



# When the locals are *Othered*: hybridized representations of Latin American cultures and identities through nation branding

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## Abstract

This study unveils how Latin American countries present to the eyes of educated, English-speaking audiences in the promotion of exports, tourism, and foreign direct investment offerings through different nation branding campaigns. Their invitations to come make use of strikingly similar strategies: (1) the “adventurous” foreigner venturing to explore a new land; and the (2) proud, local citizen, telling the newcomer what is so special about their nation. The main goal of this study is to introduce the concepts of “hybridization” and “equalization” as powerful constructs to analyze *hybridized representations* of Latin American cultures and identities through nation branding. This study adds to existing research on cultural nation branding, as well as critical-cultural studies that focuses on analyses of the “Other,” outlining the limitations of branding as a mechanism to promote contested and multifaceted constructs such as countries.

**Keywords:** nation branding, Otherness, neoliberalism, Latin American studies, hybridization

Nation branding has driven countries to position themselves as exotic destinations (Loftsdóttir, 2015; Sataøen, 2021), in which locals offer to foreigners an “ideal” environment for business, or “life-changing experiences,” among other boiler-plate taglines. Beyond the discussion that these forms of discourse commodify the national identities and cultures of diverse countries (Aronczyk, 2013; Kaneva, 2011), previous research on critical nation branding has proposed that many times, post-colonial or developing countries engage in self-stereotyping techniques to entice their Western, wealthy, and educated audiences—by posing themselves as the *Other* (Edwards and Ramamurthy, 2017; Hall, 2018; Kaneva & Popescu, 2014; Mazzarella, 2003). This article contributes to that literature, by focusing on the self-stereotyping techniques of diverse national identities and cultures through nation branding campaigns launched by Latin American countries between 2010 and 2020.

Although these countries have different experiences to offer to their audiences, findings of this study suggest that their branding efforts make use of strikingly similar strategies: (1) the “adventurous” foreigner venturing to explore a new land; and (2) the proud, local citizen, telling the newcomer what is so special about their nation. These countries attempt to *other* themselves (in an unthreatening way) for audiences of foreign, affluent, and mostly White consumers through the imagery of exoticism, sublime nature, and local authenticity. By contrast, the advertisements that court foreign investment from businesses project images of familiarity, reliability/stability, and modernization. Both themes emphasize safety and comfort, either a safe place for exotic and regenerative leisure experiences, or a safe and unique place for profitable investment.

Theoretically, this study introduces the concepts of “hybridization” and “equalization” (Garcia Canclini, 2014) to the critical nation branding field. They serve as powerful

constructs to analyze *hybridized* representations of Latin American cultures and identities affected by global and local structures, in these countries’ quests to promote their exports, tourism, and foreign direct investment offerings. This article also takes Kraidy’s (2006) call to develop a critical theory of hybridity, by focusing on what he coined as “cultural trans-culturalism.” As findings of this study suggest, Latin American nation branding campaigns have embraced hybridity by aiming to depict a type of relationship between foreigners and locals, through the commodification of national cultures and identities available for global consumption. However, the representation of that hybridity has been unbalanced, prioritizing a foreign gaze that leads to self-stereotyping strategies. In this study, the dichotomy between “the adventurous foreigner” and the “Othered local” represents an imbalance, which is informed by a theoretical-methodological approach centered around the concept of hybridity (Garcia Canclini, 2014; Kraidy, 2006). Hybridity is, thus, integrated to the main body of literature focused on critical nation branding (Aronczyk, 2013; Kaneva, 2011) in Latin American contexts (Fehimovic & Ogden, 2018; Jiménez-Martínez, 2017; Lossio-Chávez, 2018; Miño, 2022), serving as another venue to describe the limitations of branding as a mechanism meant to represent multifaceted and contested constructs such as countries.

## The idea of the “Other” in subaltern contexts

In *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Hall (1997) theorized in depth about the representation of *different* people and places through media. He argued that representational practices are used to represent ‘difference’ in popular culture, which most of the time ends up conforming to established stereotypes. Hall outlined that *difference* matters because it is essential to define *meaning*.

In particular, the discourse about “the West and the Rest” emerged between the end of the 15th and 18th centuries. Europeans who traveled to the Americas in this period brought their own preconceptions to understand the people in this “new” world, which built the later knowledge to learn about it. Hall (2018) described that these discourses shaped “perceptions and practice. It is part of the way in which power operates. Therefore, it has consequences for both those who employ it and those who are ‘subjected’ to it” (p. 93). When people learn about the “Other,” they draw from their own cultural repertoires to understand the world.

The concepts of *Otherness* and *difference* have already been applied to the critical nation branding field. For example, Kaneva and Popescu (2014) studied the campaign “We Are Romanian, Not Roma.” They analyzed how that campaign, released by the Romanian government in 2008, served as a strategy to differentiate Romanians from the Romani, an ethnic group concentrated especially around Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe. Focused on advertisements released in Italy and Spain (the countries with the largest diasporic populations of Romanians in Europe at the time), Kaneva and Popescu (2014) concluded that the construction of a Romanian identity was based on “emotional attachments and similarities among Italians, Spaniards, and Romanians, while symbolically obliterating Romanian Roma from their narratives of identity” (p. 518). The nation branding campaigns of Romania in Italy and Spain depicted a side of Romanian identity aligned with Western standards, leaving out completely the Romani from Romanian branded narratives. Particularly in Spain, campaigns depicted Romanians as competent workers, subordinated to their Spanish superiors as helpful and nonthreatening labor. Kaneva and Popescu (2014) called these forms of representation as “self-colonization,” through which the Romanian government attempted to align their idea of a “national identity” to Western expectations.

A similar case of Othering was documented by Edwards and Ramamurthy (2017), who critiqued the “Incredible India” nation branding campaign. In their analysis, they concluded that to “keep up with globalization’s narrative of progress, India must claim to be a modern nation, yet the discursive space in which it can make such claims is limited both by its derivative status in relation to the West” (p. 337). They observed that such nation branding efforts were seen as successful to Western elites who wanted to see images of India as a traditional and spiritual destination that was yet modern and well-integrated to the world’s economy. This is a process of “auto-orientalization” (Mazzarella, 2003), through which countries use and integrate into their campaigns the insights and ideas that they believe their target audiences in the West want to hear about them.

Similar analyses could be drawn from the efforts of the Latin American nation branding campaigns presented in this article. They overwhelmingly made use of the same set of strategies to please their intended audiences. Like “auto-orientalization” (Mazzarella, 2003) or “self-colonization” (Kaneva & Popescu, 2014) processes, Latin American countries also fell into the logic of depicting the same set of branding techniques, aiming to please a Western gaze. Drawing from the work of Garcia Canclini (2014) and Kraidy (2006), this study describes this logic as the “hybridization” of Latin American cultures and identities through nation branding.

### “Hybridized” representations of Latin American cultures and identities

To contextualize nation branding in the Latin American scenario, the work of Nestor Garcia Canclini (2014) becomes particularly relevant. He argued that cultural diversity and expressions in the region, such as cinema, music, telenovelas, and products of other creative industries, have been constrained by a strong dependency on economic globalization and market expansion aspirations that became more accentuated during the last decades of the twentieth century. Garcia Canclini (2014) proposed that globalization has a dual agenda: worldwide financial systems and mass communication have grown to create more unified markets and lower political discrepancies. Because of that economic integration, globalization has reordered and reshuffled the unequal distribution of wealth and resources, while not actually eliminating these unjust circumstances (becoming the second stage of the dual agenda.) Garcia Canclini called to “imagine” new forms of globalization that break with the perpetuation circle of inequalities displayed through different cultural media industries. He added: “Although markets are governed by competition, which globalization intensifies, cultural mixing is presented in commercial circuits as reconciliation and equalization, with greater tendencies to cover up the conflicts than to work through them” (p. 170.) That “cultural mixing” is defined by Garcia Canclini as *hybridization* and *equalization*.

Kraidy (2006) took Garcia Canclini’s notions of hybridity, along with those from other critical-cultural scholars (Spivak, 1999; Martín-Barbero, 2006), and applied them to international communication research. Unlike cultural imperialism and cultural pluralism approaches (Tomlinson, 1991; Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1984), which conceive of the promotion of global “mono” or “multi” cultures through different forms of media, Kraidy suggested that hybridity should be theorized as what he coined “cultural transculturalism.” Cultural transculturalism considers hybridity as the representation of “synthetic” transcultures that adapt to translocal and intercontextual settings. He also proposed that hybridity is fully compatible with globalization, which differs from traditional debates on cultural imperialism. However, cultural transculturalism is equally concerned as cultural imperialism with issues of power imbalances and cultural change in media production and representation. These are the same set of issues that Garcia Canclini (2014) identified with his notions of hybridization and equalization.

In the context of Latin American nation branding, and as findings of this study suggest, national and cultural identities become commodities that need to be “sold” to satisfy global expectations of “what Latin America is.” For Garcia Canclini (2014), hybridization as a concept is informed by historical structures, economic dependency, and postcolonialism issues in Latin America. Hybridization is compared to a homogenization process in service to market and neoliberalism’s standards. Kraidy’s (2006) notion of hybridity is in conversation with Garcia Canclini’s work, and while it is still focused on power imbalances that may affect the representation of cultures through different forms of media, it pushes for that hybridity to be “synthetic” of a mix of different cultures. In that sense, hybridity is conceived as only compatible with globalization when cultural representations open space to move beyond power imbalances—such as those presented in Romania’s (Kaneva & Popescu, 2014) and India’s (Edwards

and Ramamurthy, 2017) cases. The theoretical underpinnings centered on hybridization inform the methodological approach of this case study, applied to Latin American nation branding.

### Theoretical-methodological approach

To study the hybridization and equalization of Latin American cultures and identities through nation branding, I conducted a qualitative content analysis of 72 video advertisements of 18 Latin American countries published to YouTube between 2010 and 2020. For this article, I selected 10 of those videos (see Table 1) to illustrate that analysis. These ads depicted the specific goods and services that each country intended to promote abroad, with the goal of growing their economies. I purposively selected videos that: (a) were in English; (b) explicitly promoted a country's exports, tourism, or investment offerings to foreign audiences; and (c) came from an official government/official nation branding organization account. In this analysis, attention was paid to both text and images/videos that accompanied that text, considering both denotative and connotative meanings (Barthes, 1972). All figures included in this article contain still images that I took from these videos, which are publicly available in the YouTube accounts of each organization. The caption on each figure includes a link to each branding campaign, hosted on the YouTube accounts of these different government/official nation branding organizations.

To select the videos, I started by looking at the ones published in late 2020. Then, I went back a few years until I reached four videos per country. For accounts that had multiple videos depicting different goals for nation branding, I selected ads that promoted different sectors. For example, Peru had many videos promoting different sides of their food and gastronomy industry, as well as tourism and other services. To make Peru's sample more inclusive of different nation branding goals, I only selected the most recent video that promoted food, as well as the most recent video that promoted a service (Peru as a convenient location for services to the audiovisual industry).

I extracted text from all 72 videos and imported them into MAXQDA (a software program designed for computer-assisted qualitative methods data) as transcripts. I used the software to have a panoramic view for all transcripts considered in the project, and code pieces of data that different countries had in common. My research was guided following the techniques of close reading. Brummett (2018) defined

close reading as the mindful, disciplined reading of an object with a view to deeper understanding of its meanings. Through close reading techniques, I started the coding process by selecting pieces of data that responded to both deductive and inductive codes. Using grounded theory research's terms (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014), I used "open," "axial," and "selective" coding strategies. In the "open" stage, I coded 353 pieces of data that consisted of either poignant words or short phrases that conformed into 28 different inductive and deductive codes. These were further analyzed in an "axial" coding stage. In the "selective" coding stage, I identified the four most prevalent codes that guided the analysis: (1) invitation to come; (2) experiences; (3) unique geography; and (4) people. Finally, and in concordance with the theoretical argument on "hybridity" that informs this study, I concluded my analysis with two themes focused on the dichotomy between the "foreigner" and "local" represented in these advertisements. This selection allowed me to focus on the idea of the "Other" as it applies to the hybridization of Latin American cultures and identities through nation branding. In the next section, I discuss how these four codes inform the two proposed themes.

### The "adventurous" foreigner who travels to Latin America

In most cases, the protagonist in these advertisements was a White man or woman, who wandered on their own through unknown, exotic lands, and went on an "adventure" to explore this new territory. Most of these videos had a touristic appeal, which is one of the three main goals of nation branding.

A poignant example of this came from Costa Rica (Fig. 1). The scenery in one of their ads is an isolated beach, on which a woman, looking at an orange sunrise, goes surfing on her own. The strength of the waves is later entangled with the image of hot coffee being poured into a cup, from which this woman later drinks. "What is it about a beautiful sunrise that energizes the body? That perfect cup of coffee that makes you feel strong and warm inside (...) Or the sound of crashing water that reconnects you to the wonderment of nature," she says (VisitCostaRica, 2017). Images of hands holding whole coffee beans, water slipping through someone's fingers, and the view and sound of a rushing waterfall are part of the background. In the middle of that scenery, this woman practices yoga while being observed by frogs, monkeys, and other species that are part of the local nature. Later, she is shown

**Table 1.** List of nation branding campaigns analyzed

Country	Title of the Ad	Year	Name of YouTube Account
Costa Rica	Essential Costa Rica, My Choice, Naturally	2017	VisitCostaRica
Honduras	You can't leave Honduras without really knowing Honduras	2018	Visit Honduras
Guatemala	True Wealth Goes Beyond Money, Guatemala	2014	VisitGuatemala
Bolivia	Bolivia te espera—Like a Dream	2015	Viceministerio Turismo
Panama	Panama #DiscoveredByNature	2020	Visit Panama
Peru	Peru, Dedicated to the World	2016	Marca Perú
Uruguay	URUGUAY - #1 Business HUB in Latin America for global services	2020	Uruguay XXI
Colombia	This is Colombia	2017	Colombia
El Salvador	Discover El Salvador: Tourism industry	2018	El Salvador Marca País
Nicaragua	Investment Opportunities in Nicaragua 2017	2018	Investmentnicaragua



**Figure 1.** “Essential Costa Rica. My Choice, Naturally” Ad (Source: VisitCostaRica YouTube account, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9g7-4gf76s4>)

laughing with small groups of people, trying new types of food, walking through a lively and crowded street, watching other women dance, and doing more yoga. The strength of different rushing waterfalls is juxtaposed with a towering, grand volcano. The woman later enjoys a massage, listens to local music, bathes at the bottom of a waterfall, goes on a canopy ride through a forest that resembles an open space with thick, green walls. Finally, she states: “Ultimately in life we make choices that define what type of life we want and who we want to be (...) Costa Rica, my choice, naturally” (VisitCostaRica, 2017). She is White and speaks English without a Costa Rican accent, so viewers could conclude that she is most likely from North America or Europe. She also introduces herself in the ad as a neuroscientist. These two facts are significant, since they define to *whom* the ad is targeted: educated, English-speaking audiences. Drawing from her experiences, viewers could conclude that Costa Rica is a country in which you can travel by yourself—meaning, it is *safe* to go there, where you can “reconnect” with nature and “pause” from the fast-paced world that people live in. The ad shows a sunrise that “energizes” you, coffee that makes you feel “strong” and “warm inside,” and water that “reconnects you” with nature. It is this woman’s “choice” to go to Costa Rica because it is “the natural” choice—meaning, Costa Rica is defined by its nature, and it is as well an “obvious” destination choice *for others like her*.

An advertisement from Honduras also portrayed a younger, White man experiencing different adventures in that country (Visit Honduras, 2018). An interesting scene in this video calls the attention of the viewer, on which this tourist is invited by a local Indigenous man to go on a zipline ride. The native man speaks in his own dialect, instead of Spanish or English. That is why, in the ad, a woman translates to English for the tourist, telling him: “He asks if you’d be interested in doing canopy.” The tourist seems slightly taken aback at first, since he did not understand what he was being invited to do (go on a zipline ride), but in a later scene he is seen enjoying the activity and interacting with other Hondurans, who invite him to try new foods, observe and take pictures of exotic and colorful birds, and tour the jungle.

This scene is significant in the context of the ad because there is a direct interaction between the “local” and the “foreigner.” The local speaks in his own dialect, wears a traditional hat, and looks old, wise, and knowledgeable. The foreigner observes the local and accepts the invitation, the “challenge” presented to him by the local. The advertisement, with a clear touristic appeal, is intended to those who look like the foreigner depicted in the ad. Viewers can “see themselves” in the video through the lens of this tourist, while the local is *Othered* through the gaze of the tourist.

Guatemala made a similar invitation to foreigners as one of the best destinations for them to hone their Spanish skills. One of their ads mentioned: “Guatemala, the best place to

come and learn Spanish (...) Not only you will come and learn the language, but every teacher will be eager to teach you something more (...) Let Guatemala teach you a life lesson” (VisitGuatemala, 2014). In the ad, Guatemalans are seen talking to a Caucasian, blonde male while they share a traditional meal with him. But in each of these interactions, the camera centers the attention on the foreigner, while the locals take a secondary role in position to him. Their faces are not directly shown since the advertisement is centered on the tourist.

Just like the cases presented from Costa Rica and Honduras, this Guatemalan advertisement makes use of the same strategy to entice tourists to come and experience the Mayan culture in Guatemala. The foreigner is “learning” a new language but is also seeing the world through a different lens, while Guatemalans encourage him to come and explore what they have to offer.

So far, all lead characters in these advertisements have been White. In one of their ads, Bolivia also featured a Caucasian woman, with a British accent, who said that being in Bolivia was “like a dream.” She said: “I saw warriors battle for the earth, I tasted the nectar of the gods (...) an elixir fallen from the sky (...) It was like a dream, but it wasn’t one, Bolivia awaits you” (Viceministerio Turismo, 2015). In this ad, there is what appears to be an “encounter” between two worlds: the world of the woman who narrates the video, and her meeting with a Bolivian Indigenous leader. According to her experiences, this woman said that being in Bolivia was “like a dream” because it exceeded anything beyond what was known to her in real life. To live that “dream” is the invitation that this woman gives to the viewer, while the Indigenous man is shown dancing for her, not talking, wearing his traditional clothing.

Finally, Panama’s campaign (Visit Panama, 2020) features images of tourists visiting Panama who are on their own, exploring abundant nature and exciting experiences. In contrast to those scenes, locals of the country are depicted playing music, dancing, and wearing traditional clothes—all unknown to the newcomers. In that comparison, there is a clear distinction between “us” (the tourists) and the “Other” (the locals, who welcomed the newcomers to their traditions and their land). This example is similar to the one presented by Bolivia discussed above.

These examples show hybridized versions of diverse Latin American cultures and identities through the gaze of White men and women, who are educated and have the resources to wander through these “unknown” territories being presented to them. The Costa Rican and Guatemalan cases are examples of locals that are hindered in the background of the advertisements, centered in the foreigners. The Honduran, Bolivian, and Panamanian cases exoticize the locals, who speak native dialects, perform traditional dances, or play with local instruments. These are all experiences that deviate from Western

standards, *Othering* the locals for global consumption. Those decisions most likely allowed White and Western audiences to relate to the experiences of the lead characters depicted in the ads.

### The locals who “proudly” serve the foreigner

The second theme under analysis is the presentation in these advertisements of locals, who “proudly” shared with the world what their country has to offer and serve to foreigners. These locals made the invitation to come and explore their countries not just with touristic purposes, but also with commercial and financial interests. Indeed, many of these invitations were created to invest in the nation because of their strategic geographic location, the value of their people, and the several economic advantages offered to make that initial investment. While the focus of this second theme deviates from tourism purposes, the goal of the ads analyzed remains the same—to commodify and sell national cultures and identities for global businesses and investment.

A good example of this is the campaign “Peru, Dedicated to the World” (Marca Perú, 2016). In this campaign, Indigenous communities are shown working the land and harvesting potatoes, grapes, mangoes, and coffee from different types of crops (Fig. 2). Like the Costa Rican ad, Peru’s video depicts images of hands holding different products which are shown to the viewer, like an invitation to consume them. In a later scene, a coffee drink with the logo of the Peruvian nation brand is served to a White man in what looks to be a cosmopolitan, cold climate city in the Global North. This contrast between the “local” and the “cosmopolitan” is evident throughout the ad: images of local pisco producers—a liquor made from grape—are tangled with those of a mixologist serving pisco as an elegant drink. Pictures of Indigenous women in their traditional clothing weaving with Alpaca wool intertwine with the image of an elegant woman using a scarf made from that fabric. Mangoes, avocados, and coffee beans harvested by local workers are later shown to be traded in a street market in a lively city. This ad calls the viewer to pay attention to the *origin* of the products that are consumed by the Caucasian consumers drinking that cup of Peruvian coffee, wearing that scarf made from Alpaca wool, and buying those avocados and mangoes at what seems to be a city market somewhere in North America or Europe. For Peruvians, the promotion of the *origin* of their products is particularly relevant. That is because the video explicitly intends to act as a poem to the “Mother Nature” that exists in Peru. The ad says: “Our products are our conversation with you, earth (...) Our way of telling you what we have learned (...) Where we come from and where we are going,

In every fruit from the earth, in every stitch of thread, Peru is there” (Marca Perú, 2016).

In the advertisement, viewers can appreciate that Peru *learns* from the earth, from Mother Nature. Peru is *there*; both in the highest of the Andes Mountains with local Indigenous communities, as well as in the Peruvian goods that are later consumed by the tourist who explores their land—like the White man drinking pisco while looking at the horizon in the highest of the Andes. That Indigenous origin, which is proudly depicted both through local farmers and groups of women dancing and knitting, becomes of special relevance to represent Peru. This country holds the territory not only to grow unique products, but also has a culture and identity that is available for global consumption. And Peruvians are fiercely proud of that heritage that they show to the world, as the man who narrates the ad and says: “This is what we do (...) This is who we are. And this is the source of our pride. Peru, dedicated to you (...) Dedicated to the world” (Marca Perú, 2016). However, although in the advertisement Peruvians proudly show to the foreigner what makes them unique, the video falls into the same logics presented in the first theme. Particularly, Indigenous populations are *Othered* for global consumption, to foreigners who may seek out Peruvian pisco, grapes, mangoes, or wool.

In a less metaphoric manner, other countries also depicted their people as hardworking, with clear economic end goals. In Uruguay’s ad (Uruguay XXI, 2020), a Uruguayan businessman is talking to the camera and attempting to persuade viewers that Uruguay is a smart choice for foreign investment. Uruguay’s video not only relies on their nature or experiences to be lived, but also on social constructions that are part of the nation that make it stand out in the Latin American context. Some of those social constructions include their strong, traditional democracy, their free educational system, and their cultural ties to European immigrant communities in Latin America, which are proudly promoted by this man in the ad. Although Uruguay does not show a rich Indigenous heritage in the ad, they use their connection as a former European colony to entice their audiences in the Global North with their offerings to come and invest in the nation. Uruguay uses to their advantage the shared cultural values with Europe to promote the country, particularly relevant to them in business contexts.

The ad “This is Colombia” (Colombia, 2017) has the voice over of a Colombian man, also making the invitation to audiences, particularly business leaders, to visit the country. There are mentions of Colombia as a growing economy (“strong and steady nation”), “determined to take the country to the next level” with a “business-friendly environment.” Colombia makes an invitation to see the world through Colombian products, describing that Asians start their days



Figure 2. “Peru, Dedicated to the World” Ad (Source: Marca Perú YouTube account, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tfLNvXypzWU>)

with the world's smoothest coffee, Europeans enjoy their exotic fruits, and in North America, ceremonies are decorated with a wide variety of Colombian flowers. Colombia is represented as an open economy to the world, in which they even "smile as if joy could be exported." This is a clear association between the new, business-oriented Colombian identity, with "vibrant and caring people who believe in reconciliation and integration" (Colombia, 2017).

When it comes to the people, locals are seen welcoming tourists and business leaders to enjoy what Colombia has to offer to them. In the ad, we see the image of a Colombian woman smiling. This image is followed by an image of three businessmen—one of them can be assumed to be Colombian, while the other two are Asian. However, the intention of the ad when showing the Colombian woman is unclear: she serves as a decorative, almost ornamental piece to depict *who Colombians are*, and how some of them are open to foreign buyers and investment.

A more evident example of this came from El Salvador (El Salvador Marca País, 2018). They focused on the promotion of their tourism industry not to tourists, but to potential investors with resources to support their operations in the country and build all-inclusive resort hotels, among other services. In the video, images of beaches, with tall waves to surf, are shown. Several people can be seen walking those beaches, as well as some of the tall mountains to be found in the country. Some of the text that flashed on the screen of the video read "Privileged location," "Fantastic year-round climate," "Rising demand in tourism," "Hub for Latin American airlines," "Modern facilities," and "Service vocation." These are all intended to be used as advantages for potential business groups to choose El Salvador as their next investment destination.

Appealing to external investors in the same video, El Salvador announced: "Discover El Salvador, one of the greatest countries in the world (...) Great in tourism industry opportunities, come and see it for yourself" (El Salvador Marca País, 2018). In the images, Salvadoran workers can be seen preparing meals, while tourists walk in isolated beaches, enjoy the sea, and hike a tall mountain. While the video is narrated by what could be assumed is a Salvadoran, foreigners are the lead characters in these ads, while locals pose as part of the local scenery and are *Othered* for investors to see how their workforce could look like.

Nicaragua also promoted the talent of their people, by saying that "Nicaraguan human talent is considered young, dynamic, and highly qualified (...) Making Nicaragua one of the most competitive investment platforms in the Americas" (Investmentnicaragua, 2018). Of special interest in this advertisement is how labor is depicted as a strategic source of power for Nicaragua. Besides being close to important financial districts in Mexico and the United States, Nicaraguan labor is "abundant" for investors to come and develop their operations in the country. Their geographic position is of special interest, too: "Nicaragua is strategically located in the heart of the Americas (...) Right in the center of the Central American isthmus, and bordered by the Pacific Ocean and Caribbean Sea (...) Which facilitates maritime, terrestrial, and air trade with other continents and the rest of the American countries" (Investmentnicaragua, 2018). Images of different businessmen are depicted. They narrate the benefits of Nicaragua for their companies, such as preferential trade agreements with the different countries in the Americas, that

allow them to use the country as an export's platform. However, those images are contrasted later with the Nicaraguan workers tasked with growing each of these businesses.

In summary, this theme can be analyzed using Aronczyk's (2013) work on nation branding and national identity. One of Aronczyk's many critiques of nation branding is its use of national identity and citizens' "pride" to promote a country internationally. Aronczyk observed how the nation branding professionals tasked with campaigns on behalf of developing nations have traditionally adopted national identity as a "strategic asset" to promote a country, both internally and externally. In her own words: "the primary responsibility for the success of the nation brand lies with individuals: the nation's citizens, members of the diaspora, or even non-citizens in distant locations who may find cause to engage with the nation and therefore wish to have a stake in its success. For national citizens in particular, the key function is to 'live the brand'" (p. 76). In the advertisements presented in this section, the locals are presented in relationship to their status next to the foreigner. For example, going back to Peru's advertisement (Fig. 2), the locals literally present and serve various Peruvian products available for consumption to the foreigner: avocados, mangoes, coffee, among others. Uruguay's example is a good one to understand how certain national identities are "strategic" for these countries to emphasize—in their case, their "European" closeness to the Global North in terms of shared, cultural values that are good for economic reasons. Colombia's case directed the viewer's attention to their geographical location, right in the middle of the Americas, as a benefit for businesses. Some depictions of their locals were shown, at times on their own, and at times with businessmen from other countries. The cases of El Salvador and Nicaragua went further and depicted people as workers who did not interact with the foreigner and labored mostly in secondary and tertiary positions. This opens the question: *who* are these nation branding campaigns benefiting to? I tackle some answers to this, and other questions, in the conclusion section of this article.

## Conclusion: hybridized and equalized Latin American cultures and identities

As the findings of this study indicate, images and techniques used in these nation branding efforts feed into the global imaginary of Latin America as a region of the world that is striking, unusual, accommodating, and to which foreigners are invited through an appeal that accentuates that exoticism. As Edwards and Ramamurthy (2017) said: "for countries in the global South, encouraged to commodify their identity in order to benefit from global trade, national branding frequently works to impose identities and deny or commodify diversity in the interests of the market rather than communities" (p. 339). For the cases in which Latin America was not presented in an exotic way, it was depicted as a safe, strategic, and smart destination for foreign direct investment and global businesses. But what is most relevant in this analysis is that in all cases, the main center of attention was put on the foreigner. We learn through the gaze of this lead character about the *locals* in these countries, who are *Othered* to outsiders—and to viewers of these ads, the intended target audience—for global consumption.

In a context of heightened neoliberalism, nation branding's main goals are the attraction of exports, tourists, and investment offerings. This leads different countries to *hybridize* their cultures and identities to global, Western expectations that allow them to successfully promote each of these industries. The concepts of "hybridization" and "hybridity" (Garcia Canclini, 2014; Kraidy, 2006) serve as powerful theoretical constructs to conceptualize nation branding in the region as a "simulacrum" that is performative to Western expectations (Lossio-Chávez, 2018), as a form "symbolic capital" (Fehimovic & Odgen, 2018) that profits from exoticized identities of countries depicted as an "economic unit" to the world (Jiménez-Martínez, 2017), and as a "modern expression of colonialism" (Miño, 2022). What all these research studies have in common is the adoption of a cultural approach to nation branding (Kaneva, 2011), which recognizes the international power dynamics to which Latin America has been subject to as a region due to their economic dependency on nations that are at the core of the world's economy since its inception (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979; Garcia Canclini, 2014). While some countries in the region have significantly improved their economic production structures by gaining entry to international markets of goods and services, the bulk of Latin American countries "have not been able to leave their natural-resource-based production patterns completely" (Bértola & Ocampo, 2013, p. 2). Because of such dynamics, that operate at the regional level, most countries considered in this study used nation branding as mechanism to appeal to a foreign gaze, exoticizing national cultures and identities and *Othering* the locals presented in these advertisements.

Through the concept of hybridization, Garcia Canclini (2014) argued that Latin American culture had become homogenized through different forms of media, aiming to appeal to Western tastes. He proposed that media and communication industries act as vehicles for cultural expression, equalizing national identities to reduce market-oriented discourses about the nation. As this study suggests, the same situation applies to Latin American nation branding. Kraidy's (2006) notion of hybridity goes a step beyond Garcia Canclini's conception of the definition since it applies to other regional scenarios beyond Latin America. While Kraidy's call was to think of hybridity as compatible with globalization, he also argued that the key to this concept is in conceiving cultures "to be inherently mixed" (p. 14), assuming the representation of individuals from different cultures *not* just as "discrete entities." All campaigns presented in this study presented the interaction between the "foreigner" and the "local" as separate, discrete entities, by placing the locals as *foreign others* and taking the gaze and perspective of the "adventurous foreigner" as normal. In that sense, the Latin American nation branding campaigns presented in this article follow a logic that places locals and foreigners in an "Us" vs. "Them" dichotomy (Hall, 2018), incompatible with Kraidy's call to conceive hybridity as a "synthetic" of inherently mixed cultures.

This study's contribution to the literature resides in the recognition of a set of "auto-orientalization" (Mazzarella, 2003) and "self-colonization" (Kaneva & Popescu, 2014) strategies, which at the Latin American level can be conceived as "hybridization" processes. This study also contributes to the cultural approach to nation branding (Kaneva, 2011), using hybridization as a theoretical construct that outlines the limitations of branding as a mechanism to represent contested and multifaceted constructs such as countries. Instead of relying on

images and stereotypes that hybridize and equalize diverse identities and cultures, further research should focus on exploring whether nation branding campaigns can portray the interaction between the foreigner and the local beyond mere separate and discrete entities. In that context, this study makes the same call that Garcia Canclini (2014) did, which is to "imagine" new forms of globalization, but in the context of nation branding. This call follows Kraidy's (2006) conception of hybridity as a "synthetic," pushing for the representation of cultures as inherently mixed, even considering the limitations of branding as a mechanism meant to represent contested and multifaceted constructs such as countries. While the intentions of people behind the campaigns presented in this article can be novel, through hybridization they also distance the "foreigner" from the "local," in a communicative process with little interaction between one and the other. In that sense, I argue that the ethicality of nation branding should also rely on the representation of an interaction between the two, in which hybridity is represented by people who can learn from each other and the purpose of their relations. This approach could allow nation branding to grow out of the *Othering* emphasis that has permeated this practice since its inception, despite being constrained by market-oriented discourses that have led nation branding to its current state.

## Data availability

The data underlying this article are available in the article and in its online supplementary material.

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