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# The nude beach as a liminal homoerotic place

## Abstract

*As a socially, culturally and sexually constructed space, the nude beach has been the focus of academic research. Some studies have analysed the nude beach as a place where erotic relations and meanings among men are performed, constructed, negotiated and transformed. These studies however have seldom acknowledged the multiple dimensions of sexualised practices and subjectivities taking place at the nude beach among men. By adopting a homoerotic framework, this study analyses a number of sexualised practices and subjectivities among men in the context of a nude beach in Mexico. Through ethnographic fieldwork and the adoption of photographs as a supplementary research tool, this study reveals that the nude beach becomes a setting for the performance of multiple sexual identities –often culturally determined– that go beyond the traditional notion of "gay". It also suggests that the nude beach becomes a scenario for different social and sexual practices that define how the beach is constructed as a leisure and liminal space. The study concludes that the nude beach is an amalgamation of several social practices and subjectivities that are widely sexualised, and suggests that the concept of "gay nude beach", which is frequently used in the literature, is simplistic when attempting to understand the complex dimensions of the several homoerotic relations among males.*

*Key words: nude beach; homoerotic framework; liminal space; Mexico*

## Introduction

Any analysis of *the beach* as a social and cultural construct should not ignore the difference between *space* and *place*. Space is conceived as abstract geometries (distance, direction, size, shape, volume, etc.) detached from material form, cultural interpretation and social meaning (Gieryn, 2000); therefore space can be found anywhere in the world. Place is used in ordinary language and commonly refers to any physical space. Therefore a park, a hotel room, a destination, a temple, to mention but a few, are examples of places. Unlike space, however, place is a complex concept that does not involve only a geographic location and the compilation of physical things or objects (material component). Places, as social and cultural scenarios, are invested with both individual and collective meanings and values. They are identified, represented, interpreted, narrated, perceived, felt, understood, and imagined in several ways by individuals (Gieryn, 2000). Places are thus socially and culturally determined and may have various meanings that will shape, and be determined by, the behaviours adopted by individuals. A place is thus a space with social practices and meanings.

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The meaning of a place is founded on the static physical background or the setting, the activities, and the intentions and meanings of those activities (Selännemi, 2003). In the context of tourism, tourism places are spaces of social interaction and become meaningful through the ways in which people are encountered (Crouch, 2000). Because tourism places can be the site for several social encounters, various meanings can thus be assigned to the same space, and as a consequence several social practices, behaviours and subjectivities may coexist in it. As a result, "it is not possible to disaggregate the physical space which tourists encounter from the array of meaningful and dynamic practices and connections through which individuals interpret those spaces" (Thurnell-Read, 2012, p. 803).

Specific social practices and behaviours in tourism places, and therefore the meanings attached to them, tend to be considerably determined by the liminal role of tourism. Tourism commonly implies a temporary respite from individuals' everyday life and provides tourists with a certain degree of anonymity (McKercher & Bauer, 2003). This offers the opportunity to travel to and to experience unfamiliar and unregulated spaces. Consequently, tourists can get the chance to adopt a wide range of social practices and radical behaviours that are often socially condemned at home and that otherwise would be suppressed.

Specifically, the liminal role of tourism seems to have special effect on what has been commonly referred to as the "gay tourist". Because "gays" frequently need to travel to other places to be themselves (Hughes, 1997), they experience not only spatial and temporal transitions but also mental and behavioural transformations. Thus, the spatio-temporal transition/transgression of familiar settings and everyday life changes the psychological state, social order, bodily state, and the way tourists – including "gays" – perceive and experience their surroundings and their own and others' sexuality (Selännemi, 2003). The inherent subjectivities that emerge from this transgression are also transformed. The liminal role of tourism thus shapes the way "gays" give meaning to tourism spaces and to their own lives through social practices and sexualised behaviours. While the liminal role of tourism may be theoretically adequate to explain "gay" tourists' erotic behaviours, little empirical research exists on the specific practices and meanings that male tourists attach to their experiences in leisure places.

As a leisure place, the nude beach becomes a tourism place where multiple sexual practices and subjective implications among men are constructed, transformed, negotiated, experienced, accepted or rejected. The studies on nude beaches, however, have largely ignored that the social and sexual practices on nude beaches among males may be represented by a large number of practices, which will have a significant influence on how the nude beach space is socially and sexually constructed. This paper thus aims to contribute to fill this gap by analysing a number of social and sexualised practices among males at a nude beach in Mexico. In order to do so, a homoerotic framework recognising the multidimensionality of sexualised practices as well as the meanings and identities attached to these is used.

## Literature review

### The nude beach as a liminal space

From the discussion above, it is acknowledged that space by itself has no much value for sociological analysis, unless social meaning is assigned to it. The beach as a place, that is a space attached to social

and cultural significance, becomes a rich concept for the analysis of liminal behaviour. As a place, the beach is socially constructed; it is the product of social processes and practices that define its use on the basis of specific leisure activities. These activities may be a representation of freedom and an escape from normal social and cultural constraints (Preston-Whyte, 2004). As in other places, the meanings that individuals assign to the beach together with the amalgamation of social, cultural and environmental components contribute to the creation of a place that is commonly adopted as a site for bathing, surfing, relaxing and spirituality. Transgressive behaviours such as nudism and other stigmatised sexual behaviours are also present at the beach. The beach then becomes a liminal place as it turns into an unregulated space where a wide range of social practices and radical behaviours - socially condemned at home and commonly suppressed - take place.

The nude beach has been the ideal setting for the analysis of nudism and other transgressive behaviours. Within the context of the naturism philosophy, for example, the nude beach becomes an ideal haven for the encounter of natural elements, sea, sun, sand, wind and the human body (Barthe-Deloizy, 2003). The direct contact of the nude body with the natural environment of the beach may be regarded as a way to escape from the social impositions that clothing, as a social and cultural construct, may represent for some. Also, the practice of public nudity on beaches is closely related to the individual and family experience of relaxation and socialisation with "like-minded" people (Douglas, Rasmussen & Flanagan, 1977) and allows individuals to relax and release the tensions of life (Preston-Whyte, 2004).

Yet the nude beach also represents an ideal scenario for sex related behaviours. The nude public beach is attractive as it offers a wide range of sexual opportunities for nudists, from voyeurism and exhibitionism to sexual intercourse and other sexual experiences largely determined by the social actors. Ethnographic studies, although quite limited in number and contexts, have consistently revealed that sexual activity between people of both the same and different sex is a constant phenomenon on public nude beaches (Andriotis, 2010; Douglas et al., 1977; Jaurand, 2005; Schoemaker, 2006). Although open air sexual intercourse is rare, it does happen on nude beaches. Sexual encounters have always occurred on isolated nude beaches, simply because their isolation makes these acts less conspicuous (Douglas et al., 1977, p. 107). In addition, certain nude beaches are far more than places for leisure and sexual activity; for some the beach may have specific social and sexual meaning and functions. The nude beach also represents a means for escaping the normative repression and social norm, and to assert sexual identities for certain individuals such as the "homosexual" community (Jaurand, 2005). Bearing this in mind, the nude beach is therefore also constructed as a liminal sexual space.

## A homoerotic framework

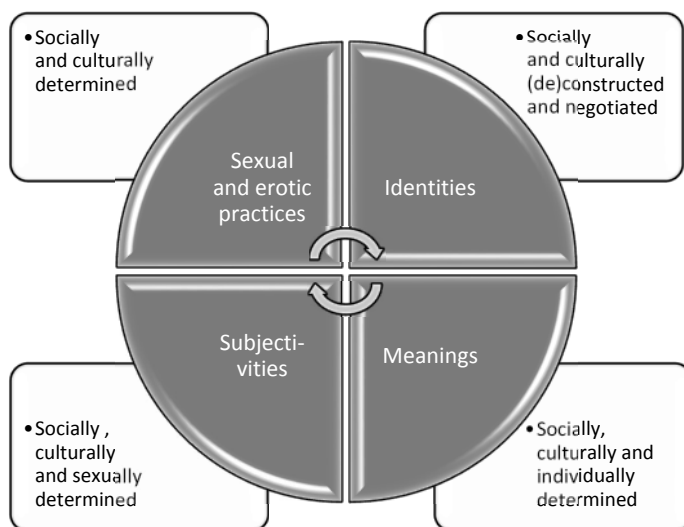
The beach may be part of what is commonly referred to as a gay space. For Hughes (2002, p. 299) the gay space, also commonly known as the gay scene (Hughes, 2006), is "a spatially discrete concentration of bars and clubs, but also cafes, restaurants, shops, residences and public space that permit gay identity to be validated by relationships with others". The significance of the "gay" space for the performance of various sexual practices and the construction of sexual-related identities is quite relevant for men who are erotically related to other men. However, the concept of gay space, while useful for the analysis of "gay" tourists mainly in urban environments - where such concentrations tend to be found - , seems to be deficient for the study of the complex relationships between "gays" and space.

The concept of being "gay" has for long been the dominant label for men who identify themselves on their interest in other men and who have sexual experiences with other men (Nardi, 2000). It is closely linked to the adoption of certain forms of thinking and behaving that comprise the "gay" identity (Hughes, 1997). This notion however seems to ignore the complex continuum of culturally defined sexual practices, identities and meanings that may not be recognised within the notion of "gay" by those involved. As Cantú (2002) notices, the "gay identity", as understood in Anglo-Saxon contexts, does not exist in other contexts. The gay identity and culture have been understood, therefore, as constructions alien to other cultural and social landscapes such as those in Mexico (Cantú, 2002, p. 141), where the naming of a man sexually related to other men is socially constructed based not only on the biological sex of the sexual partner, but, among several other factors, on the culturally defined roles of being "active" or "passive" in sexual acts (Carrier, 1995; Chant & Craske, 2002; Murray, 1995).

Bearing this in mind, the concept of "homoeroticism" (Núñez, 2001) seems more fruitful for the analysis of erotic interactions between men as well as for the diverse social practices and meanings that emerge from such interactions. The concept of homoeroticism recognises, on the one hand, that individuals who are somehow sexually and emotionally related or orientated to people of the same sex may adopt a large number of erotic practices. These include, but not exclusive to, kisses, hugs, caresses, genital stimulations, looks, fetishist games and anal penetration. Additionally, homoeroticism acknowledges that those men who are erotically related to other men may (not) self-define as gay, homosexual, or any other ethnocentric, academic or medical categorisation already established.

A homoerotic framework thus acknowledges the complex continuum of sexual, erotic, emotional and subjective relationships among people of the same sex. The framework recognises that among males several sexual and erotic practices, subjectivities, meanings and identities can take place. It also acknowledges that all this is socially, culturally, sexually and individually defined (see Figure 1). A homoerotic framework would then allow incorporating a large number of sexual practices and - when applicable - self-definitions of men related to other men that are largely ignored by the notion of "gay".

Figure 1  
A homoerotic framework for understanding the complex relationships among males



This framework would allow incorporating cases such as those in Lima, Peru, where sexual behaviour among males, particularly that in which no effeminate participant is involved, is not necessarily regarded as homosexuality, and where sexual activity among males is accepted as long as the participants do not get involved in more than just the sexual act. A homoerotic framework would also permit to incorporate other categories in order to describe analytically male-male sex in Costa Rica, which are distinct from the notions of heterosexual, homosexual, gay, and bisexual in North America and Europe. In Costa Rica, the first category (heterosexual), which has no name, refers to any male who has sex with another male but identifies himself as lover of women and believes that sex with men is not important enough to affect his identity. The second category (homosexual) is composed of those who label themselves as *de ambiente*, the closest term to the modern notion of gay. These men might be exclusively man-lovers, but they behave in a masculine way in society who therefore does not have a label for them. The third category (gay) is made up of men with effeminate mannerisms, and who in the eyes of society his is a different identity. These men are publicly humiliated, repressed and joked about. Except for the third category, it is claimed that in Costa Rica there is no homosexual identity outside of homosexual situations (Kutsche, 1995).

The recognition of a large range of sexual practices and cultural meanings attached to them through the concept of homoeroticism permits the recognition of the various social and sexual practices and the sociocultural meanings attached to the places. These include the nude beach, where a large number of homoerotic relationships develop. For the purpose of this study the term homoeroticism will be used to refer to the various, probably countless, forms of sexual practices, self-definitions, emotions, identities and subjectivities related to such practices among men regardless of their sexual and emotional orientation and behaviours. The homoerotic notion allows analysing places whose meaning and social attributions are framed by the several social, cultural and sexual interactions among men, and their subjectivities.

## The homoerotic beach

Literature on nude beaches suggests that male homosexual<sup>1</sup> scenes are part of the majority of nude beaches. Either socially or physically demarcated, the so called gay nude beaches are generally clearly distinguished from heterosexual ones and have been observed to be easily spotted by homosexual nudists (Andriotis, 2010; Douglas et al., 1977; Jaurand, 2005). As a matter of fact, the vast majority of the consulted references revised for this article, discuss, either briefly or in depth, some homoerotic aspects dominating nude public beaches. These aspects seem to be so prominent in the social and spatial reality of nude beaches that the concepts of gay beach and gay nude beach appear to be well-established constructs in the academic research (Andriotis, 2010; Douglas et al., 1977; Jaurand, 2005; Schoemaker, 2006). The use of the gay nude beach concept in the study of social practices and meanings attached to the beach space would considerably oversimplify the countless number of possible homoerotic social practices and meanings existing among males in specific cultural contexts.

Although largely neglected in the literature, the popularity of the nude beach among males has been explained in terms of the roles that nude beaches play in their lives.

The homoerotic nude beach, unlike for example urban centres, provides homosexual males with a place where diverse homoerotic interactions are considerably visible both in open air and in public places

(Barthe-Deloizy & Jaurand, 2005). Additionally, the homoerotic nude beach offers male nudists the opportunity to get away from the social constraints. As Andriotis (2010, pp. 1091-1092) supports, the nude beach "serves as a direct response to the oppression they [gay men] feel by offering them the opportunity to take off the 'masks' they normally wear to hide their sexuality from the heterosexual world and indulge in activities not allowed in heterosexual spaces". The nude beach thus offers an opportunity to reinforce identities related to the sexual practices with and/or orientations to the same sex (Jaurand, 2005). "The gay beach... works as a homosociability territory where the homosexual community develops their practice, their norms and plays the role of spatial actor... the homosexuals make their own laws on the gay beach" (Jaurand, 2005, pp. 72, 74).

Although homoerotic nude beaches may be regarded as a setting for relaxation and socialisation, the role of a sexual spatial provider is also quite common on these beaches, particularly for homosexuals. As Clarke (1982, p. 229) warns, "The act of social nudity does not in itself lead to sexual encounters nor are social nudists necessarily sexually motivated, but the fact remains that there is a strong undercurrent of sensual stimulation, and there are sexual associations". Empirical studies have demonstrated that the sexual component of nudism is more prominent within the homoerotic community (Douglas et al., 1977; Schoemaker, 2006). Thus, it is not surprising to know that the homoerotic beach has been identified as a place where the sexual consumption is a common characteristic (Barthe-Deloizy, 2003; Barthe-Deloizy & Jaurand, 2005). This in part coincides with the presumption that outdoor sex scenes and sites have for long been central to gay cultures (Bell & Holliday, 2000). Like on heterosexual beaches, sexual behaviour often takes place on homoerotic nude ones. However, the "heavier" or "aggressive" nature of the sexual activity by homosexuals has also been repeatedly recognised (Schoemaker, 2006) and reported mainly as voyeurism, exhibitionism, masturbation, fellatio and swinging (Andriotis, 2010; Douglas et al., 1977; Schoemaker, 2006).

While research has widely acknowledged that the homoerotic aspect is a common component of the nude beach, it is observed that most empirical studies on "gay" nude beaches have identified or described the sexual behaviour and appropriation of the beach by males. However, considerably neglected has been the large number of homoerotic sexual practices and related meanings attached to the nude beach, particularly in the context of the sexual system in Mexico, where homoeroticism is more sensitive to cultural particularities (Núñez, 2001, p. 19). This paper therefore aims to contribute to fill this gap by taking the case of a nude beach in Mexico where homoerotic encounters take place.

## The setting

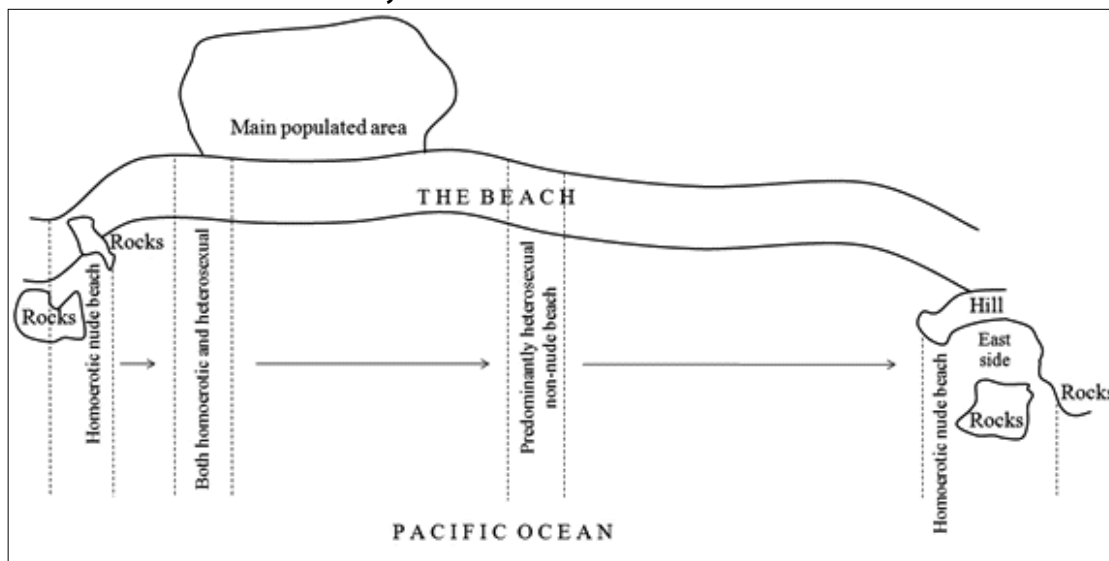
The beach under study<sup>2</sup> is a relatively small beach destination located on the Pacific south of Mexico. Its popularity started to emerge in the 1970s through the visitation of "hippies" mainly. Since then nudism became a relevant attractive feature of the destination. The beach, which stretches up to nearly 2 kilometres long, is reported as being the first nude beach in Mexico and is visited by both domestic and international tourists, from which backpackers compose a considerable amount of international tourism flows. It may be categorised as a "tolerated" beach (*plage nudiste tolérée*) (Jaurand & de-Luze, 2004), for there does not exist official authorisation nor reprobation of the beach, and the practice of nudity is based on the right to public space usage.

The destination is rustic in terms of tourism industry development. Accommodation (cottages and hammocks mainly) and other tourism related facilities are basic and quite affordable for low budget international and national tourists. The destination's attraction lies in its rustic development, natural beauty, peacefulness, and liberal atmosphere including the practice of nudism, open drug use and its popularity as a gay tourism destination.

The beach can be divided into three sections: the west, mid and east sections. Although the beach is known as a nudist destination, it is only part of the beach that is used for nudism purposes. The mid part, which encompasses the largest part of the beach, is visited mainly by heterosexual people. Heterosexual couples can be observed along this section of the beach and not all of them are nude. In fact, very few people get nude in this section. The west and east sides of the beach are more popular among nudists, mainly males. In particular the east section of the beach, which is reached by climbing a small hill separating the rest of the beach from the east end, concentrates the majority of male visitors (See Figure 2) and various liminal interactions. Therefore, the nude beach becomes a liminal place as it turns into an unregulated space where a wide range of social practices, sexual and erotic behaviours among men are present.

Although the destination receives the great majority of tourists during the three most touristic periods of the year, namely April, July-August and December, visitors can be observed during the whole year.

Figure 2  
Sections of the beach under study



## Methods

The study of homoerotic behaviour among males in public sex environments, also known as erotic oases (Andriotis, 2010), has been widely approached through ethnographic methods. This is evidenced by the work of Humphreys (1970) on casual, quick and impersonal sexual acts among males in public restrooms in the United States through participant observation and structured interviews. The work of Schifter (2000) on male sex in public spaces such as parks, bathhouses and saunas, and the dangers

involved, also consisted of an ethnographic approach; specifically covert participant observation and in-depth interviewing were adopted in order to reach groups of men who have sex with men in parks, alleyways, public toilets, movie theatres and saunas in Costa Rica.

Within the context of nude beaches, ethnographic approaches have also been utilised and proved useful for the analysis of sexual behaviours among males. Although not exclusively focused on homoerotic behaviours on a nude beach, the work of Douglas et al. (1977) provides a clear example. By regarding the human body's feeling, communication and actions on the nude as sociologically significant, the authors adopted an ethnographic approach and "went native" in order to understand the various phenomena and to describe sexual behaviour among nudists, including same sex behaviour. Based on in-depth interviews and two months of intensive ethnographic fieldwork involving participant observation, the study of Schoemaker (2006) sets another example on the value of ethnography in nude beaches. According to the author, an ethnographic approach for the study of the nude beach and its social and sexuality discourses, including those of the homoerotic dimension, offers a unique perspective to understand a relatively large invisible phenomenon. More recently, the work of Andriotis (2010) on heterotopic erotic oases in Crete recognises that covert ethnographic methods offer the researcher access to information that through other approaches would have been unavailable.

Through their findings and contributions, the above investigations evidence that the emic value of ethnographic approaches largely relies on the potential to get a deep understanding of how social actors behave, feel, experience and give meaning to their actions. As Douglas et al. (1977, p. 14) literally claim,

*"We would immerse ourselves in the total nude scene and, only after thoroughly grasping the whole body experience the way any nonscientist is likely to do, would we resurface to think analytically about the whole thing. We wanted to feel the things others feel but do not talk about largely because they cannot. All of our experience up to that point, and far more since we became involved in the nude world, had convinced us that human experience is vastly more complex, more passionate, deeper than our conscious experience normally allows us to know and that our social science experience allows us to feel. If we approached the nude experience only with our minds, we would get only the surface, only the abstract symbols that people use to deal with strangers who do not have the common fund of felt experience to go on-and who may have to be lied to because they are aliens".*

In the recognition of the emic value of ethnographic approaches, this paper draws from a larger ethnographic project conducted from 2005 to 2012 looking at the sexual behaviour of homoerotic male visitors at the beach described above. This particular paper presents the findings in terms of the various homoerotic practices, identities and subjectivities identified during fieldwork particularly at the east extreme of the beach. By so doing, it aims to contribute to a better understanding and a wider recognition of the various homoerotic behaviours and sex-related meanings assigned to the nude beach as a leisure place. Participant observations and informal conversations with males visiting the beach were adopted as research techniques. Fieldwork was undertaken each year, since 2005, mainly during the three most touristic periods of the year. The researcher stayed from a couple of days to a month in a row during each visit to the beach. Furthermore, visits to the beach during off-season periods were also made in order to capture various longitudinal realities.

A covert participant observation was adopted at all times. The role of the researcher was that of passive participation, that is, the researcher did not participate or interact with other people to any great



extend (Spradley, 1980). This allowed the researcher to be part of the scene but have little participation in, and thus possibly limited effects on, the social dynamics at the beach. Gaining access to the homoerotic nude scene was at the beginning difficult, for the researcher was initially quite unfamiliar with the homoerotic and nude scenes. However, his recurrent visitations to the beach provided him with the familiarisation needed to later deeply explore the various social behaviours and the meanings attached to them and to the beach. Such familiarisation helped the researcher to gain more experience not only in the understanding of the phenomena observed but also in learning how to deal with the various conflicts and "risks" that undertaking ethnographic work on sexually active places represent for the researcher. As noted by Spradley (1980), in doing fieldwork the researcher is always faced with conflicting values. Although during the first visits the idea of "going native" (getting nude himself and observing the homoerotic scene) was somehow unusual and self-conflicting to the researcher, his repeated visits helped him to get rid of (at least partially) his own subjectivity regarding these issues; his visit-after-visit increasing experience therefore allowed him to study the realities observed in a (hopefully) more objective manner.

As in any type of covert research, ethical issues need to be addressed. According to the British Sociological Association (BSA, 2002), covert methods violate the principles of informed consent and may invade the privacy of those being studied. While the issues of violation, invasion and privacy may become considerably important – though still quite debatable –, covert research is sometimes one of the very few choices that researcher can have in very specific situations. Covert methods are very useful, and sometimes the only choice, when dealing to social phenomena that cannot be studied in its natural state through other methods.

According to Bryman (2008), there are four specific ethical principles that need attention in social research, namely harm to participants, lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy and deception. It is the belief of the author that the first three principles hold potential serious implications that deserved special attention in this study. With regard to potential harm of participants, special care over maintaining confidentiality of records and informants' identities was taken. Care was also taken with regard to the possible identification of individuals and places; informants' names and other personal details are not revealed in this study. This offers the chance to safeguard informants' rights, interests, and sensitivities (Spradley, 1980).

With regard to informed consent, it first needs to be acknowledged that during the ethnographic fieldwork on the beach, the researcher came into contact with a large number of (potential and actual) informants (tourists, locals, vendors, etc.) whose behaviours were somehow publicly displayed. Therefore the chance that everyone at the beach had the opportunity for informed consent was practically impossible. Additionally, it needs to be recognised that "the participant observer has no more or less of an ethical obligation to the people encountered in the course of research than she or he would have under other everyday life circumstances" (Jorgensen, 1989, p. 28).

Therefore the adoption of covert methods was considered essential in order to gain access to genuine information. If overt methods had been used, participants may have changed their behaviour – which was actually a core component of this study. The use of surveys or interviews may have potentially altered the information provided by informants due to the sensitivity of the topic; this would then have threatened the validity of the findings herein presented. When adopting a covert ethnographic

approach for studying the role of nude beach, body and sexuality in the tourism experience, Andriotis (2010, p. 1084) justifies his methodological approach acknowledging that, "in practice, interviewing people about use practices and experiences which are often marginalized, can present practical difficulties [...] the presence of a known researcher immersing himself into the space could be annoying and disrupt the tranquility of the space". Finally, as far as the principle of invasion of privacy is concerned, individuals' personal information has been kept confidential. As fieldwork took place, it was also ensured that only essential "sensitive" information was recorded.

Recognising that ethnography entails a wide range of techniques of data collection and sources, photographs represent a special valuable source for the purpose of this paper. Although photographs have mostly remained an under-utilised research tool in tourism (Bandyopadhyay, 2011), they - especially those that are research driven - may be employed as sources of information in their own right and not simply attached to the researcher's ethnographic field notes. As sources of data, photographs as well as other visual materials require the researcher's ability to "read" images in a manner that is sensitive to the context in which they were taken and the potential for multiple meanings (Bryman, 2008). This requirement can be easily met when the photographs are an on-site production of the researcher.

Bearing this in mind, a relatively large number of photographs were taken during most of the visits to beach. Photographs were generated in a supplementary manner mainly for the research purposes. They focused on diverse social scenes of the beach that, in the ethnographic experience of the researcher, provide a snapshot of the social dynamics observed. They were analysed in conjunction with observation data. Recurrent general categories and subcategories rising from field notes and from the content of photographs were identified; each category and subcategory was composed of a range of specific events that were interrelated, and because of their unique content, distinguish from others. The categories were then ordered according to general themes that either related to existing literature or derived from "new" connections between the categories identified. Then, field notes sorting was carried out. This involved grouping segments of information on categories and subcategories in order to more deeply explore their meanings; the result was a group of excerpts drawn from field notes discussing one theme.

The intention of incorporating photographs<sup>3</sup> as a research tool in this investigation is double folded. On the one hand, they may be offered as sources that represent depictions and illustrate the various realities observed during fieldwork. On the other hand, it aims to acknowledge the research value of photographs for studying how social actors use, negotiate, appropriate, transform and give meaning to spaces – in this case homoerotic nude beaches - that have for long been invisible not only to the great majority of the society but also to the academic community as well.

## The beach as a homoerotic place

### On identities

The findings of this study reveals that the beach is a space where homoeroticism is largely a visible phenomenon. This means that there exist several sexual practices, identities and meanings that are performed, negotiated and transformed within the same space. According to the ethnographic approach, there seems to be a significant difference between national and international visitors regarding their sexual self-definition, practices and subjectivities attached to the nude beach. This may be

largely explained on the basis that in Mexico sexual practices and meanings are significantly sensitive and defined by cultural specificities. Because anthropological descriptions that are sensitive to such cultural and native categorisations seem to be more adequate for the study of homoeroticism (Núñez, 2001), most of the findings presented below are specifically related to national visitors to the beach.

In terms of how most visitors sexually self-define, it is noted that a large number of diverse identities or self-definitions exist. A great part of visitors define themselves as "gay" and tend more to define the beach as a "gay beach". For them, at a national level this nude beach is one of the few beaches where gays reunite in a sexualised environment. This gives gays the sense of having a special place for them, which makes them feel part, albeit temporarily, of a community within their leisure time. The beach allows the gay to get social and individual recognition not only of their sexual preference and behaviour but also of their shared lifestyle.

From another angle, it is of interest to note that some visitors consider themselves as homosexuals but do not define themselves as gay. For these, being a homosexual indicates a sexual orientation towards, and possible sexual relations with, other males; yet, these are quite reluctant to be regarded as gay and to adopt certain behavioural patterns culturally assigned to the notion of gay. They admit they are attracted to men, but distinguish themselves from gays in terms of how they speak, dress, walk, consume, and so forth. For those who openly accept to be homosexuals, there seems to be special interest in preserving their masculinity in the public eye, even among other homoerotic individuals, and in differentiating them from the gays, who, for them, are more the effeminate type.

In a similar vein, the bisexual categorisation is not totally alien to the beach. Some visitors, although fewer than the first two already described, define themselves as being bisexual. They commonly hold a relation with a woman (commonly his wife) but are also sexually attracted to, and are sexually related to, other men. They consider themselves neither as gays nor as homosexuals, but as men who "enjoy" both sexes.

But the notions of gay, homosexuality and bisexuality seem to be alien to other males who are also part of the social and sexual complex dynamics at the nude beach. For some males, mainly those who come from adjacent or regional localities, these notions are not part of their social representations; for most of these, gay, homosexuality, heterosexuality and bisexuality, are terms that do not even exist in their ordinary vocabulary. The researcher remembers a conversation between one of these men and a "gay"; the latter asked the former, "Are you gay?", and the first responded, "What is that?" Cases like this were identified repeatedly along the field work and are not exclusive to males, for some local women did not know what the term meant either. For these men, who may not be necessarily regarded as effeminate at all, but on the contrary as a very masculine coastal man, there is not a stated categorisation in terms of their sexual identity, if any at all. While they may (not) hold a specific sexual identity, they get involved in homoerotic dynamics and are thus important social actors that construct the beach as a sexually complex space.

While being gay, homosexual, heterosexual or bisexual is unfamiliar to these males, this does not mean that their sexuality is uncategorised. Their self-categorisation is not a matter of the identity adopted, but often of the role in sexual relations with other men. Some of these men may have sexual encounters with other males but seek to maintain an active role; they are who penetrate other males and do not allow being penetrated, kissed in the mouth or sexually exhibited in public with other males. This

suggests that those men maintaining the active role in homoerotic spaces also maintain their masculinity intact. "I'm a man, and that's it!" was a common response of these men when questioned about their self-identification.

Based on the evidence above, it is thus suggested that the notion of gay, as has been commonly utilised to refer to the "gay space", "gay beach", "gay nude beach", to mention but a few, are simplistic in terms of the various identities, practices and meanings found in public spaces. While the notion of gay has been useful to somehow categorise same-sex relations, it is a reductionist concept that does not encompass the various homoerotic practices and subjectivities that make the nude beach, and other homoerotic places, a socially and culturally complex space.

### On the homoerotic appropriation of the nude beach

As seen before, the definition of space largely depends on the behaviours and collective and individual meanings assigned to it. The beach is not the exception of this; and in the case of the beach under study, it seems to be largely related to the homoerotic appropriation or homonormalisation (Visser, 2008) of the beach. Largely based on interviews and informal conversations with local people, it was learnt that no part of the beach was ever designated to the homosexual community. The east side of the beach used to be visited by heterosexual couples and even families, but as time went through, it became a space for homoerotic interactions. Particularly this side of the beach is almost entirely visited by males. The scene presented in Figure 3 is commonly observed during tourist seasons; men can be observed alone or in groups, spread all along the beach. The appropriation of the beach as a homoerotic nude beach may be explained on the basis of Douglas et al.'s (1977, p. 36) suggestion that "it is most likely that male homosexuals ("gays") were the most active group in trying to "liberate" the beaches from clothes and from the traditional laws. The gay males are still a very active group on all the beaches that have been liberated. Moreover, they are still trying to liberate new beaches".

Figure 3

#### The homoerotic nude beach - male dominance and appropriation of space



As Figure 3 suggests, the homoerotic nude beach has become clearly demarcated both socially and physically. Socially, the large number of male visitors that may stay at a time at the beach has implicitly contributed to recognise and label it as a homoerotic ("gay") beach. The dominant number of males spread all along the beach suggests an appropriation of the beach by males and thus alienates other type of visitors from it. This of course does not mean that the beach is not visited by others; women (sometimes accompanying males) and heterosexual couples come down to the beach and get nude, but the number of visitors, as can be observed in the photograph, is definitely overwhelmingly male. In the case of families and probably heterosexual couples, several times (perhaps driven by the curiosity of the popularity of the beach) arrive and observe the beach from the top of the hill. Comments, whispering, eyebrows lifts, smiles, and laughs are among the commonest reactions of the people who look at the beach from the top of the hill but who never go down.

Physically, the beach is also clearly demarcated. It is located on the east extreme of the whole beach, and its access is not easily visible. Additionally, there is a need to climb up a relatively small hill (through stairs) that separates the rest of the beach from it. This type of physical demarcation seems to stick closely to the model of nude beaches distribution as proposed by Jaurand (2005). The French geographer's model suggests that there commonly exist logic of spatial segmentation of homoerotic beaches; the great majority of homoerotic nude beaches are frequently distant from the main bathing sections of the beach and are protected from the visitation and observations of others by natural elements such as forests, cliffs and hills. The beach herein studied then supports such a spatial marginalisation of the beach, which has also been identified in other beaches in France (Jaurand, 2005), Greece (Andriotis, 2010), and the United States (Douglas et al., 1977).

## On homoerotic practices

As the conceptual discussion above indicates, the space is shaped by the practices and social meanings that are assigned to it. In the case of the beach under study, several homoerotic practices are performed and thus many meanings are encountered. Unlike other recreational places such as locals parks, cinemas and theatres, the nude beach as a tourism place represents an amalgamation of a probably countless number of practices and subjectivities. This is mainly for two reasons; first because the beach is visited by people from different parts of the country, each with its own specific cultural definitions and, second because this amalgamation becomes more complex due to the number of international male visitors (North American and European, mainly) who turn the beach into a more socially, culturally and homoerotically complex place. While it is difficult if not impossible to present all the possible existing homoerotic practices and meanings of the beach, the forthcoming paragraphs present some of the most conspicuous.

### *A haven for like-minded people*

Undoubtedly, the beach is regarded as a *haven for like-minded people*. Many males visit the beach in search of socialising with other men who share similar characteristics, interests and identities. They look for a space that can provide them with the sense of belonging, which will eventually perhaps influence their own self-perception and identity. For them, the social component of the beach is more important than the nudism, leisure or sexual elements. They may not get nude or look for sexual opportunities; they

are the type of men who approach others to have a conversation about them as part of a community that can be found at the beach. The homoerotic beach, socially and physically demarcated, allows them to get social recognition and to confirm the "gay identity". From the observations and participations during fieldwork, it is presumed that socialisation among males is faster, easier and more comfortable within homoerotic surroundings than those found in non-sexualised spaces.

### *An opportunity to be oneself*

In relation to the meaning above, the homoerotic nude beach represents an *opportunity to be oneself*. As stated before, for a large number of men performing their sexual orientation in the ordinary life is frequently restricted due to the common social condemnation of homosexuality. Thus, some males do not care much about the nudism or even the social components of the beach; they appreciate a space which provides them with the liminal opportunity to be themselves without the social restrictions commonly faced at home. Although many homoerotic beaches in other destinations may have this attribute, the beach herein analysed as a homoerotic space becomes more valuable due to the stronger social, familiar, legal and religious oppression that can still be faced in Mexican societies. The fact that males who live in other coastal resorts visit this specific beach evidences that it is not the natural attractiveness of the destination itself which attracts them but the liminal aspect of it that allows them to be themselves.

### *Relaxation and diversion*

The nude beach, like many other destinations, represents a milieu for *relaxation, recovery and diversion*. The rustic and peaceful environment found at the beach provides the ideal space for relaxation and activities that may help to recover from the negative psychological effects of work. This environment becomes more attractive when a homoerotic scene exists in the beach, even if one is not an active part of the scene. So, it is common to find males lying on the beach just getting suntanned practically away from everyone. Observations reveal that there are males who do not look for a social environment in which to be themselves or socialise with other men. Therefore, finding men reading a book, listening to music, or just getting tanned on their own is a relatively common practice at the beach. Additionally, bathing, playing some ball games can also be observed at the beach. Fieldwork suggests that the homoerotic atmosphere defines the way in which these specific leisure activities take place. Leisure activities at the beach are commonly embedded in a homoerotic environment and are thus performed in a way that would be socially constrained in non-homoerotic spaces. This suggests that the particularities of diversionary practices may also be positively sexualised within a favourably homoerotic environment.

### *Getting nude*

By definition, the nude beach is also regarded as the ideal place for *getting nude*. Although not everyone gets nude during their stay at the beach, many do get naked. For some, particularly for some foreign tourists, the nude beach represents the ideal environment for the practice of *naturism*.

*"Naturism since its origins is a healing philosophy, an empirical medicine... that utilises natural elements for therapeutic purposes. Naturism is therefore a medicine without medications. The natural elements*

*(water, air, sun) are utilised for therapeutic reasons... All forms of naturism find their roots in the idea of a beneficial nature for the human being" (Barthe-DeLoizy, 2003, p. 140).*

It is thus common to find tourists that have come to beach for the specific intention of experiencing the healing properties of the nature on their bare bodies. For them, the homoerotic environment and the nudist reputation of the beach allows them to get nude without worrying about the socially repressing attitudes commonly found towards nudism and homosexuality at the same time.

However, for other males the nude beach represents the ideal opportunity to show their body and its "attributes". Some males use the nudist environment of the beach "to show what they have and see what others have". For some, this may represent a chance for self-esteem and pride by getting their body seen, admired and perhaps "desired" by others. This is commonly achieved by "doing the gorgeous trip" (Douglas et al., 1977). This supports the assertion of Douglas et al. (1977, p. 186) that voyeurism, body-display and organ-display are all much more open and recurrent than on hetero beaches-and "heavier" by hetero-casual standards.

### *Cruising*

The nude beach also means an ideal homoerotic space for *cruising*. Observations reveal that the beach is an ideal place for the search of sexual partners. It is common to find several men coming to the beach and approach other males. This can take place by talking about the weather or the high wave, for example, or by walking by forwards and backwards near the person who the man is interested in. For cruising, being nude is not a condition. Cruising can take place with both clothed and unclothed men. Several men were observed to arrive alone to the beach, approach someone, talk for some time and then leave together back to the hotel room or somewhere else along the beach for sexual purposes.

### *Homoerotic sexual scenario*

The nude beach is not only an ideal place for getting nude or cruising, but a *homoerotic sexual scenario* as such. The beach space is sexualised by the several homoerotic practices among males. The beach as a nude space provides the context to recognise that homoerotic practices may take place in a wide range of forms and can be negotiated in several forms. For some, sex among males may imply fellatio, masturbation or penetration. But in reality, on the beach, sex and eroticism among men can take different dimensions. Homoerotic practices at the beach may be in the form of voyeurism, exhibitionism, erotic stares and conversations, hugs, caresses, kisses, genital or verbal insinuation, fellatio, masturbation, penetration and many others that may fit into the creativity and desire of the homoerotic mind.

Some of these practices such as hugs, kisses and caresses take place at the beach and at any time of the day. However, "heavier" practices, particularly fellatio, masturbation and penetration, take place commonly on the rocks, where actors can somehow hide from the rest. During observations, used condoms were repeatedly found on the rocks and other specific parts of the beach. Bearing this in mind, the beach then becomes a sex paradise not only due to the beauty of the beach but to the number of possible sexual encounters that can be found here.

Finally, it needs to be recognised that although certain specific homoerotic practices and meanings may be clearly identified, these are neither static nor exclusive to anyone. Some men may adopt several practices at a time and go forth and back. The nude beach provides ample opportunities to experience and experiment homoerotic practices that are socially, culturally and sexually prescribed but also to perform new practices that emerge from the novelty of encounters among men. The homoerotic practices and meanings at the nude beach are then highly varied and somehow unpredictable.

## Conclusion

This paper aimed to analyse various social and sexualised practices and subjectivities among men at a nude beach within a homoerotic framework. A homoerotic framework would allow acknowledging the several and multifaceted experiences of men who sexually and erotically relate to other men. It suggests guiding principles for explaining the wide range of sexual practices and subjectivities that are socially and culturally defined. The findings of this study suggest that the nude beach, as a social and cultural construct, represents a setting where a large number of practices, liminal behaviours and meanings are amalgamated. The homoerotic beach then becomes a liminal place as it turns into an unregulated, yet often sexually negotiated, space where socially condemned behaviours are performed.

The amalgamation of homoerotic practices, behaviours and meanings at the nude beach seem to be highly sexualised. Based on the study findings, the sexualisation of these are related to two specific aspects; first, the nudist aspect of the beach that frequently leads to sexual innuendo by forms of both sexual display and sexual observation by others; and second, the concentration of males who are somehow involved with other males that elicits the interaction of sexual identities and behaviours among them. The beach is thus a complex combination of practices that are socially, culturally, sexually and subjectively determined that give sense and explanation to homoerotic encounters among males.

Furthermore, the empirical evidence herein provided reveals that the sexual identities of males are not always recognised, accepted or even acknowledged by those participating in homoerotic encounters. The status of sexual identities, the findings suggest, will be determined significantly by cultural contexts and (de)constructed, adopted or challenged through the liminal role of the homoerotic beach. In the case of the Mexican nude beach studied, it seems that some identities – predominantly those accepted and recognised by other cultures such as in the United States and some European countries - are alien to the practices, feelings and interests of male social actors visiting the beach. Thus adjectives such as "gay" and "homosexual" have no sense for some; they have no meaning for self-definition; or at least the meanings of such adjectives are culturally negotiated in order to fit male subjectivities in such contexts. The beach provides the social, cultural, sexual and liminal opportunity for the performance and transformation of males' subjectivities.

This study thus evidences that the "gay nude beach" – and possibly other concepts such as "gay space" - cannot encompass the diverse homoerotic realities that can be found at the beach. The concept of "gay nude beach" therefore becomes simplistic as it does not recognise the various homoerotic practices and meanings that in some societies are culturally defined to a large extent. The "homoerotic nude beach" appears to be a more inclusive concept for the recognition of the complex social, sexual and subjective dynamics among males at the beach as a liminal place.



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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Although it is recognised that the concepts of gay and homosexual tend to oversimplify the diverse sexual practices, identities, meanings and male subjectivities within homoerotic relations in contexts that are socially and culturally different from those of western notions (North America, mainly), both concepts will be used in subsequent sections in order to keep the original term utilised by the authors cited, but with the recognition of the complex diversity that the homoerotic framework offers.

<sup>2</sup> In order to reduce potential harm to research participants, it has been advised that the identity of individuals and places should remain unrevealed (Bryman, 2008). Due to ethical principles, the name of the beach under study remains covered.

<sup>3</sup> For this paper, it was initially expected to incorporate several photographs in order to provide a more comprehensive illustration of the social reality, by so doing, however, serious ethical/legal issues may arise. Therefore, in order to protect informants' identities, photographs (except for one) have been left out.

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