonial domination executed by the Iberian-European population in Mexico, which also might be the case in other post-colonial Latin American societies.

   In the next step of this research, agents involved in advertising were asked about the reasons for the exclusion of people who do not fit into this profile and the moral responsibility that these agents should assume in this process.

> *Should the intellectual authors of advertising projects have some kind of moral or ethical responsibility?*
> I don't know if those authors, who are generally young graduates of universities and not only of private universities, have that responsibility. Look, they are employees of a large company, those large advertising agencies. And honestly, I don't think they are interested in rescuing those values that you mention. What they want is to place the product and sell it. What they want is that the client earns money so they can earn money. Also, the owner of the brand has the right to choose who will appear in the commercial, right? So, the values of inclusion of gender or race, whatever you want, I think that is not an issue for them.
> **Casting director, 56 years old**

The people who appear in the commercials is a result of a decision, a decision whose main purpose is to present the product with the aim to increase its consumption. It is also a decision about the direction towards a certain 'target market'. 'International Latino' could not be considered as a profile that represents the diversity of Mexicans because technically it should be the 'multiracial', 'multiethnic' or 'international' profile, commonly used in 'profile breakdowns' for advertising projects for the United States, Canada and worldwide campaigns. It should be stressed that Mexico's is a highly diverse population, and that is something that also should be reflected in advertising, so that a greater number of 'sectors' could identify themselves with its visual contents. However, 'the owner of the brand has the right to choose who will appear in the commercial'. Therefore, I would like to return to the question: why does such a 'international Latino' reductionism prevail?

> *But why there is such an obsession with the white skin?*
> Look, I don't think that … well, at the population level, maybe we should go back to the conquest, and I think there are better voices than mine to speak about it. I do not feel that obsession with white skin in advertising. We do not think of it that way, what you are looking for is to transmit a commercial idea. But yes, as you know, it is an issue that is not resolved in Mexican society and what advertising is most afraid of, is rejection. Everything is tested and proven, so if you suddenly see certain type of people in the ads, it is because the people, the public to whom it was addressed, liked it that way. In many group sessions I hear that 'no, this girl should be prettier', and I am like 'what do you mean by prettier?'. 'No, well, taller, slimmer', whatever. People tell you what they want. Everything is tested. With these data I design the campaign and return it to society. This is how advertising is done.
> *What I mean is that in commercials there is a systematic tendency to exclude the diversity of the Mexican population …*
> I insist! Advertising is not responsible, advertising is not generating it, advertising portrays the reality that will better empathize with people. What the publicity does is to take into account the consumer research. That is the context where I am going

to try to insert the product or a cause. Ask the society! Question the society! It is not advertising! I think your approach is wrong. If there's racism, it's out there.
Creative director of an advertising agency, 55 years old

Here I would like to emphasize two points: (1) the issue that 'is not resolved in Mexican society' and (2) the point, 'it's not the advertising, it's the society'. It is clear from the above testimony that some aspects of the design of an advertising project are derived from 'focus groups' consisting of potential consumers and/or marketing studies on potential consumers. This is done with the goal of ensuring that the advertising product results in a sympathetic response, because rejection is 'what advertising is most afraid of'. The present situation describes a vicious circle: advertising in Mexico is based on colourist racism ('an unresolved issue in Mexican society') because that's how the society is to which the advertising is directed to; and meanwhile there aren't going to be changes in the society, nor there are going to be in the advertising contents because they 'adjust' to the desires of the society ('empathize with people').

Subsequently, by reflecting these desires and preferences, advertising reinforces or (re)produces them, which later functions as a source of symbolic learning about what should be *preferred* and what should be *despised*. Thus, promoting a future (re)production of *colourism*, from which the advertising will nourish again and, consequently, portray in its contents.

Conclusions and discussion

The main objectives of this study were to describe and analyse the frequency with which people with certain physiognomic traits are requested for visual advertising campaigns in and for Mexico, as well as to analyse the underlying logics of the selection of actors, actresses and models for advertising projects, with the goal of inquiring whether advertising in Mexico is one of the symbolic spaces that (re)produce colourist racism or *colourism* in the Mexican society.

Colourism is a form of discrimination that is not exactly built upon a supposed existence of different 'races' with different 'biological structures' that can be stratified according to the ideological intentions of domination. *Colourism* is a form of discrimination that emerges from this type of racism, substituting the category of 'race' for the 'phenotype'. Therefore, it could also be called 'phenotypic discrimination' where people are 'valued' according to the colour of certain physical aspects like skin tone, the colour of eyes, hair, etc. The underlying logic implied in the selection of people for the Mexican commercials is based on this type of racism, forming part of a structural colourist racism and classism in Mexican society.

The profile with the highest demand in advertising for Mexico is 'international Latino', whose phenotypic description is far from the corporal features of the majority of the population of Mexico. It is usually characterized as 'white skin' and 'dark' or 'brown' hair, while the skin tones of the majority of the Mexican population are much more diverse. The 'international Latino' profile is based on exclusion of the dark skin tones and blondes (*'güero'*, in Spanish) which in some casting requests appears literally as 'international Latino, no blondes, no browns'. Relating this patron of selection of actors and models to the colonial caste discourse, 'international Latino' is something far from the *mestizo* ('mixed race'), and at the same time, far from the stereotypical Nordic European ('no blondes'). Therefore, it could be interpreted as a contemporary representation of the *creole* caste or the people already born in Mexico of Iberian-European origin (American Spanish) that in colonial times occupied the upper echelons of the social hierarchy. In this sense, the advertising projects for Mexico could be interpreted as a symbolic continuation of the colonial discourse of Iberian-European domination that installed colourist racism within Mexican society in the form of *pigmentocracy*, or a structural system that favours a majority *whiteness* and legitimates asymmetrical power relations in the socio-economical and political context, mainly based on different skin tones and ancestry.

Exclusion of the Afro-descendant profiles is also notorious: together with the 'blondes' profile (with the exception of some brands that require high purchasing power), it is associated with the foreign or something that cannot representative the population of Mexico, despite the fact that the Mexican population is extremely diverse. Consequently, advertising projects in Mexico also act as a symbolic instrument of invisibilization of its Afro-Mexican population and the diversity of Mexican society in general.

In advertising for Mexico, the intersection between classism and *colourism* can also be observed, something that has historically existed in Mexican society since the colonial era. 'International Latino' in this intersection is associated with the upper-middle socioeconomic strata, while 'Mexican Latino' (brown skin tones) with the lower-middle and lower class. This is one of the fundamental differences in phenotypic representation between commercial and governmental advertising. If people with an 'international Latino' profile are systematically casted for commercial advertising, in governmental advertising and especially for welfare programs, there is some demand for the 'Mexican Latino' profile and it is the only advertising format where sometimes people with 'indigenous traits' will be welcomed even though, represented in a highly folklorized way and associated with rurality and extreme poverty. Thus, advertising in Mexico (re)produces a gamut of imagery where skin tones are associated with the person's position within the socioeconomic stratification. These stereotypical representations can be considered harmful to the society because they reinforce the ideological dimension of exclusion by symbolically legitimizing and naturalizing it. At the subjective individual level, this can translate into concrete practices of exclusion and prejudice.

Considering the diversity of the Mexican population, it would be necessary to critically assess the possible consequences of *'international Latino'-centrism*, both within the casting requests and the final advertisement products. If in the case of commercial advertising it is a moral responsibility not to (re)produce exclusionary imaginaries that are potentially harmful for a successful cohesion of Mexican society, in the case of political advertising it should be a legal responsibility.

The fact that the advertising discourse in Mexico is based on colourist racism and classism, brings us to the question who is going to impulse a change. According to advertisers, the change in advertising is going to happen after a change in society, because advertising nourishes from society and 'reflects' its desires with the intention of increasing the sales of the advertised product. This intentionally passive positioning should be critically questioned. The advertising industry is not external to society, but is a media product that impacts it through building and projecting imaginaries, that is, *per se* has an active role. However, as with other social struggles for humanistic causes, a change usually begins 'from below'. Therefore, the first step towards an ethical and antiracist change in advertising in Mexico is to highlight the expressions of colourist racism in order to generate a critical awareness on the part of the population and the advertisers. This would lead to the second step: a gradual shift towards more inclusive advertising for different profiles, similar to the campaigns undertaken in other demographically and culturally diverse countries.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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