



Media, cruising, gay sex and tourist destinations

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ABSTRACT

The increasing visibility of gay tourism in digital media generates debates around certain practices that are not tied to heteronormativity, as is the case with cruising. This study explores the contradictions generated by cruising as a potential tourist resource based on debates reproduced in digital media. Specifically, it examines one of the most important international LGBT+ tourist destinations, Maspalomas, and one of the best-known settings for this type of practice: the Maspalomas sand dunes.

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Introduction

The categorisation of gay friendly has a positive impact on tourist destinations in that it provides an image of modernity (Domínguez Ruiz, 2021). Hence, companies have also been incorporating a more inclusive vision into their advertising (Cheng, Zhou, & Yao, 2022), and this is indicative of the progressive social acceptance of certain forms of homosexuality. In fact, the LGBT+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and other sexual minorities) tourism niche has been expanding, and today many tourist destinations compete to attract this market segment, generating specific advertising campaigns for this sector. Indeed, some of the most important international tourism fairs, such as Fitur in Madrid (Spain), have specific sections for LGBT+ tourist destinations. The global impact of LGBT+ tourism on the economy has been acknowledged in previous research (Badgett, Waaldijk, & van der Meulen Rodgers, 2019; Guaracino & Salvato, 2017). A specific focus on the economic benefits of LGBT+ tourism has been noted in Spain (Ródenas, 2020) and particularly in the area of Maspalomas (Santana, 2004). Melián-González, Moreno-Gil, and Araña (2011) reported that the average daily spending of gay tourists in Maspalomas is 177 euros, significantly higher than the average of 40.96 euros spent by tourists in general in the Canary Islands in 2007. However, as LGBT+ – mainly male gay – tourists become more visible, it is evident that despite social advances in the acceptance of sexual and gender diversity (Calvo & Pichardo, 2011), in practice, conflicts and contradictions are generated between certain uses and the projected image of the tourist destination.

In the past, the notion of 'gay' carried negative connotations, and tourist destinations avoided associations with this segment. At present, an image has been constructed that reproduces a whole series of clichés and stereotypes about gay tourists – with a 'positive' meaning. Comparing these two representations, progress has undeniably been made. However, the new image of LGBT+ tourists (in practice male gay tourists) ends up standardising internal diversity in favour of a white, male, 'politically correct'

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media representation (Greedy, 2018), concealing other groups that might be less appealing to tourist destinations on account of their economic and even racial characteristics (Reddy-Best & Olson, 2020).

There are a number of clichés surrounding gay tourists: They have more purchasing power, travel more, are more willing to spend, have a higher level of education, and have a special interest in cultural events. Such stereotypes, although widespread, do not always correspond to reality (Hughes, 2005). Gay tourists travel for a variety of reasons, possess unequal purchasing power, and travel to 'gay friendly' as well as other destinations (Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2018). For Leroy and Jaurand (2010), gay tourism is not the tourism of gays or, rather, of all gays, much less of the whole LGBT+ collective. The characterisation of a supposed gay tourist is usually carried out according to the users of certain destinations. This implies a fair amount of bias and questions the generalisation of a homogeneous category of tourists (Hughes, 2005).

Undoubtedly, one of the most controversial practices affecting the image of gay tourists and their tourist destinations is related to 'cruising'. Although the existence of cruising sites attracts some tourists, their increasing visibility is being understood as a threat to other types of tourism. The dearth of literature related to cruising in tourism settings, which contrasts with the broad literature on the link between cruising and sexually transmitted diseases, is significant (Binson et al., 2001). However, despite the fact that cruising could be considered a tourist resource, no approaches in specialised tourism journals have analysed it from this perspective. This is because science is not without moral prejudice, and the link between sexuality and tourism has always been problematic. By associating sex and tourism, another association quickly forms with prostitution, the sex trade, power relations, and paedophilia, often confusing sex tourism with sex in tourism (Valcuende & Cáceres-Feria, 2014), and the recreational aspect of sex is left behind. This confusion is also reproduced in the media, which usually adopts a sensationalist approach to the issue.

Indeed, on many gay travel websites and blogs, cruising is exhibited as just another attraction. Sex in tourism is an incentive for a particular market segment, both heterosexual and homosexual. In fact, the advertising of tourist destinations constantly plays with body images that conform to certain aesthetic criteria, that is, within certain parameters that reproduce a normative vision. Cruising, especially through its growing visibility in digital media, breaks down this heteronormativity to some extent. These practices involve the appropriation of certain public spaces by sexual dissidents and raise the visibility of another way of understanding sexual relations, threatening the cisheteronormativity that characterises tourist settings, which is also reproduced in the treatment of sexual diversity. Therefore, it is essential to explore the link between cruising and tourism in greater depth, considering that the virtual world has substantially changed the significance of these practices. As noted by Latour, Rifiotis, Petry, and Segata (2015), networks enable disconnections and ruptures to operate in proximity and reconnections to be generated in distance. This is fundamental in understanding not only the change in the significance of cruising but also its protagonism in the media.

This article explores a case study to answer two questions: How are these non-normative sexual practices viewed in the media? What impact does cruising have on the friendly image projected by the media about gay tourists and their tourist destinations?

To answer these questions, the study examines one of the most important international gay tourist destinations, Maspalomas, on the island of Gran Canaria (Spain), and a key setting for cruising: the sand dunes. The Maspalomas sand dunes are a protected natural area, classified as a special nature reserve. At the same time, these dunes are advertised on certain travel pages as a space where people can enjoy freedom – the largest outdoor space in the world where nudism and outdoor sex can be practiced. The different uses spark a great deal of debate on social media – debate that can be analysed to see how gay tourists are represented in the media and how these representations affect the projected image of the tourist destination.

The practice of cruising: from secrecy to visibility

Sex between strangers in public spaces, either in open areas such as beaches and parks, or in closed spaces such as cinemas, bars, saunas, and toilets, has been frequent among homosexual men, especially in contexts marked by repression (Guasch, 1995; Langarita Adiego, 2013, 2014). Anonymity has long been essential to these encounters. In the absence of spaces of their own, a game of proximity is developed to facilitate encounters with other men and, at the same time, one of distance, to allow for total or relative intimacy, so that any public space can potentially be a cruising site (Solis, 2020).

Places with large crowds of people and even some means of transport – such as the subway in Mexico City (Hernández-Sancén, 2020) – are propitious for cruising, as are places that are far from urban centres. Tourist settings generally facilitate cruising in that they fulfil certain important requirements to understand these practices: They are far away from the participants' places of origin, where social control is more direct, and they facilitate encounters with other people who are not part of their everyday lives. Unsurprisingly, therefore, beaches are often regular scenarios for sexual practices (Jaurand, 2005), which usually go unnoticed or can be avoided by other users (Gaissad & Audouit, 2014). Locations that possess specific characteristics that facilitate the overlapping of the terrain vague and queer space (Andersson, 2023). There are numerous such beaches in Spain, including the Playa de Rompeculos in Huelva, Playa del Saler in Valencia, Playa del Rebollo in Alicante, Playa del Calblanque in Murcia, and Playa de Cabopino in Marbella.

The social impact and significance of sexual practices in public spaces have changed in recent years as they have become more visible. Today, a segment of the gay community defends the practice of cruising by offloading the stigma attached to it, although it is important to remember that sex in public spaces is also practiced by heterosexuals (dogging). This is true of certain beaches, such as Cap d'Adge in France (Welzer-Lang, 2001) or in areas of the Maspalomas sand dunes, where there are areas for heterosexual sexual swinging.

The social stigma attached to cruising is rooted in the moral and biomedical visions that focus on its dangers. In the case of anonymous sex between men, two characteristics are specified: (1) the consideration that it carries the risk of transmitting sexually transmitted infections or the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), and (2) the understanding of it as the paradigmatic expression of a perverse, unhealthy, and unsatisfactory practice. Hence, cruising clashes with the canons of normative sexuality that link sexuality–love–romance–couple–reproduction and support the hegemonic heteronormative model (Guasch, 2000; Pichardo, 2009). Thus, it implies a breaking apart of sexual–sexed space, which is based on the radical separation of sexuality carried out in private (moral) and public (immoral) spaces (Hubbard, 2000).

Knowledge and access to cruising sites was traditionally passed on by word of mouth, the ‘intuition’ of gay men when looking for and spotting these spaces, or sometimes facilitated by print publications (the usual means of dissemination and contacts before the arrival of the Internet). In recent years, the emergence and extension of social media have made it possible to publicise places where cruising is practiced. This dissemination has helped to blur the boundaries between the public and the intimate. They are no longer spaces accessed exclusively by those ‘in the know’, who follow a whole series of interaction rituals (Langarita Adiego, 2014) in which appearance and attitude were fundamental to recognise and be recognised (Pichardo, 2002).

The significance of cruising has changed, and what was ‘secret’, a more or less safe ‘liminal’ place, has become public. Cruising spaces and practices are being disseminated, visible in the media – even through general tourist publications such as *Time Out* magazine (Time Out, 2014) – and are accessible with a simple click (GaysCruising, n.d.). For some practitioners, hiding is no longer necessary. The following have made a major contribution to this evolution: (1) the mediation provided by apps, which change forms of interaction (Valcuende, Costa, & Macarro, 2020) and (2) the dissemination of these places through the online world.

Advertising and crowding feed into one another, enabling the consumption of sex in the physical space, but also in the online space, where many cruising sites have been integrated. As Prat (2012, p. 240) points out, analysing the emblematic case of Cap d'Adge, “the social relations generated through the existing ‘links’ on Internet ‘websites’ favour the tourist development of destinations where there is a certain marginal tourism”.

Today's cruising sites are also articulated beyond physical reality through specialised applications and contact apps, such as Grindr or Wapo, and even through commercial or personal pornographic websites, where videos with images of sexual practices recorded in these places are posted. Thus, these contexts become conducive scenarios not only for encounters but also for generating and consuming ‘virtual’ sex. At the same time, they facilitate connections between virtual users, which in many cases will cease to be virtual through agreed encounters at physical cruising sites.

These sexual practices usually occur in semi-hidden places and away from onlookers, so conflicts are not typically generated between different types of users. Problems are created primarily on the basis of discourses that, beyond contributing to solving specific problems, generate moral panic (Cohen, 2011). In fact, actions to prevent such sexual practices from occurring are constant at different cruising sites (Andersson, 2012). From a heteronormative perspective, the use of public spaces is controlled and regulated. This situation occurs in the context of a fragile balance between legislation that attempts to eliminate or restrict this type of practice and users who make an initially unintended use of space.

The online world becomes a speaker that ends up making public what should be discreet, thereby fostering the intervention of different agents who take action in relation to the place without being present. These contradictions are also evident in the case of the Maspalomas sand dunes. Local society consented to such practices when they were only evident to local users and especially to tourists who eventually formed spaces for sexual interaction with other tourists and with the local population. The potential for sex is, de facto, an incentive for some gay tourists who come to this type of destination (Clift & Forrest, 1999). The offline world facilitated the compartmentalisation of different spaces. However, this vision changes when these sexual practices, both in the dunes and in certain establishments, begin to be covered by the media, websites, and press articles with a clearly sensational approach.

Methodology

This research is part of a broader ethnographic project that combines various research techniques and was developed in Chueca, Sitges, Maspalomas, and Torremolinos between 2018 and 2022. The case presented here examines the effects of a scientific debate, which we believe encompasses a moral discourse, on the subject of anonymous sexual encounters in Maspalomas. For the study of this case, discourse analysis has been fundamental, from an interpretive perspective. Our interest has not been so much in representativeness as in the significance of the data. As Martín-Barbero points out, it is a matter of losing “the objects” to recover “the processes” (Martín-Barbero, 2012). For Martín Criado (2014), discourse can only be understood relationally, as a positioning against other positions, in a situation of ambiguity.

Based on the analysis of news and debates on the Internet, we interpret the different positions and changes experienced in the meaning of cruising in this tourist destination at various scales: international, national, and local. At the same time, the analysis of news on the internet and social networks has also allowed us to address an aspect that we consider fundamental and that goes beyond the production of information: its consumption in provincial and local contexts. These techniques, combined with interviews and ethnographic fieldwork, enabled methodological triangulation (Sade-Beck, 2004) and ultimately brought us closer to what C. Geertz (1973) defines as “thick description”, understood as a description of significant events in which data is interpreted in terms of the historical and cultural context in which they are produced. This analysis has been enriched by contributions from queer studies, which propose a critical perspective on the normalization of social spaces as well as sexed subjects who interact in them (Gandy, 2012).

The analysis of this controversy involved a review of digital editions of press publications, general and LGBT+ tourism websites, travel apps, and blogs published from 2009 to 2022 was conducted to produce this article. During this period, two controversies took considerable dimensions. In 2009, two television reports were broadcast on national television stations, which generated a broad debate regarding the significance of cruising in the context of Maspalomas. Meanwhile, in 2021, the findings of a scientific article (García-Romero, Peña-Alonso, Hesp, Hernández-Cordero, & Hernández-Calvento, 2022) were also reported in the international media, turning the spotlight back onto this type of practice.

In both media polemics, the practice of sex in the dunes, especially gay sex, is seen as a problem. It is precisely these two cases that have attracted special attention, systematically following up both controversies in the different media mentioned above. The intention here is not to quantify the news stories published, but rather to analyse the image that is reproduced in the media by linking cruising with the tourist destination, and secondly, to analyse discourses about gay tourists through media coverage of these practices. The search for information on the Internet was conducted at two levels.

Initially, to explore the link between cruising, tourism, and gay tourists, various search terms were combined in Google – gay, gays, cruising, tourism, and Maspalomas – which yielded press articles and travel pages, both specific to LGBT+ communities, as well as general travel pages, where user opinions echoed the discussion around cruising (e.g. TripAdvisor). In turn, specific searches were performed on apps such as Twitter and Facebook. In the first app, the link between pornography, cruising, and tourist destinations was clear on numerous pages. After this initial search, the next step was to focus more specifically on the two debates indicated previously. To explore these debates in depth, searches were conducted combining specific terms such as 'La Noria', 'Tele5', cruising, Maspalomas, 'Antena 3', and 'Arena Mix'.

The present study has examined how this controversy is reported by a news agency, seven nationally circulated newspapers, and three regionally circulated newspapers. The news item has engendered opinions and debates in four blog forums. Of these blogs, two are oriented towards the LGBT+ community, one has a generalist focus, and one is a travel-themed website. This search sent us back to the debate conducted mainly in the general national, regional, and local press and also on specific apps such as Facebook, where there are LGBT+ groups linked to the sand dunes. One such group is called 'Los amigos de las dunas' [The friends of the dunes].

A second search was conducted in order to evaluate the media impact of the article about Maspalomas Dunes published by García-Romero et al. (2022). On this occasion, the controversy was elevated to an international level; hence, the analysis was expanded to the press of various countries, mainly Latin American and English-speaking countries. Through an online search, we identified 48 entries related to the controversy surrounding the scientific article, and selected those that were directly linked to the topic. This news item was widely covered by most generalist TV channels in Spain, five nationally circulated newspapers, and various regional, provincial, and local newspapers across the Canary Islands and other regions and provinces in Spain. Furthermore, international media outlets such as CNN and National Geographic have reported on this research. Additionally, this news has been covered in press publications from Argentina, Chile, Great Britain, the United States, and Mexico.

Moreover, we focused on analysing information provided by specialised travel forums such as TripAdvisor, in which travellers evaluate tourist destinations and carry out specific searches, to analyse their views on cruising.

This work conducted on the Internet was complemented by fieldwork carried out in Maspalomas, in specific periods between 2018 and 2022, along with interviews with key informants. The information provided by these techniques, although not directly used in this article, has helped us to corroborate the information obtained through the analysis of digital media and other online applications.

Following ethical principles, only information that is already accessible on the Internet has been made public. Contextual information about the specific places where cruising takes place in the dunes has not been included in this paper, although it is also easily accessible information, and no information provided by informants that may injure them is given here.

Maspalomas: sand, sun, sea, and sex

Many destinations have been progressively integrating various forms of tourism presented as 'marginal'. Moreover, the limits and characteristics that define what is or is not marginal have evolved according to the historical context. In Spain, media debates about these forms of tourism have progressively transformed in accordance with the historical period in which they take place: from bikini-clad women to women going topless, nudism, and, finally the practice of sex between strangers, such as dogging or cruising. Criticism of these practices has been fundamentally ethical or moral in nature. During Franco's regime (Cáceres-Feria, del Río, Molina, & García, 2021), and later on in town councils, once Spain had transitioned to democracy, attempts have been made to regulate, if not prohibit, activities such as nudism and cruising, which for a long time were considered crimes.

Maspalomas, in Gran Canaria, is one of the most important tourist destinations in Spain. It is also a major gay tourist destination internationally and has a large offer focused on this segment of the market. The island, especially the southern part, in the municipality of San Bartolomé de Tirajana, combines all the incentives to attract tourists since the 1960s: extensive services, a wide array of hotels, leisure, entertainment, and shops; good weather all year round; and long sandy beaches. The possibility of having sex outside of one's daily life has been a further stimulus for some tourists. There are numerous travel websites and blogs dedicated to the gay community that refer to the appeal of the dunes as a location for engaging in outdoor sex. Some of these pages recount personal experiences, and in some cases provide information on the most suitable locations, with users offering their opinions on the matter (GaysCruising, n.d.).

The island offers the option of sex in numerous specific establishments: saunas, bars, clubs, swingers clubs, and many more that are mentioned in various gay guides (Spartacus, n.d.; Travelgay, n.d.). Of all these spaces, the Maspalomas sand dunes

particularly stand out – a place of undeniable environmental value that has diverse uses: a space for environmental education, a location for adverts and audiovisual shoots, a place frequented by tourists to take photos and selfies, a place for camel rides, a site to view the sunset, a site to go hiking, and a site to practice nudism. However, it has also become famous for the possibility of having sex with strangers, through cruising or dogging. According to a website dedicated to the dunes in question, they are described as follows: “The dunes of Maspalomas are unique in the world. They are one of the main attractions of Gran Canaria and annually attract millions of tourists. Seems to be the biggest outdoor cruising area in the world, for gays, bi's and straight” (Dunasmap, n.d.).

In the case of LGBT+ tourism, the tourist offer of this area is situated around two major areas: the Yumbo Centrum shopping mall, located in Playa del Ingles, and the sand dunes. Around these two interconnected places there is a large offer of regular hotels, defined mostly as gay friendly, together with a more specific offer of hotels targeted at gays.

The importance of the Yumbo Centrum shopping mall, which opened in 1982, is so significant that it is promoted on the official website as ‘the one and only LGBTI shopping centre in the world’ (Yumbo Centrum, n.d.). It offers a wide and varied assortment of shops and services aimed at the LGBT+ population: from restaurants and bars with shows starring trans and drag queens to places for sexual encounters, shops specialising in erotic male lingerie, and various shops whose owners are mostly foreign. The nationality of the person running the establishment largely dictates the nationality of its clientele. This ‘specialised’ offer is combined with other more typically touristy shops and markets, run mainly by Maghreb or Asian traders; although there are also shops and stalls run by Afro-descendants. This melting pot of diversity is completed by a mosque located on one side of the shopping mall.

The second area is located in the Maspalomas sand dunes, which have been a protected natural space since 1987. In 1994, it became a special nature reserve. This area is around 404 ha in size. The practice of cruising is best known among gay tourists, although it is not the only practice. The Official Tourism Website of Gran Canaria points out specifically in its Gay Friendly section: ‘Gran Canaria offers an entire ocean of beaches. Beaches that, in addition to their natural attractiveness, offer a pleasant climate so that you can enjoy the sea all year round. The best known beaches, Maspalomas and Playa del Ingles, join the sea to the large sand dune system in the south of the island’ (Official tourism website of Gran Canaria, n.d.-a).

The above section on the tourism website has become known as *Proudly Gran Canaria* (also in English on its Spanish page) and expanded its scope beyond gay men to encompass the entire LGBT+ population (Official tourism website of Gran Canaria, n.d.-b), although, de facto, most tourists are gay men. The images accompanying the texts show pairs of young men and women. This advertisement sells sun, sand, and sexual identity, and the idealised, prototypical, and somewhat naive image of romantic love. However, it ignores (1) sexuality, the practice of having sex, and (2) bodies which in the sex market are not considered ‘desirable’, especially those of older people.

Maspalomas offers an important range of services for the LGBT+ public as well as a wide array of specifically gay and gay pride festivities and celebrations, which take place throughout the year: the Bear Carnival (March), Maspalomas Summer Pride (May), the Bear Camp and Maspalomas Summer Fiesta (August), the Freedom Festival and Maspalomas Fetish week (October), Karneval Maspalomas, and Winter Pride (November). The offer is tailored (1) according to aesthetic and sexual preferences (fetishists, bears, etc.), (2) by nationalities (such as the celebration known popularly as the German carnival) and (3) according to the tourist calendar, to cover the ‘low seasons’.

Cruising has become an important attraction for a sector of gay tourism. As stated by Melián-González et al. (2011), a significant percentage of gay tourists visiting Maspalomas, specifically 20.8 %, consider cruising areas as a valuable resource for a gay tourism destination. As mentioned above, some travel websites note that this could be the largest cruising area in the world, where nudism is also allowed.

Sex in the dunes as a moral problem

As seen in the previous section, through these two key areas (the shopping mall and the dunes) and the events aimed at this sector of tourism, gay tourism offers are really significant. This implies that the presence of LGBT+ groups is important in the image projected by a tourist destination through advertising. This advertising, especially institutional advertising, seeks to normalise and attract these tourists by reproducing ‘politically correct’ images that normalise the gay identity through a heteronormative perspective, which is not exclusive to Maspalomas (Marco-Macarro & Jaramillo, 2022).

The media and advertising have been progressively incorporating a more inclusive view of sexual diversity. The presence of gay men and lesbian women and, to a lesser extent, bisexual, trans, and non-binary people is becoming prominent in audiovisual fiction, media, and advertising. Gays and lesbians are presented as a niche target market and are characterised in a socially acceptable way, often forming mixed groups or families with children. This fact has to do more with the representation that seeks to normalise sexual diversity than with the users who enjoy gay tourist products. In fact, young gay men tend to avoid family destinations, and same sex partners with children do the same with gay tourist destinations (Lucena, Jarvis, & Weeden, 2015).

This positive and friendly image, which is represented in practices related to love, affectivity, leisure, partying, or joy embodied by the LGTB+ collective, is called into question when the practice of sex between male strangers is brought into the public light. This is what occurred when two reports were published in 2009, which had a significant media impact. One was a programme entitled *Arena Mix*, broadcast on 7 August 2009 on Antena 3 television, which looked at different beaches in Tenerife and Gran Canaria and spoke to their users.

Complaints about the report lodged by the Gran Canaria authorities focused on the difference in the way the two islands were treated in the programme. While the focus in Tenerife was on family tourism, visiting hotels for guests with high levels of

purchasing power, in the case of Gran Canaria, the focus was on tourists with much lower purchasing power, presenting beaches with tents pitched on them, and placing particular emphasis on gay tourism linked to sex. Cruising was also covered in the report, both inside a resort and in public spaces. This was particularly disturbing to the authorities and some representatives of the tourism sector, as became evident in various press articles (García, 2009; La Provincia, 2009).

In the case of the programme *La Noria* shown on Tele5 on 5 September 2009, the 'problem' of public sex in the dunes was reanalysed. Well-known media figures debated the licit and illicit nature, in moral terms, of these practices, as the programme showed images of cruising in the dunes. Again, this television programme generated significant reactions from local authorities, covered by the press as well as some LGBT+ media, although for different reasons.

LGBT+ press coverage contained references to the sensationalist and unethical nature of the report by publicly showing sexual practices between men without their consent. Taking a humorous tone, the Ambiente G blog pointed out the following:

And that made me indignant. Why? Because of the approach taken on the matter. First, both the presenter, Jordi González, and the person in charge of explaining the issues, Gloria Serra, were quite scandalised when they saw the videos shown. The videos showed homosexuals having sex at approximately 4 pm in the dunes of Maspalomas (Gran Canaria). What was not explained is that the cruising area of these dunes cannot be seen by anyone passing by, and that you have to go into the dunes to get there. Instead, the impression was that there were guys going at it on the beach in broad daylight. Of course, a scandal ensued.

[(Martínez, 2009)]

For the politicians from Gran Canaria, what was at stake was the good name of the tourist destination. The televised news stories were seen as an orchestrated campaign to degrade one of the main attractions of the island (the dunes), to the benefit of other competing destinations. It was felt that explicit sex, and in particular sex between male strangers in public spaces, created a bad image of the destination and the gay community itself. Europa Press reported extensive statements made by the president of the Tourist Board of Gran Canaria, in which he denounced the sensationalist attitude of the news presented in the media:

The indignation that we can feel in Gran Canaria is based on the fact that the image projected internationally is that the sand dunes are only for having sex outdoors. We question why images of other tourist spots where outdoor sex is also practiced, which are mentioned in the programme, were not also recorded to illustrate this report.

[(Europa Press, 2009)]

If institutional and business arguments focus on the overstatement of a 'problem' that has a negative impact on the destination, in other cases, the debate focuses on moral issues. Sexuality is represented as a threat; sex must take place in private places. In fact, the criticism of cruising in the dunes has been and continues to be a constant feature of various travel pages. They refer to issues such as nudism, people having sex, homosexuality, and, almost always, the possible presence of minors, indicating that the authorities or police should do something about the issue. Here are some opinions expressed on TripAdvisor when assessing the special nature reserve of the Maspalomas Sand Dunes which, although in the minority, are still significant:

I have no complaints because the place is magical, beautiful, and full of natural beauty. It is just as good as in other places, and you can really get lost in the dunes and enjoy yourself. For me, the downside is that you don't have to go too far into the dunes before you see lovers sneaking around or people cruising (having outdoor sex). [...] You can't even enjoy the landscape because you suddenly come across people having an orgy, not even kidding. Come across a giant shrub on a sand dune? You walk round it and there's a group of outdoor sex lovers... It just shouldn't be that way. You might be with your children, with your friends, or partner... It doesn't matter, even on your own, you can't go for a nice peaceful walk anywhere. The police should have more control over these activities and the mess they generate.

[(TripAdvisor, 2018)]

A spectacular place, but as soon as you step into the dunes you will see thousands of homosexuals having sex, I don't really understand how they allow that there. It's just incredible, such a beautiful beach and that has to happen there.

[(TripAdvisor, 2016)]

Beautiful landscape; it looks like a stretch of the Sahara. The problem is that many people don't stick to the path, and the dunes are becoming blurred. It doesn't specifically say so, but it is a nudist beach, and when we were there, there were also parts used as a kind of sex pad in broad daylight. No presence of the authorities to enforce a bit of order and prevent families with children from encountering such unpleasant scenes when they arrive at the beach.

[(TripAdvisor, 2022)]

However, if public sex can be considered a danger to morals, health, or religion (Rubin, 1984) we see that, in an emerging way, sex in public places between men is becoming an environmental problem and perhaps, as noted by the website Dos Manzanas, aimed at an LGBT+ audience, which reported on the controversy, an economic problem:

It seems that a part of the reality of homosexual visitors, so attractive to the industry for their 'high levels of spending' and who in Gran Canaria account for 12 % of tourist revenues, are beginning to become bothersome to politicians and business owners, just as images show what has been happening for a long time. They say that they are worried about the homosexual community and that they do not want to be criminalised or denigrated. However, they may also be concerned about the money they may stop earning from other types of tourists.

[(Madrid, 2009)]

Sex in the dunes as an ecological problem

After the lockdown resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to the disappearance of tourism for many months, the area of the dunes regained a 'pristine' appearance. During the lockdown, the media showed images around the world of nature recovering. In the case of Spain, the media focused, among other cases, on Maspalomas. An idyllic vision that distorted reality. Beyond aesthetic recovery, 'the reversal of the degradation process of the dunes will only be possible by minimising or suppressing the tourist impacts that have occurred for decades' (Hernández-Cordero, San Romualdo Collado, Peña-Alonso, García-Romero, & Hernández-Calvento, 2020).

Coverage of the idyllic dunes in the national media, after the pandemic, encouraged the city council and the island council of Gran Canaria to reactivate the ambitious Masdunas project, intending to avoid the progressive deterioration of the dune system, which constitutes one of the major appeals of this tourist destination. The actions involve, among many other things, regenerating the sand, restricting disorderly use of the space, and preventing tourists from entering certain areas. The sole aim is to avoid human presence as much as possible and to limit the use of dunes to purely educational purposes.

From a conservationist perspective, the aim is to recover and transform a space that has been used and therefore appropriated into a kind of museum place. A space that is observed and enjoyed, but cannot be 'touched', or touched in a certain way. Based on these approaches, sexual practices, especially those of men who have sex with other men, are one of the greatest threats to conservation.

The dissemination of research carried out by García-Romero et al. (2022) reaffirms the arguments of regional and local administrations. However, this article's impact extended beyond academia, and its findings have been widely reported in the media. The article identified 290 places where gay men engage in cruising, in an area of 5763.85 m², noting the following:

This activity produces direct impacts on the aeolian landforms and on the vegetation, as well as on the environment in general through the generation of waste and illegal toilet spots. Despite the fact that the activity is illegal in the Reserve, the lack of control so far by the managing administrations has facilitated its development and contributed to cruisers acquiring so-called 'rights' to practice cruising, thereby effectively "privatizing" a public space and increasing the development of the aforementioned impacts, as well as other indirect impacts such as the inhibition of environmental education within the Reserve.

The dimensions and relevance of the controversy generated in the media by this academic publication are clearly expressed in the article published on 29 November 2021 at Eldiario.es: "Cruising viral: un estudio sobre los efectos ecológicos del sexo casual en Maspalomas da la vuelta al mundo a través de los medios de comunicación" [Cruising goes viral: a study on the ecological effects of casual sex in Maspalomas goes global through the media] (Jiménez, 2021). This news story makes reference to some of the media that reported on this research internationally.

One of the most prominent aspects of this controversy going viral is the identification of the island as a destination for sex tourism. Most of the press carried similar headlines: "Turistas que tienen sexo en las dunas están arruinando la reserva natural de Maspalomas" [Tourists having sex in the dunes are ruining the natural reserve of Maspalomas] (Buckley, 2021); "El sexo descontrolado en las dunas arruina una importante playa" [Uncontrolled sex in the dunes is ruining an important beach] (Clarín, 2021); "Así amenaza el 'cruising' la reserva de las Dunas de Maspalomas" [Cruising threatens the Maspalomas Dunes Reserve] (Gómez, 2021); "En España sexo en las dunas arruina la reserva natural en Gran Canaria" [In Spain, sex in the dunes is ruining the natural reserve in Gran Canaria] (Última Hora, 2021); "Tener sexo en la playa tiene graves daños a la naturaleza, revela estudio" [Having sex on the beach causes serious damage to nature, study reveals] (Heraldo de México, 2021); and "La reserva natural que está en peligro de extinción por turistas que tienen sexo en el lugar" [Natural reserve in danger of extinction due to tourists having sex on site] (Arqué, 2021).

The consumption of this news story in the national and international media shows a discursive shift in relation to cruising by turning the environmental issue into a central problem. Based on environmental protection, good and bad practices, as well as irresponsible practices that cause harm to the environment, in this case personified in the gay community, are now being pointed out.

Criticism of both this research and its interpretation in mass media and social media arrived swiftly. Questions have been raised regarding why it pointed exclusively to a practice and a population as the main causal factors of environmental deterioration in the dunes, by focusing on sexuality between men. Heterosexual sex and other types of uses and practices within the dunes are ignored or minimised, and other relevant aspects that could have provided a more complete view of the deterioration of the dunes are also ignored: poor maintenance by the responsible administrations, problems arising

from other constructions affecting the dunes, poor signage, and lack of cleaning services, among others (The Stem Village, 2021; Wolters, 2022). As early as December 2019, before the pandemic, the 'Amigos de las Dunas' [Friends of the Dunes] Facebook group posted the following on their account:

Garbage-wise there is no difference between heterosexuals and homosexuals: The same ratio of dry versus wet tissues and yes, both use condoms! Established proof today while cleaning up part of the heterosexual cruising area: Jörn, Georges, Lars Helge, Bernard and Neil (not in the picture).

[(Los Amigos de las Dunas de Maspalomas, 2019)]

Some organisations and associations (such as the Friends of the Dunes) maintain a dual character (LGBT+ and environmentalist), arguing the compatibility of public sex in the dunes with environmental preservation. This is one of the few alliances that Gandy (2012) defined as heterotopic alliances.

Both ethical and purely scientific aspects that bias the research findings have been criticised in academic circles, such as the time of year when the field work was carried out – during Pride, when Maspalomas receives large crowds of visitors. Beyond the validity of the results, this research has served to legitimise repressive measures implemented at an institutional level: surveillance, identification, or fines for those 'suspected' of using this space in an 'inappropriate' manner. 'Protectionist' approaches reinforce the position of administrations that expel and seize spaces 'conquered' by the LGBT+ community. In any case, it is particularly striking how, at a media level, criticism of cruising is brought to the fore, contrasting with the wall of silence received by those who have contested the article, both LGBT+ groups and scientists who question the hegemonic vision.

Scientific criticism led to the provisional withdrawal of the article, which hangs a question mark over its scientific validity. However, this does not question its media validity. The media reproduce the moral principles of an official science that under the appearance of objectivity also undervalues arguments that do not correspond to cisheteronormativity (Valcuende, 2004) and which considers that intervention can take place within a space without considering the processes of territorial appropriation and the users who make use of this space.

Conclusions

Cruising in both enclosed and public places is another attraction in gay tourist destinations. It is, therefore, an activity that is interesting for some tourist destinations but at the same time poses a threat to their image. This is thrown into strong contrast as these practices become more visible through media coverage, jeopardising the 'good' name of the tourist setting. Looking at the two controversies analysed, there is an evolution in the discourses and debates of the media in relation to cruising. These have evolved from discourses criticising users for the appropriation of certain spaces through practices that should be 'private' to discourses that no longer question the morality or immorality of cruising as much as the environmental problems it generates. A fact that is reproduced in different places and which once again turns a spotlight on cruising, viewed as a threat, environmental in this case, based on a hegemonic cisheteronormative perspective (Forteza et al., 2020; Gaissad & Audouit, 2014). Cisheteronormative science points to the dominant values supported by a purported objectivity, which is used by the mass media to reproduce sexual normativity (Valcuende, 2004).

In a society such as Spain, which has made substantial progress in the recognition and normalisation of homosexuality, moral discourses lose their effectiveness. It is noteworthy that in other tourism contexts where there is significant development of LGBT+ tourism, such as Torremolinos, ultraconservative political parties do not dare to directly position themselves against the development of this type of tourism. As per these discourses, the issue at hand is not gay tourism, which generates significant economic benefits, but rather the behaviour attributed to certain individuals within the gay community, commonly characterised as problematic or disruptive (Valcuende, Cáceres-Feria, & Quintero-Morón, 2023). Now, latent homophobia finds in so-called "scientific" arguments the principles of a supposedly unquestionable truth. If it is becoming less effective to assess the morality or immorality of individuals based on their sexual orientation, it seems to remain pertinent to scrutinise the environmental impact they may cause. The normalisation of nature implies ordering practices and uses, relegating sexuality to the realm of the private or to businesses intended for this purpose, excluding from public spaces those who have fewer economic resources or who do not correspond to certain body standards. Nature becomes a disputed category from which some practices over the territory are legitimised (Valcuende and Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2019) or queered (Nowak & Roynesdal, 2022) while others are not. Regulating nature also means regulating and adapting "unnatural" behaviours (Mortimer-Sandilands, 2011).

The terms of the debate are usually presented in a sensationalist way, advocating the abolition of this type of practice, whether for moral reasons, environmental reasons, or especially for the impact they have on the negative image of the tourist destination. The appropriation of tourist spaces by gay visitors is desirable in that it represents an important economic incentive, but at the same time it is viewed with suspicion on the part of the administration and some tourist businesses. The desired type of gay tourist is one who reproduces certain stereotypes and adjusts to heteronormativity. An image that is intentionally replicated in institutional advertising, where there is a deliberate omission of any reference to practices such as cruising. The media visibility of cruising is regularly used against tourist destinations, and especially gay tourists. While the sex practiced by men who have sex with other men fills headlines and heated debates on social media, the sex practiced by heterosexuals in public spaces does not play the same role in media. As Cohen (2012, p. 520) points out, 'The circulation of only select gay images in mainstream media suggests that only those fitting a certain type will ever achieve acceptance. Different tourism promotions construct different

versions of the gay traveller largely by way of representation or the lack of representation, but also through language use and other details'.

The visibility of these practices through the mass media and the Internet has forced, in one way or another, social actors to take a position. Unlike in the past, users of these spaces can express their opinions and claim their rights. Social media and apps have played a central role in articulating communities that can more easily express stigmatised identities (McKenna & Chughtai, 2020). However, the capacity to express dissenting opinions and have them picked up by the media is very low. It is striking how user groups who defend cruising, such as 'Los Amigos de las Dunas', are barely heard, and their statements are silenced by the media, as are other scientific arguments that question the common sense of sexuality in terms already defined by Rubin (1984). This silencing of specific tourism niches is evidenced by the scarcity of research that ventures to analyse cruising as a niche market, a phenomenon that is similarly reproduced in the marketing of swinging. There are issues that are still taboo which hinder the analysis of certain forms of consumption considered inappropriate even today (see Barbro, 2021).

The media could play an important role in recognising diversity and challenging official discourse. However, as seen in the debates presented, sex becomes a commodity that sells in the media and is offered to tailor sexual diversity to cisheteronormativity. Users of cruising spaces are shown as passive agents on which intervention should act, as part of the problem rather than part of the solution, as they are fundamental to the maintenance of the dunes themselves. The recognition of these actors and the alliances between ecology and the queer movement, although scarce, are particularly effective, even from an environmental point of view, as demonstrated in other contexts (Gandy, 2012). This fact implies the recognition of "homonormative ecologies" (Patrick, 2014).

All the prejudices that are evident in the media and social media highlight the reasons underlying cruising and other forms of non-normative sex, even if in practice they are tourist resources, but are not publicly recognised as such, either in the media or in the specialist literature on tourism. However, this perspective could provide a deeper understanding of a subject that has not been explored, and, above all, it could foster the compatibility of various interests that converge in the appropriation of a territory, and which are currently presented, in a somewhat simplistic way, as being incompatible. The social sustainability of tourist destinations inevitably depends on their inclusive character. At the same time, environmental sustainability requires the involvement of the different users who make use of tourist resources. This implies the development of educational processes rather than repressive processes (Corbisiero, 2022) and moving away from perceiving certain tourists as enemies of the environment to considering them as potential allies.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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