

Afropessimism in the western imaginary: social representations of secondary school students

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Abstract: This paper analyses the social representations held by secondary school students in the Canary Islands participating in the project *Enseñar África. Una mirada en positivo*, focusing on their preconceived ideas about Africa. Particularly, it examines the Afro-pessimistic component by identifying their prejudices and negative stereotypes and explores how these perceptions can influence their construction of identity in ways that could foster racist attitudes. The methodology is qualitative and uses Atlas.ti to analyse the content of an open question. The sample consists of 1,008 secondary school students. The results reveal three distinct views, with most students falling into an Afro-pessimistic discourse in which negative stereotypes prevail. It is concluded that understanding the social representations of students is essential for understanding and reflecting on how they think about the African continent, the consequences this has for the formation of personal and social identity, and for addressing teaching and learning that promotes a critical attitude towards racism and hate speech associated with African people.

Keywords: Africa; Identity; Prejudice; Social Representation; Social sciences; Interdisciplinarity

El afropesimismo en el imaginario occidental: representaciones sociales del alumnado de secundaria

Resumen: Este trabajo investiga las representaciones sociales que el alumnado de Secundaria de Canarias, participante en el proyecto *Enseñar África. Una mirada en positivo*, tiene sobre África a modo de ideas previas. Para ello se analiza el componente afropesimista en sus representaciones, mediante la presencia de prejuicios y estereotipos negativos, y se establece cómo estos podrían incidir en su construcción identitaria de forma que pudiera contribuir a actitudes racistas. La metodología es cualitativa y se realiza con Atlas.ti el análisis de contenido de una pregunta abierta. La muestra se compone de 1008 estudiantes de Secundaria. Los resultados revelan tres tipos de visiones, pero la mayoritaria del alumnado responde a una categoría de discurso afropesimista donde persisten los estereotipos negativos. Se concluye que conocer las representaciones sociales del alumnado resulta esencial para conocer y reflexionar sobre cómo piensan acerca del continente africano, las consecuencias que esto tiene para la conformación de la identidad personal y social, y para afrontar una enseñanza-aprendizaje que permita promover una actitud crítica frente al racismo y a los discursos de odio asociados a las personas africanas.

Palabras clave: África; Identidad; Prejuicios; Representaciones Sociales; Ciencias Sociales; Interdisciplinariedad

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1. Introduction

In the political and social context of the twenty-first century—marked by digital information technologies and the rise of disinformation—extremist ideologies spread through hate speech directed at “others”, primarily immigrants or anyone perceived as different. For this reason, it is essential to foster an active and democratic global citizenship (Pagès, 2019) aligned with human rights, the Competences for Democratic Culture (Council of Europe, 2018), the Sustainable Development Goals, and the 2030 Agenda. This form of citizenship requires the development of critical digital literacy (Redecker, 2017; UNESCO, 2024a) from a critical and intersectional intercultural perspective (Aguilar & Buraschi, 2023; Díez-Bedmar, 2022). To achieve this, teachers must work with both the curriculum and transversal content through Socially Relevant Problems (SRPs) or Socially Live Issues, encouraging reflective learning in line with the principles of critical theory and critical pedagogy (Giroux, 1997; Redecker, 2017; Santisteban, 2019; Santos, 2009).

Africa shares deep historical, economic, political, and cultural ties with Spain. It is also the third-largest region of origin for immigration to Spain; the maritime route from Africa to the Canary Islands is currently the main point of irregular entry into the country, including for many unaccompanied minors; African students are present in Spanish classrooms; and African immigration is one of the main targets of contemporary hate speech. Against this backdrop, this study analyses whether students continue to reproduce the Western afropessimist imaginary and, if so, which stereotypes persist and how these may influence identity construction and the development of racist attitudes.

2. Theoretical Framework

Identity is constructed through various forms of belonging—family-based, historical, geographical, or socioeconomic—but always in dialectical relation to the “other”. In this process, the mechanism of “identification” among members of the same community or “culture” is fundamental, and prejudice and stereotypes towards others play a central role. Prejudices are “unchecked prior judgements, favourable or unfavourable in character, about an individual or a group” (Klinenberg 1968, cited in Tajfel, 1984, p. 159), and arise because human thought needs to organise and classify reality into simple categories that guide everyday actions. Stereotypes refer to the characteristics attributed to those social groups that are the object of prejudice, enabling their categorisation, and are acquired through collective memory. Thus, “identification” is linked to the “representation” one has of oneself and of the community to which one belongs (Cruz, 2006; Marín, 2002; Mercado & Hernández, 2010).

The mechanisms that activate prejudice (categorisation, stereotyping, and social identification) manifest as negative attitudes towards other groups in the form of racism or discrimination (Pascale, 2010). In this sense, Moscovici’s (2004) theory of social representations and social identity theory (Tajfel, 1984) show that social representations of something or someone are shared, constructed, and unconsciously disseminated collectively by a social group. These representations affect behaviour and social interactions, thereby influencing the formation of personal and social identities and contributing to the consolidation of racism (Cruz, 2006; Pascale, 2010).

Ethnocentrism—valuing one’s in-group positively and viewing it as “superior” to “others” or the out-group—is closely linked to xenophobia, racism, and intercultural competences (Alaminos-Fernández & Alaminos-Fernández, 2020). In this sense, the notion of “Western culture” is often constructed in opposition to certain “others” perceived as homogeneous and less advanced (Sierra, 2011). Contemporary racism in Europe is shaped by the economic, social, cultural, and ideological conditions of societies, as well as by the arrival of immigrants, and is grounded in assumptions about the superiority of particular social groups. This sense of superiority, related to ethnocentrism and Eurocentrism, reinforces the racism that the West directs towards Africa through stereotyped representations (Mesa, 1999).

The stereotypical view of Africa became consolidated through colonisation during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, shaped by narratives developed over decades. Afropessimism, a term coined by Frank B. Wilderson III in the twentieth century, converges with earlier currents of decolonial thought. It presents the continent as homogeneous, referring to “the African” and emphasising a tragic and violent image marked by wars, political instability, corruption, and widespread poverty, hunger, and disease. This representation has devastating social, political, and economic consequences for Africans (africappractice, 2024; De B’béri & Louw, 2011; Ndongo, 2023; Oguh, 2015; Pointer, 2023). In this regard, African people are often perceived as primitive, supposedly living in tribes, practising traditional cultures, and assumed not to have contributed to human advancement. The myth of the primitive and exotic (Harth, 2012, cited in Oguh, 2015), or of the continent’s timelessness—apparently unchanged compared with others—underpins this view and rarely acknowledges the possibility of coexistence between tradition and technological development or modernity.

This afropessimist imaginary construct contrasts with other representations, such as Africa depicted as a natural landscape of deserts and savannas populated by wild animals. In such portrayals, “the African” may appear as an example of the “noble savage” (González, 1987), in contrast to depictions of people living in modern, urban environments in everyday conditions—an image that is almost never shown. Finally, Africa is frequently associated with migration and with emotions such as fear and compassion (Dols, 2010; Kem-Mekah, 2016; Schorr, 2011).

Thus, the Western collective imaginary of Africa is ethnocentric, Eurocentric, paternalistic, and afropessimist, and has been shaped by prejudices and stereotypes that distort reality, transmitted through family, friends, schools, literature, cinema, NGOs, and the media (Calvo, 2009; Castel, 2009; Casas, 2014; Dols, 2010; Michira, 2002; Ndongo, 2023; Oguh, 2015; Pointer, 2023). This homogeneous view has been denounced by African authors such as Adichie (TED, 2009), Wainaina (2005), Faloyin (2024), the protagonists of the documentary *Stop Filming Us* (Postema, 2020), and the news and research platform *About Africa No Filter*, among others, who call for alternative narratives, as these shape perceptions and determine what we believe about something or someone, together with the consequences that follow (Mogoatlhe, 2022).

From an educational standpoint, this perspective of Africa has been conveyed through didactic models, epistemological approaches, and Geography and History textbooks (Dols, 2010; Michira, 2002). Several studies (Casas de Santiago, 2011; Nadal & Guerra de la Torre, 2010; Maroto, 2017) have shown that, since the 1960s, textbooks have displayed common features despite social and legislative changes. They present a homogeneous view of Africa that does not reflect the diversity of the continent’s 54 countries, and they maintain an afropessimist, paternalistic, and ethnocentric perspective in which African history begins with European colonisation, with little recognition of African historical realities. In response, UNESCO has long

acknowledged the link between prejudice, stereotypes, and racism, and has established guidelines to address this issue in general educational materials (UNESCO, 2024b).

Regarding students' social representations, Andreu-Mediero et al. (2021) identified the presence of stereotypes among a small group of students who travelled to Senegal, in a study examining the effects of contact between Canarian and Senegalese students. These findings are consistent with those of another study involving primary and lower secondary students (Guerra de la Torre et al., 2007). Martínez-Sánchez and Benito-Ambrona (2020) also conducted a quantitative study with student teachers to identify stereotypical beliefs about Africa and manifestations of both subtle and overt racism towards African immigrants, according to sociocultural variables such as ideology. However, there is still little empirical research examining students' social representations of Africa.

In the Canary Islands, the project *Enseñar África. Una mirada en positivo* is offered by the Ministry of Education, Vocational Training, Physical Activity and Sports, and Casa África, with the collaboration of the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. All educational stages may participate, and the aim is for teachers to address African realities within their subjects, analysing and reflecting on existing prejudices and stereotypes about the continent and presenting an alternative vision through SRPs that promotes diversity, normality, modernity, and the positive evolution of its challenges from an intercultural perspective (Guerra de la Torre & Nadal, 2016). Developing intercultural competence by fostering attitudes, skills, knowledge, and behaviours relating to others, through intercultural dialogue, is essential for preventing the reproduction of stereotyped images of the "other" that may foster intolerance and discrimination and give rise to hate speech (Barrett, 2011; CoE, 2009).

3. Methodological Design

The general aim of this research is to analyse the imaginary that students hold about Africa and to determine how it might influence their identity and the consolidation of racist attitudes. Specifically, it seeks to examine the stereotypes present in their social representations of Africa in order to identify whether the afropessimist view prevails and to determine whether their representations include a gender perspective.

A non-probabilistic convenience sample was obtained from students attending different educational centres in the Canary Islands. The sample consists of one thousand and eight secondary students, both compulsory (ESO) and post-compulsory (Bachillerato and Basic Vocational Training), who took part in the project *Enseñar África. Una mirada en positivo* during the 2021/2022 academic year ($n = 1008$), prior to commencing work on the project and as a means of gathering their initial ideas. Of these, 479 identify as male, 511 as female, and 18 as "other".

This qualitative study was carried out through the content analysis of a single open-ended question (Castellví et al., 2023), in accordance with the ethical principles of qualitative research (Flick, 2015). The question forms part of a broader questionnaire and aims to identify students' social representations of Africa. The instrument was distributed to educational centres using Microsoft Forms. Data analysis was conducted with Atlas.ti and supported by descriptive statistics to obtain frequency counts and percentages for some of the data generated in Atlas.ti, using SPSS, while Excel was used to produce the charts.

The first open-ended question of the questionnaire, presented as a scenario, was analysed. In this task, students had to explain Africa to someone from a distant place, as geographical and psychological distance would imply a more unfamiliar, abstract, and neutral social representation of the continent, according to Construal Level Theory (CLT) (Trope & Liberman, 2010) and the theory of social representations (Jodelet, 1993). The scenario was presented as follows: "*You have to imagine this situation and think that it is real... A new student has arrived at the school from Nepal (Asia). They had always studied the history of Nepal and Asia, so everything here is new to them. As their family had known for some time that they would be moving here, they speak your language well and have asked you about Africa, that continent completely unknown to them, which they have heard a little about in the news. You now have the chance to tell them a bit about how you perceive Africa and something about its history. Please explain it here below, because you are going to explain it by email and it is very important for them.*"

Using a deductive methodology, the system of categories was established a priori, based on theoretical work relating to the concept of afropessimism (De B'éri & Louw, 2011; Dols, 2010; Kem-Mekah, 2016; Oguh, 2015; Pointer, 2023; Schorr, 2011). Through analysis of the responses, three categories of student discourse were identified: afropessimist, balanced, and optimist, together with a separate "Does not know/does not answer" category.

Reading the responses allowed us to differentiate between descriptive narratives and others that also provided some form of causal explanation linked to students' views of the continent, even though such explanations were not requested. Inductively generated codes were therefore assigned to each category and combined with the pre-existing ones. The explanation of the categories and the codes that emerged and were used to analyse the discourses are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1: Categories of Students' Discourses According to the Views Presented.

Afropessimist view	A predominantly negative, stereotyped view of the continent. The dominant codes in this view include: poor, violent, corrupt, affected by disease, at war, tribal and traditional culture and society, primitive and exotic, natural landscapes and wild animals, feelings of compassion or paternalism, and links to migration. Both descriptive and explanatory afropessimist codes appear.
Balanced view	A view in which negative terms characteristic of the afropessimist perspective may appear and are interpreted as part of the reality, but are accompanied by other elements linked to normality, modernity, or diversity. Students provide geographical, historical, and/or cultural information that may highlight or value positive aspects. Both descriptive and explanatory balanced codes appear.
Optimistic view	Descriptions emerge that include geographical, historical, economic, and/or cultural information, which may either be objective (e.g., geographical data) or highlight positive aspects that are valued or draw attention. No negative connotation appears.
Does not know/ does not answer	Blank responses or text copied from the internet. Counted but not analysed.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Table 2: List of Codes Used

PRIMARY CODES RELATED TO THE CATEGORIES	
Afropessimism	Refers to the "Afropessimist view" category.
Afropessimism with explanation	Refers to the "Afropessimist view" category but includes a causal explanation of the perceived reality.
Balanced	Refers to the "Balanced view" category.
Balanced with explanation	Refers to the "Balanced view" category but includes a causal explanation of the perceived reality.
Optimistic	Refers to the "Optimistic view" category.
CODES	
Primitivism	Refers to notions of culture and people from a primitive or tribal perspective.
Poverty	Indicates a place and people living in poverty, experiencing hunger or thirst, suffering from disease, and/or with limited access to education.
Violence	Indicates the presence of violence, wars, conflict, lack of freedom and rights, machismo, corruption, or describes the continent as "wild".
Exotic	Refers to a place that is hot, arid and/or dry, associated with desert imagery, rivers or savannahs, and wild animals.
Migration	Refers to African migration towards Europe.
Skin-colour reference	Refers to Africans as Black, of another race, or of another colour.
Country reference	Treats Africa as a country rather than a continent.
Paternalism	Suggests a paternalistic view.
Colonialism	Refers to any kind of colonialism, historical and/or current.
Economic resources	Specifies the presence or absence of economic resources on the continent.
Normality and modernity	Refers either to aspects of everyday life comparable to Western contexts or to modernity, recognising the existence of cities and technology.
Diversity	Refers to diversity in any place, and especially to the diversity within a continent with 54 countries, each of which is itself diverse.
Positive perspective	Includes all positive comments about Africa and its people, usually expressing a desire to learn more or to travel there.

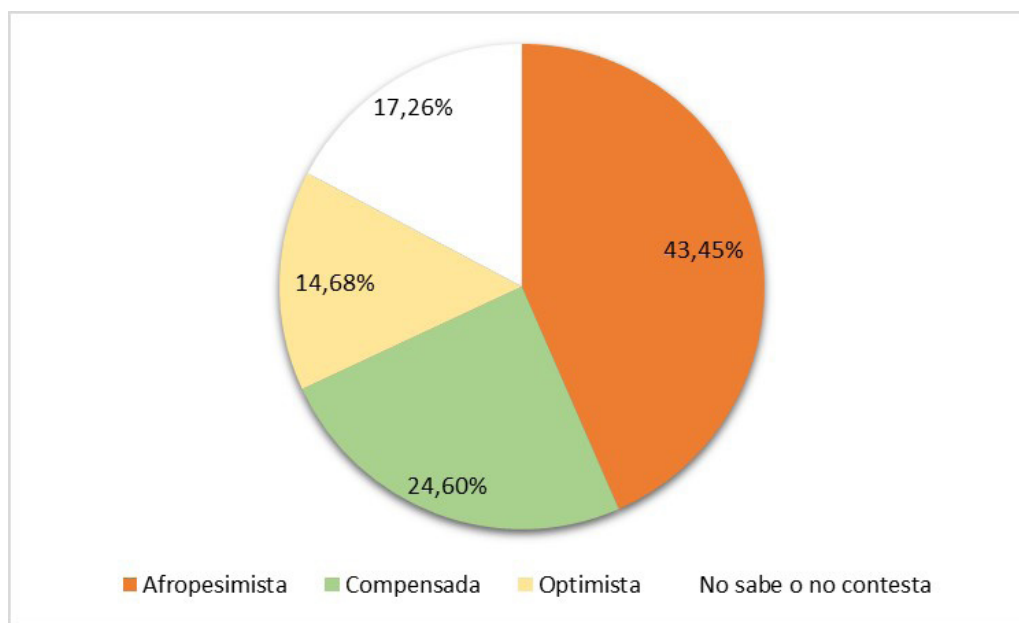
Source: Authors' own elaboration.

4. Results

The discourse categories that emerged from students' responses are presented first. This is followed by the relationship between codes and categories, illustrated with examples. The types of explanations appearing in students' responses are then examined, after which a gender perspective is introduced. Finally, the stereotypes present in the students' responses are analysed.

To begin with, the general results show three categories of discourse based on the views identified (Table 1), excluding the "does not know/does not answer" responses, which account for 17.26%. As shown in Graph 1, students predominantly adopt an afropessimist view (43.45%). The second most frequent category is the balanced view (24.60%), which acknowledges negative aspects of the continent while also considering other elements. The optimistic view is the least common (14.68%).

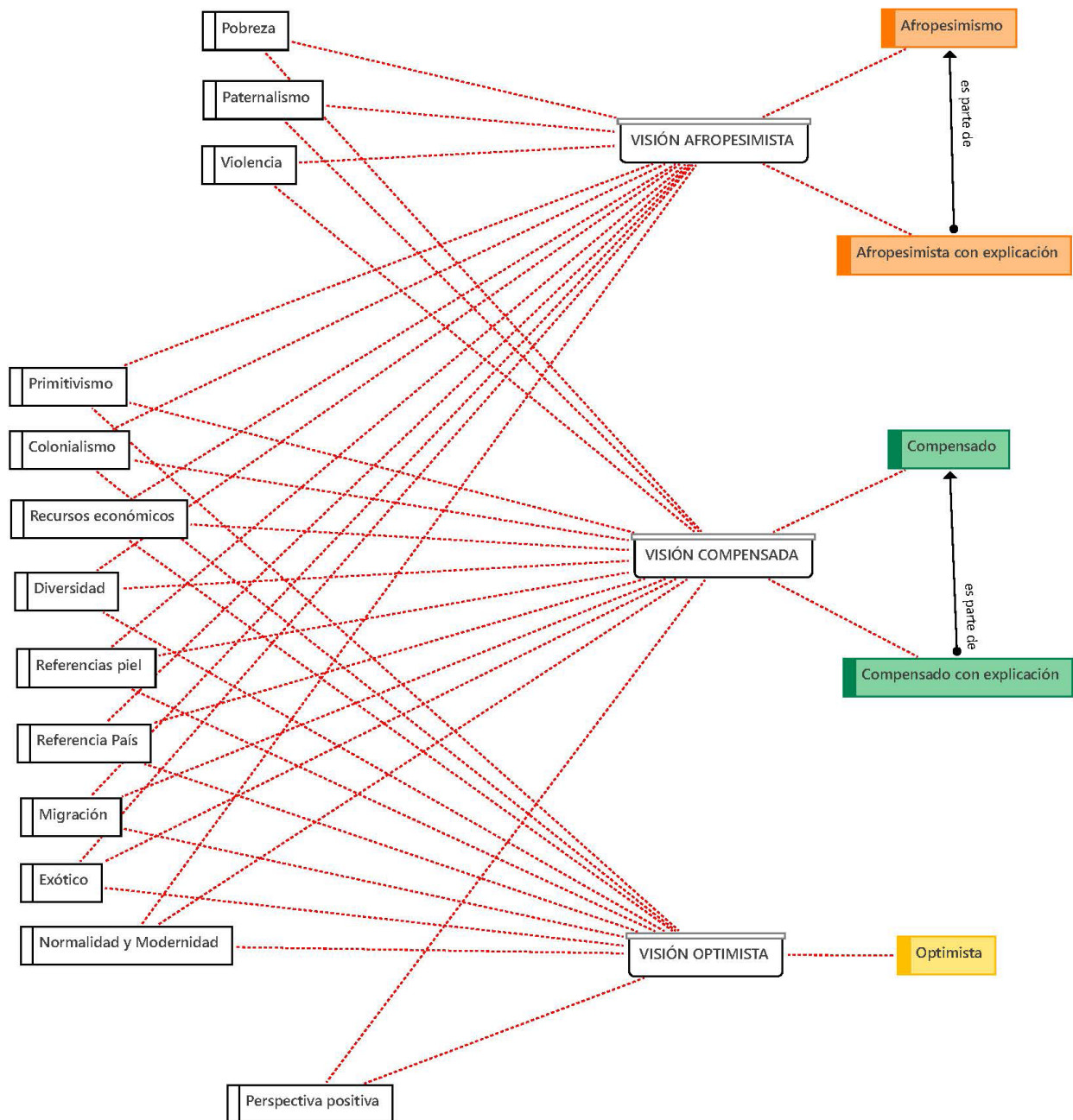
Graph 1. Students' View of Africa



Source: Authors' own elaboration.

One of the main results observed is that the codes shown in Table 2 may be shared across different categories (Image 1). This is because the context of each discourse must be taken into account, as different characteristics or aspects (codes) may be combined within a single narrative. Thus, the afropessimist view shares features such as poverty, paternalism, and violence with the balanced view—features that constitute the most negative perspective on the continent. By contrast, aspects relating to primitivism, colonialism, the presence or absence of economic resources, diversity, references to skin colour or to the idea of Africa as a country, migration, the stereotype of the exotic, and normality and modernity appear across afropessimist, balanced, and optimistic views alike. Finally, a positive perspective is found in both the balanced and optimistic views (examples of responses are provided in Table 3).

Image 1. Semantic Network of Discourse Categories and Code



Source: Authors' own elaboration. Atlas.ti.

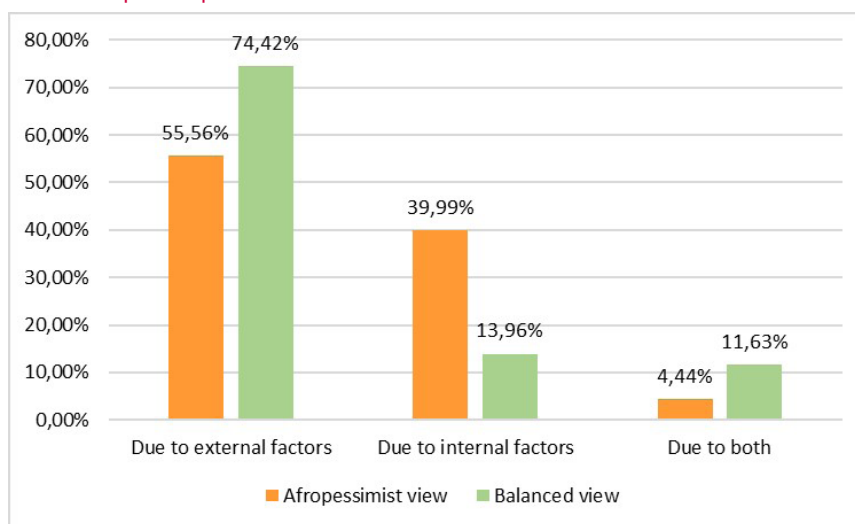
Table 3: Examples of Students' Responses for Each Discourse Category.

AFROPESEMIST VIEW	
ID 635	"It is a continent where there are Moroccans and Black people, and it is a country where there is quite a lot of poverty. They live in shanty towns and have very large families. They tend to marry at a young age and with people older than them to support their family, and by marrying so early they have many children throughout their lives. Many times they have to resort to prostitution to bring some money home for their family."
ID 686	"It is a country full of diverse animal fauna; it is dangerous because of the constant wars there. It is a country that lacks food resources and goods. There are environmental problems, with arid and hot climates, little rainfall. Africa is a country that needs help from government organisations (UN) and the European Union."
BALANCED VIEW	
ID707	"Africa is a continent like any other. People portray Africa as very poor, but Africa can also be very rich. There are all kinds of modern and wealthy cities, and very poor cities without housing. There is also a lot of culture related to food, music... It is very interesting."
OPTIMISTIC VIEW	
ID 894	"Africa is a continent located below Spain; it is very large with many beautiful countries, each with great histories behind them."

Most of the responses describing the continent are purely descriptive, although a small percentage offer a causal explanation of its situation. These explanations appear mainly within the balanced view (20.98%), while 10.27% fall within the afropessimist view.

Two groups of explanations regarding Africa's situation can be identified, depending on whether they refer to external or internal causes (Graph 2). External causes predominate and refer to the interference of European or Western countries in African contexts; these are more frequent in the balanced view (74.52%) than in the afropessimist view (55.56%). Internal causes, by contrast, attribute the continent's situation to poor internal management, almost always associated with political leaders who are labelled as dictators and/or corrupt (Graph 3). This type of explanation is much more common within afropessimist views (39.99%) and reflects a perception that Africa's challenges stem from its "own" problems, without any external, historical, or current involvement. Finally, both types of explanations appear in the balanced view, although to a lesser extent than the dominant patterns described above (Graph 2).

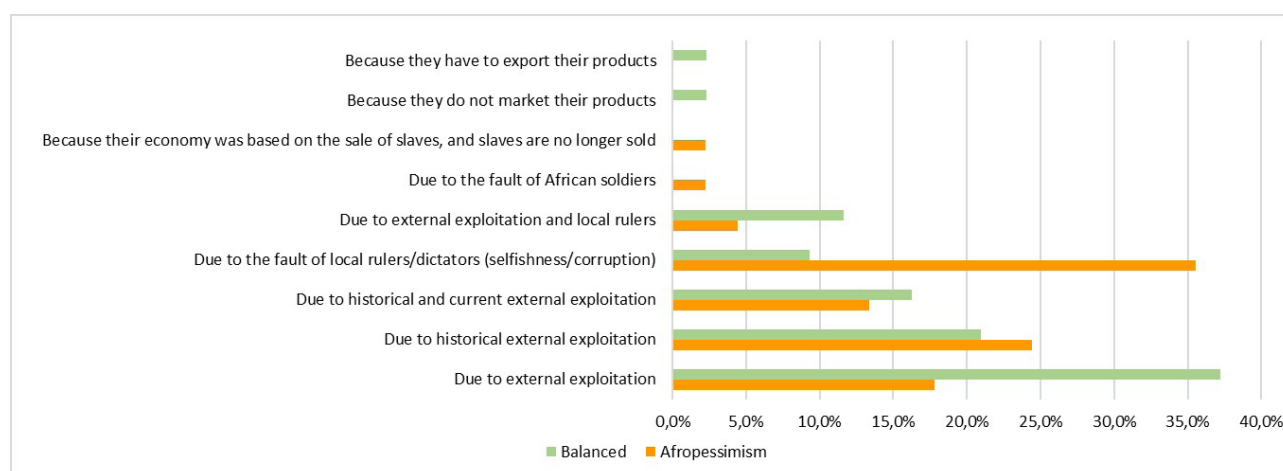
Graph 2. Explanations of External or Internal Causes of Africa's Situation



Source: Authors' own elaboration.

A detailed analysis of the types of external and internal causes (Graph 3) shows that, among external causes, students generally refer to external interference without specifying a temporal framework, particularly within the balanced view. Secondly, the most frequent explanation points to historical external exploitation associated with nineteenth-century colonialism but framed as something that did not continue thereafter. This interpretation may correspond to the content taught about Africa in compulsory and upper secondary education, where nineteenth-century imperialism is a central theme. Finally, references to external exploitation by European or Western countries situated within a historical timeframe yet viewed as continuing into the present are in the minority, although they are nevertheless more common within the balanced view.

Graph 3. Types of explanations regarding the situation in Africa



Source: Authors' own elaboration.

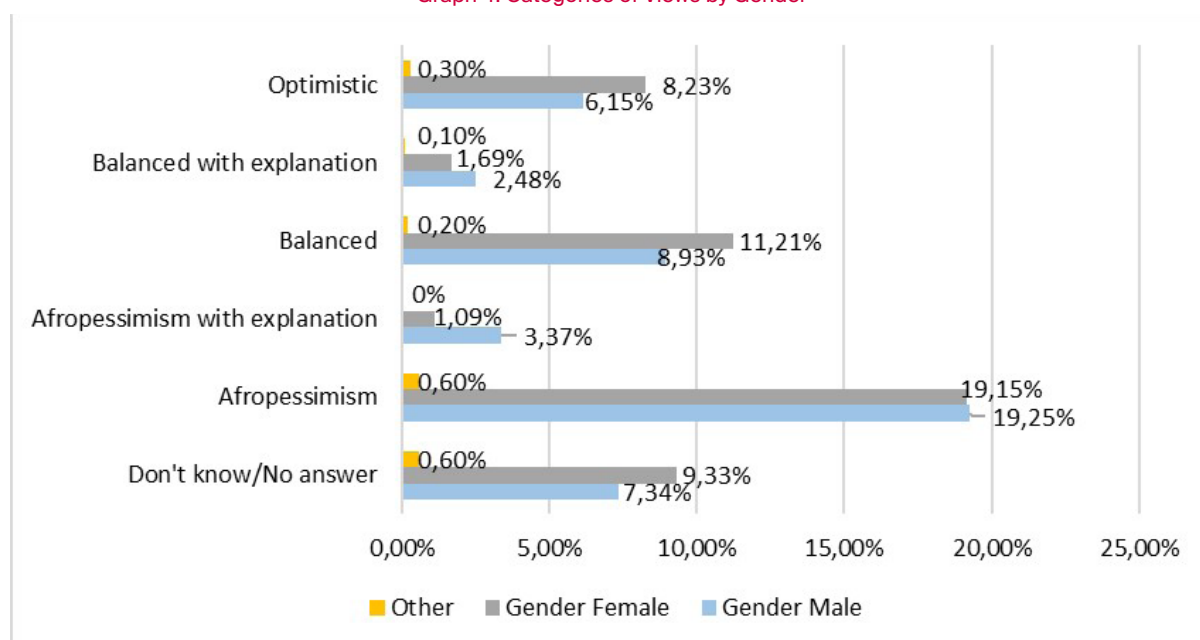
In this regard, and complementing this interpretation, an analysis of students' references to colonialism shows (Image 2) that it appears across all views. In the optimistic view, it may function as an objective piece of information and, in this sense, confirms that most references relate to historical colonialism and, to a lesser extent, to colonialism in the past and present. Notably, all students—with the exception of six cases—describe colonisation as something external, carried out by “others”: “European countries”, “the English and the French”, “other countries”, “they were colonies”, “they were under the control of other powers”, and similar expressions. Only six cases mentioned the Spanish in relation to historical colonialism, and among these, only two incorporated this into the discourse at an identity-related level, which may indicate a form of critical reflection on the role that “our society” has played or may still play in this situation. Examples include:

“Unfortunately, we have not allowed them to grow as a continent. Africa is famous for its famine because since ancient times we have all been plundering them” (ID 275);

“I feel that it is a continent rejected by the rest, but then we use it to extract, for example, its oil” (ID 655)

Regarding the gender analysis (Graph 4), although the proportions of afropessimist and balanced views are broadly similar across genders, the small differences observed show that the afropessimist view is more common among males (22.62%) than among females (20.24%). Conversely, the balanced view is more frequent among females (12.9%) than among males (11.41%), and this pattern is even more pronounced in the optimistic view. However, although the female group appears to have a more realistic and less negative perception of Africa, their responses include fewer explanations of the continent's situation and are therefore more descriptive than those of the male group.

Graph 4. Categories of Views by Gender



Source: Authors' own elaboration

As for the stereotypes present in the responses, it can be observed (Figure 2) that Africa is conceived primarily as poor. This stereotype is the most prevalent in the afropessimist view, but it also appears frequently in the balanced view. Although poverty exists on every continent and in every country, it continues to be the main characteristic used to define the neighbouring continent. Africa is depicted as a place with “a lot of poverty”, hunger, a lack of food and water, and numerous diseases—conditions that are perceived as causing the deaths of adults and children and, at times, as generating the “need for help from NGOs”:

“There is a lot of poverty, many children die of hunger and parents cannot afford to pay for education” (ID 96)

“(…) developing, where there is a lot of poverty, labour exploitation and child labour, health services are scarce, the level of education is low, they do not have access to drinking water, there is no adequate nutrition, there are many diseases that in other parts of the world have already been eradicated. The rate of infant mortality due to malnutrition is high, their homes are not in suitable conditions to live in a dignified and healthy way. They do not have access to medicines and vaccines or to well-equipped hospitals (that is why there are many NGOs responsible for helping with these services). There is human trafficking, kidnapping and the sale of slaves” (ID 113).

Paternalism, although not the most frequent stereotype (Image 2), appears in a higher proportion within the afropessimist view. It refers to the perceived need—or justification—for NGOs or other institutions to assist the continent, as seen in the previous example (ID 113) and in the following one: “Africa is a poor country

that we have to help, such as by helping children or teenagers to study, ensuring their parents have work, building houses for them so they can live and rest comfortably, and equalising the economy.” (ID 902). This indicates that NGO-mediated discourse—which continues to rely on pity to secure donations by highlighting the poverty and diseases experienced by Africans—still resonates strongly among the Spanish population and therefore contributes to the perpetuation of a stereotyped image of Africa.

It is also noteworthy that students tend to conclude immediately that Africa’s needs must be alleviated through aid, without considering alternative solutions or questioning the causes or factors that may contribute to this situation and that, if addressed, might help to reverse it.

Image 2. Characteristics and Codes Present in Students’ Discourses

	● Afropesimismo Gr=393	● Afropesimista con explicación Gr=45	● Compensado Gr=205	● Compensado con explicación Gr=43	● Optimista Gr=148
○ Colonialismo Gr=94	12	25	10	34	12
○ Diversidad Gr=243	21	6	143	21	47
○ Exótico Gr=316	159	16	70	12	49
○ Migración Gr=76	48	7	16	4	1
○ Normalidad y Modernidad Gr=83	5	2	48	8	16
○ Paternalismo Gr=52	45	4	3	0	0
○ Perspectiva positiva Gr=99	5	1	38	8	42
○ Pobreza Gr=545	331	29	152	21	3
○ Primitivismo Gr=84	62	5	15	1	1
○ Recursos económicos Gr=120	28	21	39	16	16
○ Referencia País Gr=125	83	5	23	5	7
○ Referencias piel Gr=63	45	4	8	1	4
○ Violencia Gr=105	63	24	8	9	0

Source: Authors’ own elaboration. Atlas.Ti

Secondly, it can be observed (Image 2) that stereotypes portraying Africa as an exotic place appear across all views, although most strongly in the afropessimist view. The exotic may form part of the stereotype, but it does not in itself underpin an afropessimist perspective and may even constitute a central and isolated element within the optimistic view. This characteristic mainly includes references to African fauna—explicitly exotic and wild animals—with fewer mentions of flora. Africa is also associated with the desert, particularly the Sahara, and with a desert climate described as very hot and very dry; the savannah is mentioned occasionally. It is depicted as a place with beautiful landscapes and different cultures. Students sometimes refer to rivers, especially the Nile, and to Egypt, as it is also “where the pyramids are”. References to jungles or forests are very rare, and depictions of Africa as green, leafy, or mountainous are merely anecdotal. This view may derive from wildlife documentaries or from prominent themes in ancient history linked to Egyptian civilisation.

Diversity appears mainly in the balanced view, followed by the optimistic view, and is also present in the afropessimist view, although in the latter case any hint of diversity is overshadowed by a markedly pessimistic overall description. Diversity is most often mentioned when students explain that Africa is a place with poor people or people with few resources, but also others who are wealthy. When this idea emerges, it is frequently linked to the fact that Africa has many countries, and students often note that differences are greater between countries than between regions within a single country. Secondly, Africa is described as a place with diverse cultures and customs, with fewer references to linguistic or religious diversity. Students also mention the presence of cities, which relates to the characteristic of normality and modernity—both codes associated with a balanced view. For example:

“Africa is a very large continent with many inhabitants. Africa is a continent with wealth and poverty, where there are not only poor people but also normal and rich people. It is a very beautiful continent with savannahs and animals, but there are also fields and very beautiful cities. Africa is not a continent with few resources, as there is also a lot of technology and modern things” (ID 672)

Regarding the idea of diversity, although it is less frequently mentioned than other characteristics, normality and modernity appear in descriptions that include cities—sometimes large ones, though rarely with tall buildings—and when an example is given, which is uncommon, South Africa tends to be referenced. Africa is also described as a “normal” place, like any other.

One of the most frequent references in afropessimist views (Figure 2) is the idea of Africa as a single country, as reflected in the second example (ID 686) in the afropessimist responses in Table 3.

A more evenly distributed characteristic across the three views is the reference to economic resources (Image 2). Most students speak very generally, referring to the “resources” that the continent has, although around nine state that it is poor in resources, which refers to the idea of a poor economy. Students mention “resources” and “raw materials” in generic terms without specifying what these are. Among those who do specify, “minerals” are mentioned—again very broadly—as well as oil, some mention of coltan, and four references to gold or diamonds. Only one group of students refers to the exploitation or export of these resources “abroad”. This points to a limited understanding of how the economy operates and, of course, of the links between African countries’ resources and raw materials, these countries’ economic relations with European countries and/or China, and the migration of thousands of people seeking a better life (Portell, 2023). It also suggests limited knowledge about broader economic questions, such as the origin, production conditions, and distribution of the goods we consume.

With regard to the presence of violence (Image 2), references are associated with wars, which are not defined: students do not specify where, between whom, or why, as if all countries were engaged in conflict. Africa is also described using adjectives such as “conflict-ridden” or “dangerous”. The violence exerted by corrupt governments is the next most frequent reference and is often linked to military abuse. To a lesser extent, gender-based violence is mentioned, associated with the idea that “they have another religion”, as if machismo did not exist in Spain or the West. Child exploitation in mines is also noted.

Regarding references to skin colour (Image 2), these are linked to afropessimist views and consist of mentions of Africa as a territory of “black people” or the “black race”. Students sometimes refer to “dark-skinned” or “brown-skinned” people, and, to a lesser extent, to “people of colour”, revealing some uncertainty about the most appropriate term. Five students refer to “los moros”, a term that typically has a derogatory connotation.

Finally, references to migration align with the view of poverty and/or wars occurring in these countries. Students tend to understand and justify migration as a solution, noting the connection between immigration and the arrival of pateras and cayucos to the Canary Islands, and, to a lesser extent, to mainland Spain or Italy.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

In this study, the social representations that students hold about Africa have been analysed in order to determine whether they continue along the lines of Western afropessimism (Wekker, 2021; Pointer, 2023). If so, the aim was to understand how these representations might influence their identity and the consolidation of racist attitudes. Specifically, the stereotypes present in their representations were examined, and an attempt was made to identify a gender perspective within them.

The study revealed that students in the Canary Islands hold a high number of negative prejudices and stereotypes about Africa, showing predominantly afropessimist social representations, despite the continent being geographically closest to the archipelago. This is consistent with the findings of Andreu-Mediero et al. (2021), Guerra de la Torre et al. (2007), and Martínez-Sánchez and Benito-Ambrona (2020), as well as with the afropessimist view of Africa that predominates in the West (africappractice, 2024; Faloyin, 2024; Kem-Mekah, 2016; TED, 2009).

Although students were not asked to explain the causes of Africa’s situation, their responses proved highly valuable for understanding how they perceive social processes. The explanations they provided were mainly external, although internal causes were also important, as these are associated with the afropessimist view (dictators, corruption, etc.) and tend to be disconnected from any kind of international relationship. Regarding external causes, the prevailing perspective on colonialism is historical—possibly reflecting a geography and history curriculum focused more on traditional content than on SRPs addressing current issues (Santisteban, 2019).

The gender perspective applied to the three discourse categories suggests that female students appear more inclined to hold less negative and more balanced views. However, this finding is not statistically significant.

Regarding the prejudices and stereotypes present in students’ representations of the continent before beginning work on topics related to the project, the analysis is considered essential for confirming the prevalence of stereotypes portraying the continent as poor, exotic, violent, diverse in terms of countries, conceptually homogeneous, or explained through the lens of historical colonisation—framed as devoid of responsibility and disconnected from current global processes.

Analysing and reflecting on students’ social representations of the African continent is important, because one of the functions of these representations is to shape social and personal identities through differentiation from others (Cruz, 2006). This common-sense knowledge is generated from experience, “but also from the

information, knowledge, and models of thought that we receive and transmit through tradition, education, and social communication” (Jodelet, 1993, p. 473). For this reason, the historical and current views adopted by teachers regarding different issues relating to the continent—through SRPs such as migration, racism, the consequences of climate change, or hate speech, among others—in subjects such as history, economics, and languages, are essential for students’ learning and for their identity-construction processes, helping them to understand contemporary global society and the interrelationship between past, present, and future.

Moreover, considering that the relationship between prejudice as an attitude and discriminatory behaviour may be connected (Billig, 1993), and that negative stereotypes are more deeply rooted and harder to modify than positive ones (Cruz, 2006), recognising and working with these stereotypes is essential. Awareness of them enables the adoption of initiatives to redirect the teaching and learning of the social sciences in general, and of the activities carried out through the *Enseñar África* project in particular. It is necessary to reflect on how we think about others and on how negative prejudices and stereotypes about Africa affect people’s dignity, economies, and lived realities, with the possibility of reversing the perspective (africappractice, 2024; De B’béri & Louw, 2011; Ndongo, 2023; Oguh, 2015; Pointer, 2023; Sarr, 2016).

In conclusion, this analysis provides a basis for supporting the teaching-learning process on African topics, although further work is being undertaken to achieve greater specificity regarding the types of responses according to degree programmes and sociocultural contexts, from an intersectional perspective (Díez-Bedmar, 2022).

Finally, it is important to highlight the urgent need to examine the power relations that have shaped—and continue to shape—the current situation of the African continent. It is necessary to address oppression, the global causes of the situation in different countries, and the interrelationships across all sectors, from what Giroux (1997) terms “emancipatory memory”, both in social science subjects and in others, in order to promote a critical interpretation of the world and social transformation from a decolonial perspective (Santos, 2009), thereby contributing to the development of social and civic competence (Santisteban, 2019; Pagès, 2019).

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