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Exploring Barcelona's portrayal in promotional videos and fiction films

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the projected image of Barcelona using a combination of qualitative visual content analysis and frequency data. The study focuses on 48 promotional videos released by the destination management organization, Turisme de Barcelona, and ten fiction films. The results suggest that the projected image has been stagnating, primarily in the promotional videos, where the image draws on connotations of Mediterranean and Catalan identity. The fiction films rarely deviate from the image presented in the promotional videos, limiting their potential to diversify Barcelona's image and encourage visits to less popular yet equally representative parts of this tourist-crowded city. However, one of the distinctive contributions of films is their early emphasis on portraying Barcelona as a professional city.

1. Introduction

The city of Barcelona is one of Europe's and the world's leading tourist destinations, with tourism contributing approximately 13.9 % of its GDP in 2023 (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2024). In 2010 and 2017, the Barcelona Tourism Strategic Plan warned that the city faced the risk of "dying of success" and called for marketing strategies to diversify, the projected image —understood as a place's concepts and perceptions that people can take into consideration— beyond its *clichés* (see, for example, Bramwell & Rawding, 1996; Wang et al., 2023). Media, in its different forms, can play a critical role in the construction and circulation of the image of a place. This paper focuses on two specific types, namely social media, which has been increasingly used by destination promoters (Avila-Robinson & Wakabayashi, 2018; Zhou et al., 2024) and fiction films, whose content has been incorporated in destination promoter's marketing strategies (e.g., the case of *The Lord of the Rings*, in New Zealand, Croy, 2010).

In the context of Barcelona, previous research has examined the projected image of the city as a tourist destination through the analysis of promotional content on social media (Fondevila Gascón et al., 2016; Paquin & Schwitzguébel, 2022). Scholars have also analyzed the representation of Barcelona in fiction films (Nieto-Ferrando et al., 2023; Osácar, 2016). Yet, a notable asymmetry exists in academic literature, with more emphasis placed on the perceived image of a place than on the projected image (cf. Picazo & Moreno-Gil, 2019; Wang et al., 2023). There is also limited understanding of how the images circulated in promotional videos and fiction films reiterate, complement, or contradict each other.

This article aims to address this gap by comparing promotional videos released on YouTube with fiction films. The research question guiding this empirical study is: *How is Barcelona portrayed in promotional videos and in fiction movies released in the period 2014–2023?* This will be explored through qualitative visual content analysis supported by frequency data of 48 promotional videos released by Turisme de Barcelona on its YouTube channel and ten fiction films set in Barcelona. The rationale of this study is based on three key considerations. First, contradictory images in promotional videos and fictional films can generate confusion for visitors, potentially diminishing promotional opportunities for the location (Beeton, 2004, p. 125). Second, although the tourism and audiovisual industries increasingly converge (Reijnders, 2021), and has blurred the lines between promotional videos and fictional films (cf. Shani et al., 2010), their core aims remain distinct: promotional videos are primarily designed to persuade, while fictional films aim to entertain. These differing priorities can lead to inconsistencies between agendas and projected images each medium conveys. Third, films have the potential to expand a location's

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destination image and help redistribute tourism flows to lesser-known areas (Imbert-Bouchard Ribera & Radolfi, 2023; Nieto-Ferrando et al., 2021).

The study draws on Gartner (1993) image formation process theory, valuable for understanding how projected images are constructed (see, for example, Beerli & Martin, 2004; Croy, 2010; Liu et al., 2024; Stylidis, 2022). According to Gartner (1993), a projected image results from the complex interaction of induced images created or influenced by local authorities, such as destination management organizations; autonomous sources, such as popular culture texts like films over which destination promoters have little to no control; and organic images formed, for example, through descriptions from previous visitors. The paper also considers the application of the agenda setting theory (cf. McCombs, 2014) in the exploration of the projected image of tourism destinations. While originally developed within media studies, the theory's core premise –that the more media attention a subject receives, the more importance audiences assign to it– can be transposed to the study of tourism imaginaries. Thus, it can be argued that the greater the media attention a location receives, the more significance audiences and visitors are likely to attribute to it. In this vein, Nieto-Ferrando et al. (2024) identified three agendas: the agenda proposed by tourism management institutions, the media agenda, and the agenda of audiences/tourists, to which we will refer.

2. Literature review

2.1. Image formation of place: the role of promotional videos and fiction films

Understanding how a place is represented in promotional videos and films is of utmost importance due to the effects that these texts have on the image formation of a place and, thus, on how people think about and experience them. The projected image has been broadly understood as "the ideas and impressions of a place that are available for people's consideration," which may be consciously or unconsciously created (Gunn 1972 in Bramwell & Rawding, 1996, p. 202; see, also, Marine-Roig & Ferrer-Rosell, 2018; Picazo & Moreno-Gil, 2019). Messages deliberately emitted by institutional stakeholders as part of their agendas (Nieto-Ferrando et al., 2024) have received the name of induced images (Gartner, 1993; see, also, Wang et al., 2023).

Environmental agencies, civic groups and local governments are among the different actors involved in the task of creating a (favorable) image of a place (Morgan & Pritchard, 2000). In today's highly competitive tourism market, many destinations aim to differentiate themselves from their competitors by highlighting their uniqueness. Common mechanisms for building a place's image include the creation of "singular and iconic" representations where the place's familiar attributes (Zhou et al., 2024) and "ideal features" are highlighted (Hunter, 2012, p. 422), and "dominant tourism features" (Litvin & Mouri, 2009, p. 153) are included.

Often, a place is represented using synecdochical mechanisms that intentionally reduce a place's complexity to very specific signifiers (e.g., a building) that stand for the whole place (Hunter, 2012; Smith, 2005). These signifiers are often part of a place's "comfortable heritage," i.e., selected elements of cultural heritage that legitimize the image the institutions aim to circulate (Reventós, 2007, p. 291). The architecture's mediatized power and the symbolic power of culture (Reventós, 2007, p. 290) makes these elements important pillars of a place's image.

In this vein, Rybczynski (2015) reflects on the formula of "eye-popping architecture + cultural attractions = more tourists" adopted by many cities to critique the architectural fatigue that this strategy can provoke in visitors. However, considering urban tourists' interest in seeking out mundane experiences in everyday spaces –referred to as new urban tourism (Dirksmeier & Helbrecht, 2015)– it would be fair to hypothesize that destination management organizations would want to look beyond the iconic representation of a place. This could be a particularly useful strategy in the case of places that have been dealing with important over-capacity tourism development, such as Barcelona (Palou, 2009). Yet, a study analyzing promotional videos from 2014 to 2019 by Turisme de Barcelona found that the city continues to be officially portrayed through familiar recurring symbols, such as Casa Batlló and the Sagrada Família (Paquin & Schwitzguébel, 2022, p. 257).

Induced images are just one of the multiple elements that affect the image formation of a place. As previous scholarship has demonstrated, fictional films play a crucial role in the image formation and marketing strategies of a place (Croy, 2010; Giraldi & Cesareo, 2017; Kim & Richardson, 2003; Riley & Van-Doren, 1992). For example, the Comisión de Promoción del Perú para la Exportación y el Turismo launched a dedicated website highlighting destinations featured in the film *Paddington in Peru* (2024) to promote the country's cultural and natural attractions. In some cases, the impact of films leads to renaming of places. For instance, the Italian town "Porto Empedocle" (Sicily) changed its name (also on traffic signs) to "Porto Empedocle (Vigata)" referencing the fictional town in *Inspector Montalbano* novels and TV series (Asero & Ponton, 2021).

Fiction films have been also considered to enjoy high levels of "credibility and reliability" among visitors (Giraldi & Cesareo, 2017, p. 108). A study conducted by Govers et al. (2007) on seven international destinations (e.g., Wales, Canary Islands) concluded that films are more popular information sources with travelers than advertising. A survey conducted in 2023 with 20.000 respondents from 14 different countries for the group travel technology company Expedia (2024) reported that in 2023 movies and TV shows were "the top sources of travel inspiration", above social media. Previous research has demonstrated how films affect people's perceptions of the place represented (Correia-Loureiro & Barbosa-De-Araujo, 2015; Giraldi & Cesareo, 2017), their intentions to visit (Hudson et al., 2011; Nanjangud & Reijnders, 2022), and the growth of tourist numbers at the filming locations (Beeton, 2016; Busby & Klug, 2001; Riley et al., 1998, Tooke & Baker, 1996)

The collaborations between local institutional stakeholders and filmmakers to use films as means of "raising the profile" of a place (Morgan & Pritchard, 2000) challenges the idea that films are autonomous information sources. Thus, we argue that none of the eight agents of image formation identified by Gartner (1993)[1] accurately reflects the current convergence of the tourism and audiovisual industries (Reijnders, 2021; Tzanelli, 2004), neither recognizes the existing interactions between the agenda of tourism management institutions and media agenda (cf. Nieto-Ferrando et al., 2024), nor the public awareness of this reciprocal strategic collaboration (Castro, 2022).

Therefore, the term *pseudo-autonomous images* is introduced in an attempt to explicitly acknowledge that, far from being autonomous agents, the production of a film can also be shaped by the interests and decisions made by different institutional local stakeholders. For example, film portrayals of a place are shaped by the decisions made by institutions in charge of attracting film productions (e.g. Film Commissions) and, also, by the private and public institutions in charge of granting filming permits. The concept of pseudo-autonomous images also claims film viewers' awareness of the interests that destination promoters have in working with the film industry. The presence of local institution' logos in films credits is a clear signifier of such collaboration and, thus, of the interactions between the agenda of destination management organizations and the film industry. To contextualize the insights of our analysis, the next section presents an overview of the induced and pseudo-autonomous images of Barcelona as presented in promotional videos and fiction films, respectively.

[1] The eight agents that are a part of the image formation continuum are overt-induced 1, overt-induced 2, covert-induced 1, covert-induced 2, autonomous, unsolicited organic, solicited organic, and organic (Gartner, 1993).

2.2. Barcelona in promotional videos and fiction films

The use of audiovisual pieces for marketing in Barcelona dates back to the early 20th century. In 1908, the Sociedad de Atracción de Forasteros was established to promote the city's cultural value, enhance its reputation, and counter stereotypes that portrayed the Iberian Peninsula as "a land of savages, primitives and inhabitants with strange traditions" (Palou, 2009, p. 91). To address Barcelona's "problematic image" stemming from its turbulent 19th and early 20th century political history, the Sociedad sponsored the production of *Barcelona, perla del Mediterráneo* (1912–1913) (Smith, 2005, pp. 406–407) and to attract international tourists (García Espuche & Navas, 1994, as quoted in Monclús, 2000, p. 59). In it, the city was depicted as a modern, cosmopolitan, industrial port (Antoniazzi, 2021). Tourism projects during the brief Second Republic emphasize heritage and natural resources, followed by the sun-and-beach mass tourism of the 1950s and 1960s and the promotion of Barcelona as a "city of trade fairs and congresses" in the 1970s (Palou, 2009, p. 92).

Themes like modernism and cosmopolitanism, though adapted over time, have formed part of Barcelona's re-imagining process decades later. In an analysis of re-imagining initiatives carried out up to the early years of the 2000s, Smith (2005) explains how Barcelona has positively presented itself as a "modernist," "sporting" and "monumental" city through the production of memorable synecdochical devices (e.g., the Sagrada Família) and connotations (e.g., cosmopolitanism). These themes have progressively replaced the city's former image as a dull industrial city with one of a "lively," "cultural" and "aesthetically pleasing" metropolis (p. 417), appealing to a diverse range of visitors.

Promotional videos typically feature what local destination management organizations aim "to highlight about their territories" (Huertas et al., 2017, p. 16). In Barcelona's case, Fondevila Gascón et al. (2016) analyzed social media content published by the city's local authority on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook between January 1st and March 31st, 2015. These platforms present Barcelona as an architectural city, emphasizing its iconic modernist buildings and closely associating it with Antoni Gaudí: "Barcelona is practically turned into a modernist theme park" (Reventós, 2007, p. 292).

A visual analysis of the promotional YouTube videos released by Turisme de Barcelona from 2014 to 2019 found that Barcelona's induced image is "mainly based on tangible heritage (especially monuments), its recognizable cityscape and its eno-gastronomic assets" (Paquin & Schwitzguébel, 2022, p. 257). The city is also depicted as an offbeat, sunny destination with a Mediterranean lifestyle. Geographically, the videos primarily highlight points of interest in already saturated areas, such as the Gothic Quarter (Paquin & Schwitzguébel, 2022).

Since the 19th century, the film industry has documented Barcelona's evolution, contributing to diverse and often dichotomous portrayals of the city. Barcelona's image as a modern, commercial and open city can be traced back to the 19th century, when a representative of the Lumière Brothers shot *Place du port à Barcelone* (Antoniazzi, 2021). During this period, which lasted until the beginning of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, filmmakers captured real-life scenes (e.g., *Gent i paisatge de Catalunya*, Josep Gaspar, 1926) and also shot fiction films (Antoniazzi, 2021). These productions were often filmed in undisturbed locations, such as empty streets and gardens (Minguet Batllori, 2013).

During the Spanish Civil War, films primarily aimed to document the effects of the conflict, the resistance of certain social groups and key events. Even under Franco's dictatorship, "film production managed to thrive in Barcelona" (San Miguel & Torres Hortelano, 2013, p. 6). In the 1950s, Barcelona was frequently portrayed as a "crime city", particularly after the success of *Apartado de Correos 1001* (Julio Salvador, 1950). Films often featured El Raval district and the harbor, creating a dichotomy between the "bad city" (southern Barcelona) and the "good city" (northern Barcelona).

Following Franco's death in the late 1970s, Barcelona was represented as a festive, libertarian city in films such as *Ocaña, retrato intermitente* (Ventura Pons, 1978) and *Bilbao* (Bigas Luna, 1978). El Raval remained a setting "for gritty urban tales of passion and existential despair", while the Gothic Quarter emerged as a tourist destination centered on its monuments (Rioyo, 2013). This period saw a dramatic transformation of the city, culminating in the 1992 Olympic Games. The event marked a turning point, elevating Barcelona's statues as both an international tourist destination and a filming location (Antoniazzi, 2021).

Broadly speaking, two types of films about Barcelona can be identified. On the one hand are fiction films that celebrate the positive effects of the widely praised "Barcelona model" (Antoniazzi, 2021). These "tourist poster films" (Mestre et al., 2008) present a sanitized image of the city, ignoring its complexity. *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (Woody Allen, 2008) exemplifies this trend, portraying a "Barcelona of architecture and the visible" (Bergen-Aurand, 2013, p. 439), and omits the city's diversity and real challenges (Curry, 2013). Allen's film also illustrates how movies are strategically to align with destination management organizations' goals (Nieto-Ferrando et al., 2023), promoting Barcelona, Catalonia and Spain in English-speaking and European markets (Zamorano, 2020). It blends Catalan identity attributes (e.g., local traditions, festivities), cosmopolitanism (e.g., buildings designed by internationally known architects) and Mediterranean lifestyle (e.g., local gastronomy) with traditional "Spanishness" rooted in Andalusian folklore, characteristic of the *españolada* genre (Nieto-Ferrando et al., 2023).

On the other hand, some films focus on highlighting the social transformation of Barcelona in the mid-1980s (Camí-Vela, 2013) and even question the success of the Barcelona model (Antoniazzi, 2021). This category includes films like *Biutiful* (by Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2010), a drama "about the underclasses in Barcelona" (p. 435), as well as films by Catalan women filmmakers (e.g., *Boom Boom*, Rosa Vergés, 1990; *Two for Tea*, Isabel Gardela, 2000). At times, the portrayal of Barcelona reflects the producer's country of origin. According to Osácar (2016), while most productions present a positive image of the city, films produced or co-produced by South American filmmakers portray Barcelona as an unsafe and dirty place, addressing issues such as illegal immigration and prostitution.

3. Research design

Visual methods have been used extensively to explore how cities are represented in (audio)visual material (see, for example, Hunter, 2012). In this article, we use qualitative visual content analysis with elements of quantitative content analysis to explore the projected image of the municipality of Barcelona. We have chosen to analyze the whole municipality rather than just the city center due to local institutions' interest in expanding the city's tourist areas (e.g., Ciutat Vella district). Two types of texts were selected (see Appendix A): (1) promotional videos posted by Turisme de Barcelona on its YouTube channel "Visit Barcelona" from 2014 (the channel was launched in September 2013) to 2023, which contain the institutional logo and are targeted at a non-local audience; and (2) fiction films shot in the city, released in the same period, which meet the following criteria:

(a) Barcelona is identified as such in the narrative and plays an important role in the story.
(b) One of the main characters is a tourist, visitor or temporary resident (e.g., a student) in Barcelona. This criterion facilitates the comparison of the projected image of the city in the promotional videos with the image in the fiction films. Importantly, the corpus of analysis only includes scenes shot in public spaces (both indoors and outdoors) in which these characters appear.
(c) The film received the support of the Barcelona Film Office, the entity responsible for issuing filming permits.

The selection of films (see Appendix B) also considered factors such as awards received, presence at prestigious international festivals,

distribution on (S)VOD platforms and/or audience ratings. Different portrayals of Barcelona were expected due to the different countries of production of the films analyzed (seven different nationalities).

The promotional videos and films selected were subjected to a qualitative visual content analysis, supported by frequency data. The first step in the creation of the initial set of categories involved the familiarization of the three authors with the existing academic literature and non-academic resources. During a first team meeting, the researchers deductively created an initial set of themes and categories drawing on the analysis sheet used by Nieto-Ferrando et al. (2023). This was followed by a phase of familiarization with the corpus of analysis through two rigorous individual viewings of all the promotional videos and films selected. The researchers paid attention to the *mise-en-scène* of the scenes shot in public spaces, both indoors and outdoors. The notes gathered during these viewings informed the individual adaptation of the first version of the set of themes and categories, which were discussed during a second team meeting.

To illustrate these discussions, let's take the theme "A cosmopolitan city" as an example. Following Nieto-Ferrando et al. (2023), the three researchers used the term "cosmopolitanism" to refer to places that were built in the context of the three major international events hosted in Barcelona (the Universal Exposition of 1888, the Barcelona Universal Exposition of 1929, and the 1992 Olympic Games). Sculptures and architectural designs created by renowned artists and designers built in the context of one of the abovementioned events were also included. However, it was decided that landmarks related to the 1992 Olympic Games are part of what in this paper is called "cosmopolitan heritage". Landmarks related to FC Barcelona, however, belong to the category "A cultural and leisure city".

Moreover, the creation of categories was also informed by a thorough review of the Barcelona Tourism Strategic Plans for 2015 and 2020. This helped the authors dissect the city's branding, promotional and marketing strategies. For instance, it was observed that one of the goals of the 2015 Strategic Tourism Plan was to promote Barcelona as a heterogeneous, diverse, inclusive and sustainable place; a well-connected city, with international projection and with an identity of its own; the capital of Catalonia and of the Mediterranean (Turisme de Barcelona, 2010, p. 26). The 2020 Strategic Tourism Plan, published in 2017, adopted this same vision (p.15). The theme "A connected city" reflects these plans.

In sum, the themes and categories were created following inductive and deductive approaches, that involved both academic and non-academic resources. After two team meetings, the final version of set of themes and categories (see Table 1) was created and incorporated into an analysis sheet in Excel. This was consistently used by the three researchers during their individual coding processes, reducing potential biases of the analysis. The coding results for the promotional videos had a mean agreement of 95 %, while for the films the mean agreement was 89 %. In both cases, the mean agreement increased to 98 % and 95 % respectively after further discussion between the authors.

Although presented as independent, it is important to acknowledge the interconnections between some of these categories. For example, modernism, as an artistic movement, was significantly influenced "by wider English, French and German perspectives" that allowed Barcelona "to connote its European credentials" (Smith, 2005, p. 401). Thus, the connection between "Catalan modernism" and "Cosmopolitanism" is unavoidable.

While the focus remains interpretative, frequency data is used descriptively to identify recurring patterns. To analyze the frequency of each theme and thereby identify the themes that the viewers of the promotional videos and films are exposed to the most, we adapted the methodology previously used by Gómez-Morales et al. (2022). This method involved the extraction of one frame per second using VLC media player. Based on the visual information on the *mise-en-scène*, the frames captured were classified in the categories presented in Table 1. The results were organized into the seven themes shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Final set of themes and categories.

Themes	Categories
A Mediterranean city	● Sun, sea, and beach ● Port city ● Liveliness of its streets ● Fresh foods
A cosmopolitan city	Heritage: ● Universal Exposition of 1888 ● Universal Exposition of 1929 ● Olympic Games 1992 Modern: ● High-tech buildings
A Catalan city	● Tangible heritage: modernist buildings, places of relevance to Catalan politics ● Intangible heritage: festivities, music, gastronomy, Catalan language/bilingualism ● Everyday places (e.g., random streets)
A cultural and leisure city	● Cultural events ● Museums, foundations and art galleries ● Leisure locations (e.g., restaurants without emphasis on the setting or the food) ● F.C. Barcelona
A professional city: Business, science, and education	● Convention centers ● Professional events (e.g., conferences) ● Scientific buildings ● Educational buildings
A shopping city	● Shopping districts ● Local shops
A connected city	● Arrivals and departures ● Mobility within the city

4. Results

From 2014 to 2023, Turisme de Barcelona has primarily constructed the image of Barcelona around the two key themes of "A Mediterranean city" and "A Catalan city," which together account for 52 % of the frames classified. Depictions of cultural places and events and leisure locations represent 12 % of the frames. This is followed by the depiction of Barcelona as a well-connected city, both at a metropolitan and intercity levels (11 % of the frames) and "A shopping city" (11 % of the frames). Locations that are strongly connected to the notion of "cosmopolitanism" (e.g., the Venetian Towers) are rare (9 % of the frames) as well as the representation of Barcelona as a scientific and professional place (5 % of the frames), although the latter has remarkably increased in 2022 with promotional videos such as "Barcelona's women scientist trail" and "Barcelona destination science".

The thematic distribution found in the frame analysis of the films is rather different. The themes with the largest number of frames are "A Catalan city" (30 % of the frames) and "A cultural and leisure city" (26 % of the frames), although it is important to note that 33 % of the frames included in this latter category come from two scenes in *Chinnadana Nee Kosam*' filmed in the Opium disco and the Poble Espanyol open air museum. What is more remarkable is the prominence of the depiction of Barcelona as a "professional city" (16 %), which, as will be explained below, is due largely to the characters' occupations (e.g., medical doctors, students) and their reasons for visiting Barcelona (e.g., to give a talk, to study). Barcelona as "A connected city," "A Mediterranean city" and "A cosmopolitan city" are less prominent (11 %, 11 % and 5 % of the frames, respectively) and even rare, as is the case of Barcelona as "a shopping city" (1 % of the frames) (see Fig. 1).

4.1. A Mediterranean city: sun, sea and fresh foods

Barcelona is often framed as a Mediterranean city in both promotional videos and fictional films, although each medium emphasizes different aspects of this identity. In promotional videos, this Mediterranean character is conveyed through visual references to Barcelona's

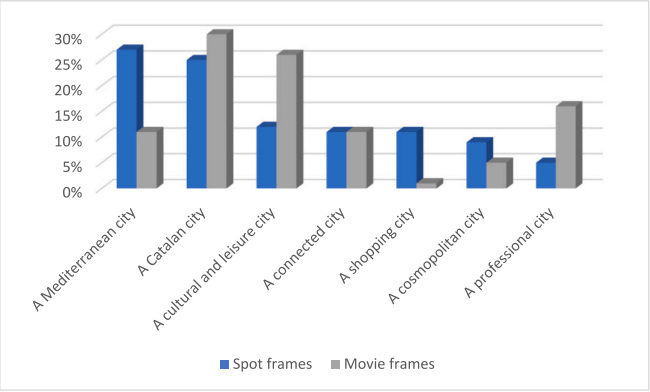


Fig. 1. Promotional videos and film frames analyzed.
Source: Authors (2024).

warm weather[2] and proximity to the sea. The coast is often reduced to the beaches of the Barceloneta neighborhood, where some of the most iconic buildings of the city's brandscape are located (e.g., Hotel W, the Mapfre Tower and Hotel Arts). The seashore is generically depicted as a place to unwind (e.g., walking along the shore, relaxing in a boat), physical activities (e.g., jogging, playing volleyball) or water sports (e.g., paddle boarding, sailing, windsurfing), all of which are typical of many coastal destinations.

Beyond sun and sea, the destination management organization reinforces in its agenda the image of Barcelona as "a city of sights" (Galí & Donaire, 2015) while also incorporating lifestyle elements associated with Mediterranean urban culture (e.g., a vibrant street life, people eating and drinking on outdoor terraces). Culinary appeal is another key element, constructed through scenes that feature fresh food in urban markets such as Mercat de la Boquería and Mercat Santa Caterina (see "Barcelona, food and wine", 2016), and chefs preparing contemporary dishes that blend tradition with innovation.

Fictional films, in contrast, offer a more subdue, yet still recognizable, version of this Mediterranean imaginary. Most of the films analyzed portray Barcelona as a lively and sunny city, with the sea appearing in at least one frame in nine out of the ten films in the sample. In *Bittersweet Day*, the Dutch protagonist briefly visits the beach, while in *Domani è un altro giorno*, the sea takes on a symbolic role as Giuliano gazes at the Mediterranean after bidding farewell to his son, before returning to Italy where Giuliano will die. The only film in which the sea is entirely absent is *No estaba muerto, andaba de parranda.*

However, fiction films tend to downplay or omit other key lifestyle markets that are part of the destination management organization's induced image, such as outdoor dining and urban markets. The Mercat de la Boquería features briefly in *Bittersweet Days*, where the protagonists try some fruit and buy juice, and in *Barcelona: A Love Untold*, where Mia unsuccessfully seeks employment at a dried fruit stand. Such limited inclusion suggests a partial alignment with the induced image, reinforcing some Mediterranean symbols while sidelining others.

4.2. A cosmopolitan city: past and present

Barcelona's promotional videos construct an image of the city as a seamless fusion of heritage and modern elements, cutting from Noucentism landmarks (e.g., the Venetian Towers) to high-tech architecture (e.g., Torre Agbar) and contemporary sculptures (e.g., The Head of Barcelona, Frank Gehry's Golden Fish). By showcasing these distinctive elements, Turisme de Barcelona makes the city "easily readable" (Smith, 2005) for tourists, offering a visual narrative that requires little socio-historical knowledge to interpret sculptures.

This same strategy of visual legibility also shapes how the city is portrayed in the films analyzed. Cosmopolitan aspirations are mapped onto the city's architecture, primarily through the use of the 1929 Universal Exposition complex. In *No estaba muerto, andaba de parranda*, the Colombian protagonists begin their exploration of the city at this site, while in *Barcelona: A Love Untold*, Ely attends and architecture class and later goes on a date to the light show at the Font Màgica de Montjuïc. Although contemporary landmarks like Gehry's Golden Fish appear briefly in *Rastros de Sándalo* their inclusion remains surface-level. It can be argued that both destination management organizations' and media agenda rely on what Rybczynski (2015) critiques as the formula "eye-popping architecture + cultural attractions = more tourist", a visually seductive but potentially fatiguing approach that reduces Barcelona to a series of consumable images.

4.3. A Catalan City: modernism and the capital of Catalonia

Modernist architecture remains as a key pillar of Barcelona's projected image. Adopted in the run-up to the 1992 Olympic Games, this artistic movement is still notably present in the promotional videos released from 2014 to 2023. Although around 34 modernist sights are catalogued in the city (Galí & Donaire, 2015), this visual narrative centers almost exclusively on Casa Vicens, Casa Milá (aka La Pedrera), Casa Batlló, Palau de la Música Catalana, Hospital de la Santa Creu i Sant Pau, and, most notably, the Sagrada Família. Understanding that these buildings were constructed in the foundational period of modern Catalan nationalism (Nogue & Vicente, 2004) underscores the lasting significance of modernist buildings in shaping the city's induced image.

Central to the Tourism Strategic Plan is communicating Barcelona's status as the capital of Catalonia. Yet, this is done through the sporadic inclusion of monuments representing the region's intangible heritage, such as the La Sardana Monument by Josep Cañas, and the Homenatge als castellers by Antoni Llena i Font. The destination management organization's agenda also features sculptures (e.g., the monument to Francesc Maciá, President of the Generalitat de Catalonia in the 1930s) and buildings with significant political meaning. However, these landmarks serve mainly as backdrops, rather than as invitation to explore Catalan identity in depth. For example, in the promotional video "Some reasons to choose Barcelona" (2014), the Plaça Sant Jaume, home to the Palau de la Generalitat de Catalunya, provides the setting for a scene featuring the *castellets* (human towers).

The notion of *Catalanidad* is largely limited to modernist architecture. While elements of Catalonia's intangible heritage, such as *castellets*, *correfocs*, *el balls dels bastons*, *sardana* and *gigants* appear in some videos, these are primarily confined to two clips focused on two local celebrations: La Mercè and Sant Jordi. Christmas is the most frequently referenced festivity, appearing in seven promotional videos. Although images of the traditional *Tió de Nadal* and *El Caganer* are often included, these videos seem to be more focused on positioning Barcelona as a winter shopping destination. Apart from the Sagrada Família, religious heritage sites are largely overshadowed by civil architecture, Catalan gastronomy is reduced to quick shots of *torrons*[3] or cava wine, and bilingualism is almost exclusively limited to a few words printed on shopping bags.

In the films analyzed, *Catalanidad* is primarily represented through modernist buildings that often play an important role in the narrative. For instance, in the Filipino movie *Barcelona: A Love Untold* the characters get engaged before the Sagrada Família, and in *No estaba muerto, andaba de parranda* this basilica sparks the characters' greatest excitement. In *Rastros de Sándalo*, a photograph taken in Parc Güell prompts Mina's journey to Barcelona in search of her sister. In *Domani è un altro*

[2] Exceptionally, in the promotional video "#Experience barcelona 2" (2018) the characters briefly appear using an umbrella.

[3] This Christmas sweet is not exclusive to Barcelona. However, the city is home to some traditional shops where it is sold, such as Torrons Vicens.

giorno, Giuliano's son lives in a building with clear modernist features. Even fleeting taxi-window montages foreground Casa Milá and Casa Batlló.

By contrast, films rarely engage with Catalonia's intangible heritage, suggesting a divergence from the destination management organization's agenda. No characters participate in traditional catalan festivities, and the reference to flamenco culture in *No estaba muerto, andaba de parranda* staged at the Arc de Triomf, underscores this. Culinary motifs surface only briefly: Colombian characters eat *fuet* in front of the well-known Hotel Majestic, while Ely serves *patatas bravas* in *Barcelona: A Love Untold.* Such scenes confirm that, although Modernist architecture unites the induced and the pseudo-autonomous images, deeper facets of Catalan culture remain largely absent from both.

4.4. A cultural and leisure city

Promotional videos often feature images of museum façades (e.g., MACBA), art foundations (e.g., Fundació Joan Miró), and art galleries (e.g., Caixa Fórum) aligning with Reventós's (2007) claim that Barcelona promotes itself as a hub for high art and culture through its "big façade museums" (p. 293). Interior shots in these centers are rare and typically intercut with footage of cultural and leisure activities (e.g., concerts, dancing) in the city streets reinforcing Barcelona's appeal as a cultural tourism destination. Mega-events (such as the Sónar music festival), family attractions (e.g., Tibidabo Amusement Park, the aquarium, the zoo) and even FC Barcelona's Camp Nou appear only ephemerally. Leisure spaces such as parks and nightlife venues are present in the promotional videos, but they remain peripheral to the city's induce image. Panoramic views occasionally hint at urban parks, Serra de Collserola or Parc del Labertint d'Horta surface only in passing, and nightlife is virtually absent.

The films analyzed offer a slightly more varied, and character-driven engagement with the city's arts scene. In *Vita Cuore Battito*, the characters attend an exhibition at the Santa Mònica Art Center (although the indoor scene was not actually filmed there), while *No voy a pedirle a nadie que me crea* features an exhibit by Joan Fontcuberta and a book launch in a local bookstore. Other films reduce cultural landmarks to postcard-style glimpses of façades of popular museums, such as MNAC, mirroring the surface-level aesthetic of the induced image.

Leisure and nightlife receive broader, although still selective, treatment in the films. *Barcelona: A Love Untold* stages a movie-withing-a movie sequence at Tibidabo Historical Amusement Park; *Chinnadana Nee Kosam* includes a five-minute scene in Poble Espanyol and a dance scene at the Opium nightclub. *Bittersweet Days* includes visits to unnamed gay pubs. Lastly, FC Barcelona is signaled through merchandising in the *mise-en-scène* in movies such as *No estaba muerto, andaba de parranda*, while other Catalan signifiers, such as the flag, are incorporated in a casual fashion (e.g., a flag in a 24-h shop in *Bittersweet Days*).

4.5. A professional city: business, science and education

Local institutions have sought to emphasize Barcelona's role as a hub for science and business (Turisme de Barcelona, 2010, 2017). Early promotional videos include images of professional events –often unrecognizable– and identifiable locations such as Fira Barcelona and the Centre de Convencions Internacionals de Barcelona. A more focused narrative emerged only in 2021, with the released of "Barcelona, the place to meet", promoting the city as a place for conferences and professional events. This was further developed through three promotional videos aimed at digital nomads (e.g., "Move your desk, change your life," 2021) which frame remote work as a lifestyle choice supported by climate and leisure. In contrast, the scientific and educational dimensions remain peripheral in the destination management organization's agenda, with a notably effort made in 2022 with promotional videos like "Route of the scientific women of Barcelona" which showcases locations such as the Biblioteca Bonnemaison and the Universitat de Barcelona.

Fiction films, on the other hand, embed science and education into their narratives, portraying Barcelona as a meaningful site of research, professional mobility, and learning. In *Rastros de Sándalo*, Mina travels from India to Barcelona and visits the Parc de Recerca Biomèdica de Barcelona, where her sister works as a biologist. *Singel 39* depicts Barcelona as a host of international medical conferences, and striving to attract international professionals. In this film, the Dutch female character is offered a position at the fictional Hospital Universitari de Barcelona, depicted using an edited façade of the MACBA museum. Two other films in the corpus include characters who come to Barcelona specifically to study, and experience absent from the induced image.

4.6. A connected city: accessible and mobile

Barcelona is portrayed as a well-connected city, accessible by plane and train (e.g., "Barcelona, the place to meet," 2021) and offering diverse public transportation options (e.g., trams in "Pride," 2021; bike sharing in "Move your desk, change your life," 2021). Scenes of people cycling and roller-skating frequently appear in the analyzed promotional videos, alongside iconic transport modes such as the Bus Turístic, the Telefèric del Port, the Telefèric to Montjuïc, and the traditional Tramvia Blau, connecting to Tibidabo.

Fiction films echo this message of accessibility yet narrow the range of transport actually used by the characters. Nearly all protagonists arrive by plane, with the exception of the Italians in *Vita Cuore Battito* who arrive by cruise ship —a controversial type of tourism that is rarely represented in the city's official induced image. Once in the city, the characters are often depicted exploring "high intensity areas" (Turisme de Barcelona, 2010, 2017), such as Ciutat Vella, Plaça Catalunya, the Sagrada Família and Parc Güell, primarily on foot. Exceptions include Ely in *Barcelona: A Love Untold*, and Juan Pablo in *No voy a pedirle a nadie que me crea*, who also use the Barcelona Metro and/or the train. Other forms of mobility (e.g., biking) appear only as background elements rather than a lived practice.

Both induced and pseudo-autonomous images rely on taxi-arrival montages that prioritize landmark density over geographic accuracy. Promotional videos and films often depict characters travelling from the airport to Barcelona by taxi. Yet, the analysis of the routes reveals that neither the promotional videos nor the films adhere to Barcelona's actual geography, frequently rearranging the locations of key landmarks. For example, in "Barcelona, the place to meet" (2021), the protagonist's taxi route sequentially features Casa Batlló, Torre Agbar, La Pedrera, and the Venetian Towers, although the latter would logically be the first site encountered by a tourist arriving from the airport. Similarly, in *No estaba muerto, andaba de parranda*, the Colombian characters pass through the city center, including the Arc del Triomf, before arriving at the Venetian Towers. These spatial bloopers reveal that, in both destination management organization's and media agenda, visual allure is prioritized over geographic accuracy.

4.7. A shopping city: shopping districts and local shops

Revitalizing the city's shopping network beyond the city center is one of the goals of the Tourism Strategic Plan (2017, p. 85). As Zhou et al. (2024) argued, encouraging tourist spending is one of the aims of destination management organization's promotional videos. The data analyzed shows that most of the promotional videos that portray shopping activities present luxury stores (e.g., jewelry stores) and chain stores located in the central tourist zones of Ciutat Vella/Gothic Quarter, Passeig de Gràcia and Porta de l'Àngel. For example, "Barcelona shopping genuine shops" (2018) was filmed entirely in the Gothic Quarter. A few promotional videos also highlight specific (local) stores, such as the MACBA shop, Santa Casilda, Custo Barcelona and Botiga de la Virreina.

In contrast, the films analyzed rarely emphasize shopping as an activity. Instead, commercial spaces serve primarily as narrative

backdrops. The Rambla del Mar, a popular shopping district for tourists, and where the Maremagnum shopping center is located, is portrayed as a meeting place in both *Rastros de Sándalo* and *Chinnadana Nee Kosam*.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The findings of this paper suggest that Barcelona's projected image has been primarily stagnating in recent years. Barcelona has been depicted as a modernist, cosmopolitan, mediterranean, sporting, monumental city since the early 20th century (Antonniazi, 2021; Reventós, 2007; Smith, 2005). Precisely, our qualitative visual content analysis complemented with frequency data (cf. Gómez-Morales et al., 2022) has revealed the prevalence of a fairly repetitive, stable destination image (Paquin & Schwitzguébel, 2022) founded on connotations of Mediterranean and (superficial) Catalan identity. This trend is especially noticeable in the Turisme de Barcelona's agenda and, precisely, on the promotional videos posted on its YouTube Channel "Visit Barcelona." Although the local institutions called for marketing strategies to diversify Barcelona's induced image and, thus, contribute to the decongestion of the more popular tourist areas (Turisme de Barcelona, 2010, 2017), these promotional videos continue to feature familiar landmarks located in central neighborhoods such as La Barceloneta and Ciutat Vella. Thus, the use of what Rybczynski (2015) referred to as "eye-popping architecture" prompts questions about architectural fatigue and the long-term impact of this strategy on tourist's experiences.

The complex notion of Catalan identity is associated mainly with the modernist architectural movement. Catalonia's intangible heritage (e.g., traditional music, dance and gastronomy) is rarely present in the destination management organization's agenda, and sites that could be considered part of the so-called "uncomfortable heritage" are notably underrepresented. For example, the Castell de Montjuïc, where opponents of the Franco regime were executed by firing squad (Reventós, 2007, p. 297) is rarely shown.

As per the media agenda and pseudo-autonomous images, the representation of Barcelona in most of the fiction films analyzed deviates little from, what we could call, "official image" promoted by the destination management organization. The visitors depicted only appear wandering around the "official Barcelona," visiting popular tourism locations also captured by the cameras in the promotional videos, such as the Sagrada Família, the architectural complex originally built for the Barcelona Universal Exposition of 1929, and Las Ramblas. The sociocultural diversity of the El Raval neighborhood, for example, is not explored by the non-local characters in these films. Exceptionally, the Filipino film *Barcelona: A Love Untold* challenges, to some extent, the unsurprisingly positive depiction of the city promoted by Turisme de Barcelona, as it offers an explicit reflection on the difficulties faced by Filipino immigrants in finding a skilled job in the city. The notion of *Catalanidad* is confined to modernist architecture, which plays a prominent role in some films. For example, in *Barcelona: A Love Untold,* the characters get engaged in front of the Sagrada Família. References to Catalan intangible heritage are limited, primarily represented by gastronomic products like *fuet*. Likewise, traditions linked to Andalusian folklore and commonly associated with "Spanishness" (cf. Nieto-Ferrando et al., 2023) featured only in the Colombian film *No estaba muerto, andaba de parranda*.

The main contribution of the films is an emphasis on Barcelona's profile as a city for professionals, through the portrayal of characters who come to Barcelona for professional or academic purposes (in the films *Singel* 39, *Barcelona: A Love Untold*, *Domani è un altro giorno,* and in *No voy a pedirle a nadie que me crea*). In the period analyzed, Turisme de Barcelona started to sporadically present this theme in promotional videos such as "Some reasons to choose Barcelona" (2014) and this narrative was further developed in 2021, with the release of a series of promotional videos that aim to present the city as an attractive option for digital nomads (e.g., "Move your desk, change your life") and to attract professional event organizers (e.g., "Barcelona, the place to meet"). In 2022, the release of promotional videos like "Barcelona, innovation and science" seems to confirm the destination management organization's interest in reinforcing Barcelona's image as a city for professionals, suggesting a confluence between destination management organization's and media agenda.

The alignment of film's pseudo-autonomous image and the induced image curated by Barcelona's destination management organization leaves viewers with a coherent –yet largely stagnant– portrayal of a complex and dynamic city. With only a handful of exceptions, the films analyzed reiterate rather than expand the official narrative. Nevertheless, those few outliers merit closer attention. Thus, and drawing on Govers et al. (2007), who found that films are more popular information sources for travelers than advertising, suggest that films could help diversify the city's brand. This can be done by steering audiences toward less-visited, yet equally representative, neighborhoods and cultural sites. While scholars have argued that film can broaden place images (e.g., Castro, 2022; Imbert-Bouchard Ribera & Radolfi, 2023; Nieto-Ferrando et al., 2021), the data suggests that it is primarily those films that depart from sanitized and dominant imaginaries that hold the greatest potential to widen Barcelona's touristic image.

5.1. Conceptual and practical implications

This study has addressed the asymmetry in academic literature by shifting focus from perceived image to the less explored domain of projected image (cf. Picazo & Moreno-Gil, 2019; Wang et al., 2023). Specifically, it has contributed to understanding how promotional videos and fiction films interact in constructing place's image –whether they reinforce, complement, or contradict each other, and whether their agendas confluence of diverge. This inquiry is crucial as the creative and tourism industries increasingly form a strategic nexus for growth, positioning and competitiveness (Imbert-Bouchard Ribera & Radolfi, 2023, p. 48).

Building on Gartner's (1993) image formation process theory, which remains relevant to contemporary studies of projected images (see Beerli & Martin, 2004; Liu et al., 2024; Stylidis, 2022), this study has introduced the term pseudo-autonomous image. This concept questions the level of autonomy of filmmakers in place representation, considering the convergence between the film and tourism industries, the influence of local stakeholders (e.g., film permits regulations), and destination management organization's marketing strategies tied to film productions.

The reproduction of the "official Barcelona" in films suggest several implications. First, underscores how the "official image" may influence filmmakers' choices of filming locations. Second, the repeated use of specific locations may limit the diversification of Barcelona's image and, through it, the creation of new imaginaries, redistribute tourism flows, and attract visitors with different profiles (Imbert-Bouchard Ribera & Radolfi, 2023; Nieto-Ferrando et al., 2021; Soro et al., 2023). A closer collaboration between the film and tourism institutions and a better alignment of their agendas could enhance the destination strategic management and planning in places that require or would benefit from a revision of their projected image (Soro et al., 2023). If, as the agenda setting theory suggests, the greater the media attention a location receives, the more significance audiences and visitors are likely to attribute to it, then applying this theory beyond its original context highlights how continued reproduction of "official Barcelona" risks exacerbating tourism in already crowded areas.

To address these issues, closer collaboration between the film and tourism sectors is recommended. Developing a Decalogue of Best Practices – negotiated during pre-production phases – could balance filmmakers' creative freedom with strategic goals for Barcelona's image. This decalogue could outline actions across pre-production, production, and post-production stages to strengthen and diversify the city's projected image. Methodologically, the study has introduced a set of analytical categories suitable for longitudinal studies that aim to explore

the evolution of Barcelona's projected image. Moreover, the combination of qualitative visual analysis with frequency data proved useful in identifying patterns.

5.2. Limitations and future research

The paper has examined Barcelona's projected image by means of a qualitative visual content analysis supported by frequency data of 48 promotional videos and ten fiction films released between 2014 and 2023. However, the projected image of any place is the result of a co-creation process in which tourists and residents also participate (Garay, 2019) through, for example, social media platforms. Future research could build on this study by incorporating social media data generated by internet users into the triangulation process, thus including the agenda of audiences, tourists and/or residents. Expanding the corpus of films to incorporate productions that do not necessarily feature a tourist character, as well as including other forms of popular culture texts, could also offer insights and further refine the concept of pseudo-autonomous images. Moreover, the findings of this analysis could be used to inform the development of interview guides to be used in conversations with, for instance, destination management organizations and filmmakers. This could help uncover the decision-making process behind the construction of the projected image.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Deborah Castro: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Jorge Nieto-Ferrando:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Beatriz Gómez-Morales:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used Chat GPT to reduce the number of words in some sentences in order to meet the word-count requirements. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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Declaration of competing interest

None.

Appendix A. List of promotional videos analyzed

	Title of the promotional video
2014	Barcelona a Colorful Christmas
	Barcelona a Colorful Christmas: Unique Traditions
	Barcelona a Colorful Christmas: Bustling Streets
	Barcelona a Colorful Christmas: Tasty Morsels
	Barcelona Bus Turístic
	Some Reasons to Choose Barcelona
	Barcelona, an Accessible Experience
2015	This Christmas, Barcelona is the Gift
	Easy Barcelona
	Barcelona Port Tour
2016	Barcelona Food & Wine
	Barcelona and Me - Visit Barcelona
2017	Enjoy Barcelona, Enjoy the Sea
	This is Barcelona
	Viu el dia de Sant Jordi a Barcelona
	Barcelona i La Mercè
	Turn on Enjoy Mode in Barcelona (Christmas)
2018	Experience Barcelona 2
	Barcelona Shopping Genuine Shops
	#EXPERIENCEBARCELONA
	Barcelona Has It All
2019	Barcelona, a City for Sharing! - Christmas
	Barcelona, a City for Sharing
2021	Barcelona Workation Paddle
	Barcelona Workation Zakaria
	Move Your Desk, Change Your Life
	Barcelona Kicks off the Christmas Season
	Barcelona, the Place to Meet
	Pride
	Barcelona, the place to meet - Incentives and activities
2022	Barcelona's Women scientists Trail
	Route of Light
	Einstein Route
	Barcelona Destination Science
	The Gastronomic Revolution Lives on in Barcelona
	Barcelona, the place to be (1)
	Barcelona, the place to be (2)
	Barcelona, the place to be (3)

(*continued on next page*)

(*continued*)

	Title of the promotional video
2023	Barcelona, the place to be (3) La Roca Village Barcelona, the Stage for Christmas Barcelona Christmas Tour Domènech i Montaner Year Cooking for the Future Barcelona opens the doors to the Mediterranean Barcelona opens its doors to you at Christmas (1) Barcelona opens its doors to you at Christmas (2) Barcelona opens its doors to you at Christmas (3)

Appendix B. List of films analyzed

Title	Year	Genre	Director	Country	Main narrative locations
Chinnadana Nee Kosam	2014	Romantic drama	A. Karunakaran	India	India, Barcelona
Rastros de sándalo	2014	Drama	Maria Ripoll	Spain	Mumbai, Barcelona
Bittersweet Days	2016	Romantic drama	Marga Melià	Spain	Barcelona, Palma de Mallorca
Barcelona: A Love Untold	2016	Romantic drama	Olivia Lamasan	Philippines	Philippines, Barcelona, Sitges
Vita, cuore, battito	2018	Comedy	Sergio Colabona	Italy	Napoli, Florence, Barcelona, Ibiza
Domani è un altro giorno	2019	Dramedy	Simone Spada	Spain	Roma, Barcelona
Singel 39	2019	Romantic comedy	Frank Krom	The Netherlands	The Hague, Barcelona
No estaba muerto, andaba de parranda	2020	Comedy	Fernando Ayllon	Colombia	Colombia, Barcelona, Marseille, Palma de Mallorca
No voy a pedirle a nadie que me crea	2023	Thriller	Fernando Frías de la Parra	Mexico/Spain	Mexico, Barcelona
Tu Jhooti Main Makkar	2023	Romantic comedy	Luv Ranjan	India	Delhi, Barcelona

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