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Negative Social Perceptions and their Impacts on the Maya People

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Negative Social Perceptions and their Impacts on the Maya People

A Thesis by

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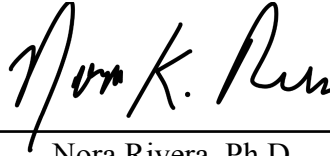Nancy Rios-Contreras, Ph.D.

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ABSTRACT

Negative Social Perceptions and their Impact on the Maya People

by Eleina Beltran

However, the literature on the Maya Train does not encompass geographically the entire Yucatan Peninsula. Furthermore, most of the literature on colorism that is available in English is focused on the impact of colorism on mental health and poverty levels, mostly for Afro-Latinos (preferably referred to as afrodescendientes), while not addressing Indigenous groups. This project examines the social perceptions that non-Indigenous Mexicans hold towards Indigenous people, specifically the Maya people from the case of the Maya Train. I argue that the social perceptions of the people in the Yucatan. By conducting interviews and surveys with citizens who identify as Maya and those who do not, and analyzing existing data and media sources, I show that there is a negative social perception of the Maya people. The damage being done to the environment by the Maya Train project is worse than what the government promised it would be and this is impacting the Maya people as the jungle is an integral part of their culture. This project contributes to the literature on colorism by connecting colorism to microaggressions using Critical Race Theory and Green theory.

Keywords: Colorism/Colorismo, Maya train, Maya people, Indigenous Peoples, Mestizos, Yucatan Peninsula, Cenotes, microaggressions, afrodescendientes

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1   INTRODUCTION

When I first arrived in Mexico there were protests the day before. People were protesting the train station for Playa de Carmen. Throughout my stay in Cancun, many people were having trouble traveling to tourist locations because of protesters blocking the roads. I was in Cancun for four days during the week of Easter and travel in the region was chaotic. Hotels are now banning taxis from their properties, so one must take hotel shuttles to travel. The issue is hotel shuttles will only take you so far because of all the protests happening and refuse to travel to certain areas because they are "high protest" areas. After my research it is not surprising that there are protests as people are unhappy with how the Maya Train project has turned out. News articles have stated that there has been trouble with how the train runs with derailing happening and caves caving in. There have even been reports of people facing abuse on the train (*The Yucatan Times,* 2024).

Mexico has one of the largest populations of Indigenous people in the Americas but the quality of life of these people has been reported as very low ("IWIGA", 2023). Not only is quality of life low but citizens of Mexico when surveyed believed that the rights of Indigenous people to be little or not respected at all (Statista, 2021). In June of 2020 construction on the Maya Train project began despite the warnings of environmentalists and multiple Indigenous Councils calling for the project to stop (Kishwari, 2023). The reason for stopping the project was because these groups were unsure how the project would affect the environment since the government refused to allow environmental studies to be done. The government claimed that because of delays brought on by Covid they could not delay any longer. The delays made the cost of the project almost triple what it was first estimated to cost. When tests were finally allowed the results to many seemed to be suspicious and without merit leaving them to question

what lengths the Mexican government and its President would go to to see this project continue (Porras, 2023). The President of Mexico used the Maya Train as his main goal in his campaign in order to be elected. The fact that he used it for his campaign and used federal powers to bypass many tests made environmentalists question the legitimacy of tests that were done. All the strings being pulled in order to get the Maya Train up and running made many weary about the information that the government of Mexico was putting out. The government does not have a very trustworthy reputation to begin with and so their actions during the Maya Train's building added more doubt and distrust between the Mexican people and their government. The Maya Train began running from Campeche to Cancun in December of 2023 with the rest of the train said to be done in February of 2024 but stations are only gradually opening as production of the train was delayed for sometime. There is also now a route from Cancun to Playa de Carmen that officially opened in March of 2024. Now that the train is up and running we are seeing more of people's opinions on the train and how it is affecting them and the environment.

The Maya people when interviewed by various new outlets were asked what their thoughts were on the project and many seemed to be against it (Porras, 2023). In interviews many stated that this project is just a new way for the government to exploit them (Porras, 2023). There seems to be a big emphasis on the fact that the Maya Train is named Maya but there was no Maya input when it was being constructed and so it seems to only benefit from the name Maya (Porras, 2023). Not only are the Maya people against the project but others in nearby communities who are farmers have spoken to news outlets and the media to state that they are being forced to take buyouts and relocate so that the Maya Train can be built (Kishwari, 2023). Many of these people state that they did not want to take the money but the alternative was to be kicked out of their homes and not be given anything in return (Kishwari, 2023). Many are also reporting that they

have not even received the money they were promised meaning they were pushed out of their homes and now do not have money to start over elsewhere (Morris, 2023). Environmentalists as mentioned are also very against the project because of the short term effects of the train being built and how it is negatively affecting the ecosystem. When the train was being announced it seemed to have much support from locals but with promises from the government falling through there seems to be a change in its perception. People are also now rallying behind the Maya people and showing their support for their cause and the audacity of the government to destroy their jungle and exploit the rights of their people. How then do non-Indigenous Mexicans perceptions of the Maya people in times when the promise of economic benefits are presented to them worsen?

This thesis project examines non-Indigenous Mexicans perceptions of the Maya people and how they potentially worsen during times of potential economic benefits from the case of the Maya Train. It also examines how they must originally be low for citizens to be complacent with the rights of the Indigenous to be exploited in order for a project like the Maya Train to continue. Using Critical Race theory (CRT) and green theory, I argue that negative social perceptions based on colorist ideals and misinformation by the government on the long-term effects of the Maya Train project on the environment and the people living there allow for the project to continue. I used interviews and surveys as well as reported data from media sources in order to study the rights and perceptions of the Maya community in the Yucatan Peninsula.

My empirical analysis demonstrates the perceptions held by non-Indigenous people on the Maya people is very low. From the fieldwork I conducted in the form of interviews and surveys the results of the data show high amounts of microaggressions being used when discussing Indigenous people.

My secondary data in my empirical data shows that there is extensive damage that has been done and is being done to the jungle. Environmentalists argued before the project started that there can be negative impacts on the surrounding jungle. Some of these included trees being razed down and water sources like cenotes being contaminated or even being filled in with cement; despite this the Mexican government and the President pushed for the project to continue promising an increase in tourism and revenue (Gudwein, 2023). The President promised that this project would benefit all and as this was his main project when running for his presidency. The President and government even used emergency federal powers to bypass environmental tests in order to continue with the project with no more delays as it had been stopped for quite a while because of the Covid epidemic. There was a study done by the government that stated the ecosystem would not be harmed by the train but many news outlets and sources have claimed that the government pressured or bought out the company that did the testing in order to have the project pass the tests being done. They claim this as before the company refused to conduct the tests because they were afraid of what would happen when the project failed and the repercussions that would fall on them for failing a government project. The train is now running with multiple stations opening up gradually and there is even a promotion going on that gives tourists free drop offs to train stations in order to encourage them to use the train instead of other forms of transportation in the region. The issue with this is that the shuttle drivers and taxis who are dropping them off are then not getting paid for these trips or tipped since it is a free trip many do not see the need to tip the drivers. The free trips are hurting the drivers and doing the opposite of what the President promised for this group as they are not gaining financially from these trips. The companies are being paid but the drivers themselves are not. My empirical findings show that environmentalists and members of the Indigenous

community did not want the Maya Train project to continue and see this as another way that the government is oppressing and taking advantage of their people and name as well as destroying the environment with no guarantees that this project will increase tourism for them specifically. There are claims that the only ones who will benefit from the revenue are the government and companies and people who already have contracts with the government but not regular people. Citizens also have stated that they have been forced from their homes and threatened to move in order to make room for the train and its tracks and fear what will happen to them if they refuse. There are also reports of citizens not being paid the money they were promised and this was backed by some of the interviews I conducted in the region of Cancun. There is also the fear from the Maya community because of attacks and threats they had faced when trying to halt the project until environmental tests could be done and with appropriate buyouts from the government for taking their land, while that fear has somewhat subsided since the project is now up and running. There is also the fear from environmentalists as they are being attacked as well when they conduct protests or when out trying to spread awareness of the harms of the project. In my interviews I discovered that there is now the fear of attacks because of competition to attract tourists. Indigenous groups are competing to attract tourists to buy from them or tour with Indigenous groups over groups not led by Indigenous people. They are also being attacked by other tourists group leaders that work under the government and it seems there is some government involvement in these attacks according to locals.

First theoretical contributions on the continuation of projects that threaten the Maya peoples way of life and quality of life and how the government is able to continue projects of this nature when it is in clear violation of the human rights of Indigenous people. This will lead into a discussion on colorism and how this social perception is being used to sway citizens of Mexico

into having a negative view of the Maya people using microaggressive speech. My thesis project fills in the gap on colorism/*colorsimo* literature that is available in English as much of it is in regards to *afrodescendientes* and the psychological effects that this exclusion based on skin color or racial origin has on women and men, *afrodescendientes* will not be the group of focus in my paper but past literature has made them the focus and so they are being mentioned in my project. This project adds the perspective of Indigenous people specifically the Maya people and how social perceptions are affecting their right to health, security, and land. It will also put an emphasis on how microaggressive speech is a major problem and the ways in which this needs to be addressed in order for there to be real change in Mexican society. By using CRT as a framework this project analyzes microaggressive speech in interviews and surveys conducted to try and determine how a project like the Maya Train could increase the amount of microaggressive speech used by people to talk about a minority group. This project uses the green theory to examine the damage being done to the environment and Maya people. The Maya people have a unique connection to the land, it fuels them both physically and spiritually and when projects like the Maya Train threaten this connection it can have adverse effects on the Maya's quality of life and the environment itself. Despite warnings by environmentalists and motions created by Indigenous Councils to try and halt the progression of the project it still continues and locals who are not Indigenous are having violent reactions towards those halting the projects. This project contributes to CRT and Green Theory by applying it to the new case of Mexican society. These theories have been used to analyze Latino communities in the United States and less commonly in some states of Mexico but more in comparison to Afro-Latinos; who prefer to be called *afrodescendientes* and shall be referred to in that way for the rest of the paper; and less commonly to Indigenous groups in Mexico. First, I contribute to CRT by adding

the context of using it for Mexican society and using it specifically to analyze the Indigenous group, the Maya people. Second, I contribute to CRT by expanding the scope of what is being analyzed when applying it to the Maya people. The theory currently is being used to examine groups' health and education while I apply it to analyze social perceptions and how these perceptions tell about the standing of these people in society. Existing studies on colorism from the CRT perspective have focused on the United States and *afrodescendientes* and while both are important it is also important to see how they expand past these groups especially since they are having negative impacts on the Indigenous Maya community in Mexico.With the case of the Maya Train project, this research expands how race is being used to create social divisions between those who do not identify as indigenous and those that do. Firstly, this project contributes to the green theory by using the example of the Maya Train project to demonstrate how the ambitions of the Mexican government to advance and benefit financially are negatively impacting the surrounding environment. Secondly, this project expands on Green theory because it is used in combination with CRT. Usually green theory is used to just analyze the environment and not people but because of the close connection the Maya people have to the environment and their respect for it I use them together. I argue that this combination, while not typical for how green theory is used, is essential because the Maya people are more connected and comparable to the environment than the selfishness of other people and governments which the green theory purposefully keeps out as the cause for environmental damage. Using the environment I examine how it is being treated in order to determine if the Maya Train project is more of a hazard to it than the already high deforestation rate that Mexico has among other environmental policies they ignore.

This research project also empirically contributes to the literature on the Maya Train project by compiling data from different sources to get a more accurate account on how the project has restructured the jungle's ecosystems. Existing literature is limited with many looking at only certain areas of where the train is running. Existing literature on colorism focuses primarily on its effects on people who are *afrodescendientes* but scholarship in Spanish exists to include the Indigenous struggle. By conducting the case study of the Maya Train project, my project will expand the literature on how colorism affects not only Indigenous peoples but the environment as well. My project will also contribute to the limited research that is available to English speakers who do not read, write or speak spanish. The findings of this research are still revealing since the Maya Train project is still new and barely began running in December of 2023 with stations still gradually opening up. Secondly, my research fills the gap in literature on the Maya Train project since it will be looking at the Yucatan Peninsula as a whole in order to see its effects on the Maya people while existing literature has been focused on select states in the Yucatan Peninsula. Thirdly, by compiling original data through my interviews and surveys I will be adding to existing data on social perceptions in Mexico with a focus on Indigenous groups which will expand on existing research and data where similar studies have been conducted to investigate social perceptions and opinions of everyday people on other minorities groups in different parts of Mexico. Furthermore, this research also brings awareness to the constant disregard to Indigenous peoples rights not only in Mexico but in other countries where the land of Indigenous peoples is being encroached on without their permission and negatively impacting their way of life. This research will also connect environmental and social issues using critical race theory and green theory in order to make a comprehensive study on how colorism and colorist ideals are being used to encroach on the rights of Indigenous Maya community of

the Yucatan Peninsula and how new technology and modernization are negatively affecting the environment.

Furthermore, policy insights contribute to new motions to improve the Maya Train project. The data in this thesis will shed light on the negative effects of the Maya Train project and why the Maya people are against it, making this paper a source for activists and environmentalists. Because the train is now operational the new intent of the paper is to track the damage the project has done on the environment and what the possible long term effects are on the Maya people and if there is any change in tourism for the months the train has been open. This research was created to be a source for others in order to understand the harmful effects of technology and modernization on Indigenous people and the environment and how social perceptions and microaggressions can allow for projects like this to continue to happen.

The next section examines the existing literature on colorism, the Maya people, and the Maya Train project while also explaining the contribution this thesis makes to the existing literature in these fields. The section after will be the background information necessary to understand the Yucatan jungle, its importance to the Maya people and the ecosystem while also going over what the Maya Train project is and how it started. Next, the paper will lay out the theoretical framework it will be built on and how it contributes to existing theories. The next section after that will be the research design, the methods chosen, the justification of these methods, and what was found through this research. Lastly, the implications of the research and its findings will be laid out followed by the conclusion.

2   LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature on the Maya Train project, its potential effects on the Maya people and the environment already exists. Literature based on colorism and its connection to CRT exists. The literature on the Maya Train project can be categorized into three groups of studies: (1) general information on how the train will be built and where it will run, (2) the potential effects on the environment, (4) government projects that have passed despite the warnings of environmentalists.

First, a group of scholars (Morris 2023; Graham 2023; Vincent 2024; and Seyoon 2023) have discussed the Maya Train project, where it will run and why it has been created. The Maya Train project is an important project for Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador because he has backed it and used it as a main point when he was running for election. The literature surrounding the Maya Train project puts emphasis on how its success can be directly connected to the President and how his push for the project to continue despite concerns was personal. The groups of scholars who discuss the Maya Train Project in this literature group discuss the more technological aspects of the project and its route, meaning they discuss how the train was built, what route it takes, how it will run and so on. This first category of research leads to the second which is about the potential effects of the Maya Train project. While this group tells us the mechanics of the train and is focused primarily on the train itself, the second group focuses on the surroundings of the train and those who could be affected by being built and running in the region.

Second, a group of scholars have analyzed the potential effects of the Maya Train Project on the environment. The main focus on how it will affect the environment is based on trees being cut down and speculation on how it will affect wildlife and water sources that provide water for both the Maya people and the animals that inhabit the Yucatan jungle. It has been established that because of the project's uncertainty there are many trees being cut down to accommodate the potential routes of the train and its tracks (Jensen and Porras 2023). There is a lack of connection between the social perceptions and stigma that allow for a project that could have such harmful effects to continue with many people wanting it to continue (Jensen and Porras 2023). Along with this research is also the research that studies the opinions so far on the Maya Train project. This research has established that many are against the project but afraid to speak out against the government in fear of repercussions not only from the government but from those who believe what the government is promoting and that it will help to bring more revenue to them (Jensen 2023; Porras 2023; Gudwein 2023; Miguel 2023; and Kishwari 2021).

Thirdly, there is research that discusses the pushing of projects to increase revenue despite the warnings of environmentalists and humane groups of the potential harmful effects of these projects on the environment or vulnerable groups of people living in the area. This research centers itself on documents from NGOs that depict how projects are negatively affecting the environment as proof that there are more trees being cut down or that water is being contaminated. This literature also includes journal articles discussing how approved projects have affected groups over time. These scholars are not divided on the projects and if they are negatively impacting the environment or vulnerable groups, but they do differ on what projects they cover and who they blame for the uncertainty, or these projects being pushed forward. Some authors blame the government for the continuation of projects while others blame corporations

and one group even blames the whole international community for not doing their due diligence and stopping projects that they know to be harmful (E360 digest, 2020; Ndn Collective.org, 2023; Cuffe, 2023; Princeton University, nd).

First, for research on perceptions of the Maya the research focuses more on their culture and education levels and are more opinionated articles in order to gauge everyday people's opinions but some of these surveys are conducted by the government (Aljazeera, 2021; MRG.org, nd; Freedom house, 2021; and Sanchez, 2023). The government is currently trying to push that they are very accepting of Indigenous people and very protective of them with the President even calling out Spain for having colonized the country. But the government of Mexico refuses to apologize for its own colonial past and no real change being implemented to better the lives of Indigenous peoples. Because of this I find the surveys collected and gathered by the government on treatment and perceptions of Indigenous people to be less reliable although I did still go over them in order to gauge an idea of how the government records and interprets the perception of the Maya people and Indigenous people. In the government surveys I noticed that Indigenous groups were not separated and were grouped as one. These surveys do not give much information on why there are negative or positive perceptions of this group of people or what has influenced these perceptions. The little writing that does exist about the negative perceptions of the Maya focus on colonialism and claim it is lingering from the values taught during that era but fails to explain how after all this time the feelings continue until now. The Maya people are one of 68 groups of Indigenous peoples of Mexico, they are an important part of many tourist attractions and sites in Mexico, so it does fail in explaining why this negative perception has prevailed in the country. It also fails to explain why the government is supporting and pushing plans that could damage or alter the Mayan culture.

Second, the quality-of-life research on the Maya people is of interest to scholars. This research focuses on education and poverty levels but there is some research on how Mexico's colonial past has created divides within the Mexican culture and society that put the Maya at a disadvantage and has allowed the perpetuation of violence towards this community (Porras 2023). Gathering accurate data on the quality of life of the Maya people is difficult. Gathering data is difficult because many of the Maya people live within the Yucatan jungle and it can be dangerous for researchers to travel to find the villages and groups living within the jungle. There is also the difficulty of language, not all Maya people speak Spanish and there are not many who speak the languages of the Maya people since not all of them speak the same dialect. The next difficulty is that many Indigenous people do not trust the government because of past grievances and it makes it difficult for a census to be conducted. Lastly, there is the difficulty that because of distance many Maya people do not take their children to government facilities to be registered and therefore they do not exist to the Mexican government nor does the government provide things like healthcare. Some of the reasons for not taking their children is the distrust in the government but also the difficulty of making it to government buildings as many do not drive and with constant construction many paths that would have been faster are now blocked off and people have to go around which can add hours to an already long journey.

Despite the findings from different studies on colorism, there are limitations in the research on how social perceptions that perpetuate colorist ideals negatively affect the quality of life of the Maya people and their environment. First, there is a lack of research on how social perceptions of the Maya are affecting their quality of life especially through a perspective on colorism. In research on colorism in Mexico there is a limitation on the available research in regards to the Maya people as much of it focuses on *afrodescendientes* and their struggles against colorism.

Second, there is a lack of connection on research between colorism and the environment. Colorism and its connection to the environment is important because the effects of colorism and how it affects or is used against certain groups can have effects on the environment especially when the environment is an important part of the groups cultural and religious practices. By connecting this indirect way of attacking the environment to colorism it opens the door to how social perceptions can be manipulated in order to attack a minority group as well as the environment. In the case of the Maya colorism and colorist ideals and perceptions are being used to bring negative feelings towards this group allowing for the destruction of the Yucatan jungle, their home and religious sites.

By conducting in-person interviews and surveys to gather information on citizens' opinions on both the Maya Train project and the Maya people as well as opinions on where these colorist (if any) ideals came from, I bridge the gap in literature making a distinct connection to both. I also look for microaggressive speech in order to determine if there is an underlayer of negative opinions while also determining if some of this information or opinions was pushed by government propaganda. The theoretical contributions of this paper will be more concise research on colorism using critical race theory and expand the existing research to include research on the Maya people beyond poverty and health. The empirical contributions of this research paper is a new data set that accurately portrays the negative effects of the Maya Train project on the environment and the people living in the Yucatan jungle while also implementing new data gather from interviews and surveys I conduct to measure social perceptions and microaggressive speech in the Cancun region. I fill this gap by connecting the research of colorism's effects on Maya people and its effects on the environment while also using information on the current Maya Train project now that it is running in the region as I was in the

region now that more stations had opened up in February. My data is more up to date than other research that has already been published and has the insight of gathering information on tourism during high season in the region as this is a time when many tourists visit my research has the added benefit of gathering information during a time when revenue is supposed to increase for people in the region because there is more opportunity to be hired by tourism companies or sell handmade items to tourists

3   BACKGROUND INFORMATION

As stated this is not the first time a project has been approved despite the possible negative

impacts it may have on vulnerable groups like indigenous communities and the environment.

Some of the projects are projects like the Manhattan project which tested in regions where there

were only Indigenous people because it seemed the only harm was to be against people "lesser".

In Mexico specifically there has been a past train project that was abandoned as it failed to

produce the revenue it promised to bring in ("Yucatan Sisal Plantation", 2022).

The hacienda chochoh was built in Merida, a state in the Yucatan Peninsula as a plantation in the

late 1800s ("Yucatan Sisal Plantation", 2022). This hacienda was created to harvest the plant

sisal, a plant very similar to agave (Lawson, 2019). Train tracks were laid down to connect the

haciendas in the area and the surrounding communities were moved around to accommodate

these tracks and haciendas ("Yucatan Sisal Plantation", 2022). The issue with this project is that

it negatively affected the surrounding community and cenotes in the area ("Yucatan Sisal

Plantation", 2022). The project was later abandoned and the tracks can still be found in Merida,

along with the hacienda chochoh which was for a time used for cattle ranching (Lawson, 2019).

The hacienda itself appears run down and abandoned. The hacienda project in Merida is an

example of a train project that was started in the Yucatan despite the negative effects it would

have on the surrounding communities and environment much like the Maya Train project.

Now there is a new project being promoted by a government that will negatively affect

an Indigenous group of people. Projects like the Maya Train are a cause for concern for

environmentalists and Indigenous Councils, whose territory the train will be passing through or

by, as it will be cutting them off form the outside world more than they already are and without

proper environmental studies they are unsure how the train and its building will affect the caves from which they obtain the drinking water for their communities (Guidwein, 2023). There are a multitude of concerns when it came to the building of the train route and its stations and now that it is running there is the concern that it does what it was meant to which is bring in revenue to the community as well as now that its up and running the effects it has on the Indigenous groups and ecosystems of the Yucatan. In order to understand the effects of the train we need to understand the region of the Yucatan Peninsula, the Yucatan jungle, and the Maya people before the train project as well as their early views on the project and we must also understand and have background on the train project itself.

The Yucatan Peninsula spans from three Mexican states; Campeche on the west, Yucatan in the north, and Quintana Roo in the east; into portions of Belize and Guatemala. The Yucatan Peninsula, not to be mistaken for the state Yucatan in Mexico, is an estimated total of 70,000 square miles. In this 70,000 square mile area is the Yucatan jungle. Certain areas of the jungle are more similar to a rainforest, because of the large area it covers some areas of the Maya Forest are referred to as a jungle and others a rainforest, for consistency I will refer to it as the Yucatan jungle in the rest of the thesis. The Yucatan jungle also known as the Maya Forest is the second largest remaining tropical rainforest in the Americas with the largest being the Amazon (Duran, 2023). The Yucatan jungle acts as a net carbon sink for Mexico (Gallun, nd). A net carbon sink essentially means that for all the carbon and greenhouse gasses that Mexico emits are nulled by the amount of oxygen that is being released into the atmosphere by the trees in the jungle (Gallun, nd). Mexico is the second largest greenhouse gas emitter in the Latin American and Caribbean region making the jungle that much more important (Gallun, nd). Without the jungle there to counteract the large amounts of greenhouse gasses that Mexico puts out then there is the

risk of how it will affect the atmosphere. The Yucatan has already faced the effects of climate change with an increase in the already hot temperatures and their hurricane season becoming worse. With temperatures rising and the coast being attacked by hurricanes and tropical storms there is an already negative effect happening to the people and animals there. The Yucatan jungle is home to many animals, many of which are on the endangered list.

The Yucatan jungle is home to animals like the endangered jaguar, howler monkeys and different types of bats. Some of these animals live in caves in the Yucatan. The caves are being filled in in order to sustain the weight of the train running atop them. Environmental studies on how the train will affect the Yucatan jungle were bypassed by national security powers meaning that there is no idea on how the train will affect the wildlife before allowing it to be built. Many of these animals are very important for the ecosystem because they help to control pests that spread diseases like mosquitos and they also are important for keeping down the population of animals that are considered to be invasive species. The destruction of the jungle will leave these animals without a home and will create a multitude of problems for the ecosystem. Many of these animals are on endangered lists and are supposed to be protected but with this project many are being killed directly and indirectly. There have been media reports that military personnel that had been dispatched to protect the train project and sites were also shooting animals if they got too close or out of fear. While filling in the caves is horrible for the animals that live in the jungle it will also negatively affect the Maya people because as stated before they use the water from caves as drinking water and so if caves are being filled in their access to water will be limited.

The Maya people live in secluded areas of the Yucatan jungle because it keeps them close to important religious sites that can be located deep in the jungle like the pyramids of

Chichen itza. Some of these religious sites are also hidden in caves. Besides the benefits of providing food, water and shelter, the Maya people also see the jungle as something that helps to sustain their spiritual life. The forest they call Yuum K'aax which means "Lord Forest" (Kishwari, 2023). The Maya people live off the land but the land also has a spiritual component to it. The jungle and its caves are locations where sacred rituals take place. By filling up caves for the train to be able to pass through, the government is destroying important religious sites. Even by cutting down parts of the jungle the Maya people see the government as hurting or attacking a spiritual being. The train will begin disrupting these natural caves that have been water systems to the Maya people for centuries. The Mexican government has already taken up many of these caves and cenotes (underground sinkholes filled with fresh water) to use as tourist attractions and so limiting them again by filling them up in order to sustain the weight of the train is putting a heavy strain on the Maya people. Some of these caves that the government was trying not to obstruct with the project actually collapsed and this generated many rumors and questions over the safety and planning of the train project (Associated Press, 2024). The train route cutting out access to water will also cut the Maya people off from civilization more than they already are. The routes of the Maya Train will be cutting through the Yucatan in places that will add walking miles to some Maya villagers who live in these sections of the jungle causing them to walk even further when they are in need of going to the bigger cities and towns that are outside of the jungle. This will add some reports say up to ten miles to an already lengthy journey for some Indigenous people. The routes of the train will even be going through villages; it will separate families and communities. This added travel time can possibly negatively impact indigenous community members' health as they will have to travel farther to get to main roads in order to seek medical attention or for the United Nations and other organizations to reach the

community with medicine or vaccines (Giudwein, 2023). It is also forcing non-Indigenous people from their homes as well. Many have in the beginning times of the train spoken to journalists and news outlets on how neighbors or even themselves were being approached by members of the government asking them to sell their land so that the train could be built (Harvard International Review, 2023). Some took the deal while others held out because they said the money being offered was not enough. Some even reported that they heard that neighbors who agreed to sell had not been paid yet and so while inconvenient to stay and the fear of what would happen if they did not comply was almost enough to make them move, they were more afraid of not having the money to relocate (Morris, 2023).

The Mexican government has promised that the Maya Train will increase tourism and in doing so will increase revenue to the people of Mexico. Interviews conducted by news outlets have shown not everyone in the Indigenous community is against the building of the Maya train with some believing it will increase tourism in their region which will bring them economic benefits and help to bring them out of poverty (Jensen, 2023). Those not against the train believe that because it will pass through their towns, the conditions of infrastructure will be better kept and that their regions will be "better-connected" and "better resourced" in order for quality of the train to be up kept and if their region is a stop for the train it will mean better infrastructure in order to impress tourists (Jensen, 2023).

While the government claims the environmental outcomes will not destroy the ecosystem, disrupt animal life and will not be a cause of harm to the Maya community there are groups conducting research and collecting data on the already extensive damage that is being done to the people, animals and nature. NGO groups have been analyzing satellite images in order to grasp an idea on how many trees have been cut down already for the project, how many caves have been

closed up or have fallen from the weight of the train and how many animals are being displaced. The NGO group CartoCritica in September of 2023 collected and analyzed satellite images that showed that 10,831 hectares (26,764 acres) are currently being used for the Maya Train project with 61% of the area deforested (Duran, 2023). The Maya Train is to run within and connect five states of Mexico in the Yucatan Peninsula, these states are Chiapas, Tabasco, Campeche, Yucatan, and Quintana Roo. The route of the train is 1,500 km long with about 21 stations and 14 stops planned, divided into seven sections. The seven sections have different stations and stops, there are actually 8 sections as one of the sections is divided into north and south sections. When the train started the government's budget was an estimated 7.3 billion but in 2019 the budget jumped to 8.8 billion dollars and recently there were reports that there was about 28 billion dollars that had been spent on the project (Sanders, 2023). With the train having already changed routes multiple times it is no surprise that it has gone over budget than what was originally planned (Sanders, 2023). There has also been more of the jungle cut down than what was originally planned as well since the route changed then new areas of the jungle had to be cut down in order to accommodate the new routes being planned and routes having changed (Graham, 2023). There are stations gradually opening and we are already starting to see how people's perceptions of the train have changed now that there is disillusionment with the economic gain that was promised by the government.

4   THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In Mexico, similarly to the United States there is a social hierarchy based on race and the color of one's skin. This is said to be a leftover effect of colonial times but it is still very prevalent today and can be tracked in other countries in Latin America or with Spanish descent. Systemically in Mexico those who are more Indigenous (having more "indigenous blood") or more black (meaning they have more African ancestry) or of darker skin are given less opportunities and are in the justice system at a disadvantage in Mexico.There are many laws to protect against discrimination but they are not well enforced (*Mexico rights,* 2017). Critical Race Theory (CRT), is a theoretical interdisciplinary academic field that is devoted to analyzing how social and political laws and media shape social conceptions of race and ethnicity (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001 & Bell, 1973). While this theory is primarily applied to the United States and was created to analyze systemic and institutional racism there, many of its components can be applied to Mexican society, its legal structures and its treatment of Indigenous people.

CRT in its creation is a theory that is racialized and grounded in law (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001 & Bell, 1973). This theory analyzes at the structural level (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001 & Bell, 1973). CRT was created to look specifically at the United States and how white people were oppressing black Americans in a systematic way (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001 & Bell, 1973). CRT is not stagnant while it was created to analyze how systematically black Americans were being oppressed; scholars have evolved the theory to create branches that analyze and study

other minority groups like Latinos/as/x and Indigenous people in the United States (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). These branches of CRT are LatCrit and TribalCrit. LatCrit was developed in order to similarly to CRT look at how laws and society are affecting the Latinos/as/x communities in the United States like CRT did for African Americans (Valdes & Bender, 2021). TribalCrit developed to do the same from Indigenous communities in America and understand the complicated dynamics between the United States government and Indigenous communities (Mckinley & Brayboy, 2006). These developments of branches of CRT show an evolution of the theory to be applicable to other minority groups although they stay in the context of the United States. While this is great for the United States, there should be a development of CRT to become international and be applied to places like Mexico and the Maya community because the Maya experience is different to that of Indigenous communities in the United States.

Combining CRT and Green theory as the theoretical frameworks, this study analyzes how microaggressions influence social perceptions of Indigenous people and how this gives insight to the structural hierarchy in Mexican society. While CRT is a theory used at the systemic level I am analyzing at the individual level because I believe that the individual level can tell us about the structural level of a society and government. The Indigenous people of Mexico as well as *afrodescendientes* are treated as less Mexican than those who are considered to have more Spanish blood, putting them into an "other" category but this also goes for people who are considered to have darker skin or features that appear "Indigenous" (Thompson, 2016). This distinction and assumption based on skin color and tone is called *colorismo* or colorism in English. *Colorismo* is a form of racism that is meant to separate those who are of more Spanish blood from those who are thought to have less of it based on appearance. In Mexican society how dark one's skin is or the facial features they have, has been used to discriminate and separate

groups of people from each other and this is left over effects from colonial hierarchical standards

that were put in place when the Spanish still ruled in the region. There are also many social

assumptions and even media portrayals of what it means to be of Indigenous descent or to appear

to have more Indigenous blood in Mexican society (Lopez, 2022).

Some of the social assumptions that come from a person having darker skin or looking more

indigenous is that they are less educated, less attractive, and in some cases poor (Thompson,

2016). This assumption is based on at times what people in Mexican society see in media

portrayals. In telenovelas and movies in Mexico many times the lead actors are of lighter

complexion and have colored eyes and these are typically the protagonists while the villain of the

telenovela is usually someone of darker skin and features. Not only that but many of these

telenovelas have a rich family in them who own land and they are typically lighter skinned and

the servants and maids they have around the house are usually darker skinned and less educated.

This harmful stereotype and assumption that people of darker skin can only be the servants and

maids and not the main beautiful protagonists are microaggressions and forms of racism that

colorismo and its ideals perpetuate into everyday Mexican society. Not only that but people have

reported to have had less opportunities or been denied opportunities based on their skin color

and/or features appearing to be more Indigenous. There have been media reports criticizing

popular movie and telenovela productions because of their lack of inclusivity and how they are

perpetuating racism by only having darker skinned Mexicans as servants and maids and less

educated (Thompson, 2016).

I argue that CRT can be applied even though it was created to look at the United States

and African Americans and minorities and how they are being systematically and institutionally

discriminated against by white people, society and the government (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001

& Bell, 1970). The components of CRT that make it applicable to Mexico and the government's treatment of Indigenous people and those who are perceived to be and are Indigenous are facing structural and institutional racism, implicit biases, microaggressions and those of lighter complexions are benefiting from white privilege. CRT states that race is a social construct and that the divisions made up with race are used to privilege some and create a hierarchical society and this can be seen in Mexico between those who look more European to those who do not and all of them are above those who are Indigenous or are *afrodescendientes*. When looking at the Maya Train project and the social perceptions that people had of the Maya people before it was announced to after and currently can be analyzed with CRT.

This thesis also adheres to the green theory, an environmental-oriented approach that encourages people to think independently from political borders and emphasize transnational relations because the continuation of humanity depends on the environment being protected (Dyer, 2018). Green theory emerged in international relations in the 1970s as a response to the increase of transnational issues related to the environment (Dyer, 2018). The focus of green theory is the environment rather than people, addressing first the interests of nature rather than people (Dyer, 2018). Green theorists also argue that it is the responsibility of the world and not just one state to treat the environment correctly and this applies to this research because this project as well as past literature analyze how the Maya Train project is just one of the many that has passed despite the possible negative effects to the environment and many different groups of people those who live in Mexico and NGOs around the world have been monitoring and trying to stop and improve the project to lessen the damage being done or could potentially be done to the environment (Dyer, 2018). Green theorists also do not trust governments because they believe governments to

be selfish (Dyer, 2018). Green theorists critically examine and attack the current world order because these structures are what are responsible for destroying the environment (Dyer, 2018). When applying this theory to the Maya Train project and how it is affecting the environment we see the truth of green theory. The Mexican government selfishly passed a project that is going to harm the environment because it would economically benefit them and they are relying on the rest of the world to make up the difference in their own carbon emissions and deforestation rates. This is not surprising though when using the lens of green theory because green theory assumes that states are selfish and how they are organized in a way that will benefit them even at the expense of the environment. This is a hierarchical system where the current needs of people today outweigh the environment and the long term needs of people in the future and this can be compared to the hierarchical systems that are found between races of people in the analysis of critical race theorists.

Referring to the two theories, this project analyzes the social perceptions of a minority group that could be affected by a colonial past of the state and its citizens while examining the potential damage to the ecosystem and the lasting negative effects the Maya Train project will have on the Yucatan jungle. Mexico has a colonial background and while the President makes public apologies to the Indigenous people who live within the country's borders many citizens believe the rights of the Indigenous to be little or not respected at all (Statista, 2021). The Maya people live off the land both physically and spiritually so when projects that can have negative impacts on the environment are pushed by the government that is a direct threat to the Maya peoples way of life and quality of life. The project itself is while a threat to the Maya people a big threat to the environment and Green theory and CRT give theoretical background on how this project while it is already up and running and will probably not be stopped it could at the

very least be restricted, improved, or have policies put in place to limit the damage that it could in the future do. The two theories work in combination because both are looking at the structure of the system and how it is created to oppress or benefit only some and how the institutions and structures of a government need to be remade and hierarchical structures in society need to be dismantled in order to create a fair world order.

My theoretical expectation is that because the people of Mexico still hold colorist beliefs and ideals that the social perceptions of the Maya people will be low. I also expect that because of *colorismo* and negative perceptions of the Mayan indigenous people that projects like the Maya train will continue to destroy the Yucatan jungle and threaten not only the Maya who live there but the plants and animals that live in the jungle as well. My theoretical expectation is that when analyzing social perceptions in interviews and surveys, looking for even microaggressive speech in everyday conversations will reveal the standing of a vulnerable population in a community and that this speech will change during times of potential economic gain.

5   METHODS AND DATA

5.1   Interviews and Surveys

The data consists of interviews and surveys with citizens of Mexico, articles on opinions of the

Maya Train project, environmental articles on the possible effects of the Maya Train project,

USAID fact sheets on Mexico's greenhouse gas emissions, environmental fact sheets on the

Yucatan Jungle from 2018-2023, media reports and interviews on public opinion and possible

effects on the wildlife and environment.

Interviews were the best way to garner insight on people's opinions because it allows

them to share more. I added surveys into my data because I wanted to give people the option to

give their opinion without feeling like they are being judged for their answers since the questions

being asked have to do with opinions on a minority group and on a government funded project. I

interviewed citizen's who are not indigenous because I want to see how their social perceptions

on something that does not affect them personally but affects another group, that may have a

negative stigma toward them because of colorsit ideals and the colonial hierarchy that is still in

place in mexico, affects how they think about that situation. I was interested in having

indigenous people interviewed because I wanted to take into account if they themselves believe

that colorism and colorist ideals are a factor into how they are treated in the country as well as

their social perceptions on the projects that are affecting their land and if any of the "benefits"

have been seen in their communities. All participants were asked the same questions irregardless

to how they identified.

I conducted surveys as well in order to gather more data. Surveys are faster and can be

more comfortable for people to answer than interviews and so I included them in my data

collection. They are not the primary form of data because I wanted the time to make connections with my interviews and be able to ask more questions than a survey would allow me to do. The surveys included simple questions to garner information on peoples opinions on the Maya Train project and the Maya people without swaying the opinions of the participants. There was also space left between the survey questions in case people wanted to leave more of their opinions or if they felt that their answers needed more of an explanation. Most of the questions on the survey had options in order to better scale people's answers on my data table but some were open for participants to just write their own answer without any influence. While this made scaling my data a bit more difficult but also gave more space to analyze if microaggressive speech is used casually or what is commonly used when being interviewed or surveyed.

In order to find my participants I traveled to Cancun during spring break because it is considered to be "high season" meaning they expect to have a lot of tourists. I chose this time because hotels and tourism companies increase their staff meaning there are more chances to encounter people who live in the Yucatan from different backgrounds as many travel to the popular vacation spot Cancun in order to find work. In Cancun there are famous streets where vendors line up their stands in order to sell to tourists and many of these vendors are descended from the Maya people whose ruins most tourists travel to Cancun and the Yucatan to see. This is just a few busy streets where vendors set up without permits hoping to sell their handmade artifacts to tourists and increase their revenue. This is where I went to search for participants for my interviews and surveys. When approaching vendors I first greeted them and asked about their stand. Looking at many of the vendors' stands was important in order to gauge if they may have had Maya ancestry (because they usually had traditional toys or clothing that only those who are Maya know how to make) or not. After speaking to the vendors for a bit about what they were

selling if I was still unsure about where they were from or how they identified I would ask them as it is not uncommon in Mexico to ask, and I even had many asking from where I was visiting from and where my family was originally from opening the door for me to ask them back. Once the pleasantries were done I would tell them that I was writing a paper for school and ask if they would help me, many enthusiastically agreed and asked how they could help. I then informed them how I was writing a thesis on the Maya Train project and social perceptions of the project and the Maya people and asked if they would interview or fill out a survey, this is the part that got some hesitation. I read the participants my consent forms and got oral consent that they would like to participate and that they understood that they could stop at any time or skip questions. I gave vendors space as they did their surveys as at first I had most people wanting to do only surveys and filling out as little as possible until one vendor came back up to me and asked if the Mexican government was going to receive their answers as well. At this point I noticed there had been a misunderstanding. I reiterated to the vendors that they did not have to put their names on their surveys and that I was in no way hired by the Mexican government to conduct these surveys and interviews. Then my results changed, I had people eager to speak to me and others asking for their surveys back in order to add more of their opinions on them. Over a course of about three days I was able to collect 15 interviews and 15 surveys that have the most thorough answers. I had collected a total of 20 interviews and 25 surveys but many of the interviews were missing information I felt that would make them more valid than the ones I chose and the surveys as well as some were only partially filled out. From the 15 interviews 10 were with Indigenous Maya and 5 were with non Indigenous who lived in the Yucatan and from the surveys 5 were from Indigenous Maya and 10 were done by non Indigenous who lived in the Yucatan specifically in Cancun.

I conducted fieldwork in the form of interviews and surveys in Cancun, Mexico from Thursday, March 28th to Saturday, March 30th. I traveled to Cancun, Mexico in the Yucatan Peninsula for three days to conduct this fieldwork and spent at least four hours each day on my research. During my field work I traveled to popular streets in Cancun where vendors set up stands in order to sell to tourists who come to visit historical Maya sites in the area. I recruited my participants for my interviews and surveys from these vendors. Many of them are of Indigenous descent which was helpful because I needed 15 people of Maya descent and 15 who were not for my data collection. In order to determine if vendors could be participants I started by first introducing myself and chatting with them. Next, I would ask about their stand and then I would ask them more specific questions about their background in order to see if they fell into either category of people I needed to interview. If they did then I would give them details on my project and ask if they would be interested in participating and would then begin the process of interviewing or giving them a survey.

I conducted interviews and surveys with non-indigenous and indigenous communities members living in Cancun. I gathered and cataloged the information gained from these interviews and created a data set to determine if I am able to say my hypothesis that social perceptions and microaggressive speech in the interviews and surveys I conduct can indicate the treatment of Indigenous Maya people in the Yucatan and if social perceptions change during times when there is potential economic gain. I analyzed this data using a CRT framework as well as a green theory framework in order to look for microaggressive speech in my interviews and surveys to determine if these key terms and phrases have any connection to the quality of life of Maya people and indirectly the quality of the environment.I created a system for my data from my interviews and surveys so that it could be interpreted in a way that would help to answer my

research question. First, for my hard copies of interviews I separated my actual interviews by those that I find with heavy microaggressive speech from ones where I see no microaggressive speech and another that has little microaggressive speech in them. I also separated any that had negative comments on any of the topics as some of my questions were asking about the Maya Train project itself. I then separated these groups further by separating them into one being interviews that were conducted with the participants who identified as non-Indigenous and the other being those who did identify themselves as Indigenous. The data from these interviews was then separated based on the questions with each question being scaled as 0 or 1 with 0 being that the participant believes there is little to no potential extensive damage to the environment or the Maya people and 1 being that there is great risk to the Maya people and/or environment. The scales were all categorized as 0 being no negative or not extensive negative and 1 being that there will be damage or there is a negative perception on Indigenous people or the environment. The same was done for questions concerning opinions on the Maya people and on the Maya Train project itself. The data from the interviews were also planted on data tables with the question listed with the numerical amount of how many participants responded in negative or positive ways, those being negative perceptions or positive perceptions or opinions or neither positive or negative perceptions. The same was done for surveys with both having an added layer of including citizens' perceptions of the government. This was added only after I had gone and conducted my research as this was a common theme to come up in over half of my interviews and surveys. Some examples of questions I asked are opinion based questions like "What do you think about the Maya train project being built here?" and "what do you think of the Indigenous councils trying to stop the project?" In order to get enough data to place in a table I set out to conduct and hand out 30 interviews and surveys with 15 people who identified as non-

Indigenous who lived in the area and another 15 who identified as Indigenous Maya. I conducted

interviews on a one on one basis in order to make my participants more comfortable and surveys

were passed out and collected in ten to fifteen minutes (the longer time if participants indicated

they needed more time to complete the survey, interviews on average took fifteen minutes).

I coded microaggressive speech by looking for words that I knew to be considered rude

ways to refer to Indigenous people like the word "*indos*". I also looked for terms or looked at the

words that preceded or went at the end like if there were curse words before the descriptor term

or after. Some of the terms I looked for when looking for microaggressive speech were terms

that were used to refer to Indigenous people as; *indios* (indian)*, prietas/os* (saying someone is

dark skinned)*, india marias* (famous stereotypical tv and movie character in Mexico)*, narizotas*

(big nosed, a way to refer to Indigenous people because of the stereotype that they have big

noses)*, tontos* (dumb, dummies)*, estupidos* (stupid); and other terms. My code or the scale I used

for microaggressive speech was anything that I found to be rude speech which could be any

derogatory terms, hostile speech, negative attitudes and even stereotypes. In order to categorize if

an answer is positive or negative I determined it by the words being used with coding. If an

answer had any of those microaggressive words listed above it was considered to be a negative

answer, the absence of these would usually put it in the positive category or if they did not give

details it was neither. For positive responses I looked for the people I interviewed and surveyed

to in general say they liked the project or people or not use any of the terms like *prieto, indio,* or

narizotas when referring to Indigenous people.

The data after being collected was cataloged with answers being rated on a scale from 0,

no negative opinions, to 1 negative opinions on the train project and 0 no negative

opinions/microaggressive speech on Maya people to 1 negative opinions/microaggressive speech

on Maya people. I added microaggressive speech because while it may not be implicit racism, microaggressions as stated by critical race theorists show a deeper unaware racism that lingers in society and I used this concept to analyze my data on how the social perceptions were affecting the Indigenous Maya people even some that may not be conscious forms of racism or negative perceptions and how these could have been influenced by what people were being told by the government on the project and about its purpose as well as what they were being told about the Indigenous councils trying to stop the project.

I personally identify as Latina being that I am Mexican-American. I am a second generation latina as both my parents were born in the United States. I do not have any Maya or Indigenous descent and so in writing this project I do it from the perspective of someone who is looking at this group from the outside as I also live in the United States. I do understand that my identity as a Latina and being able to speak Spanish gave me the opportunity to conduct this project. As I am able to speak Spanish I was able to conduct my interviews and surveys. I also understand that because I am not Maya I cannot speak on that experience first hand and that I cannot speak for the community and so when recommendations are given they are given just as suggestions from an outsider and I do believe that the Maya community should be approached and consulted and things that have to do with their community.

5.2   Supplementary data from media sources

There are also data tables that include data that was collected from information provided by NGOs, news reports, and other forms of media outlets. The data tables with information collected from NGOs are data reports from a variety of NGOs who have been monitoring the Maya Train project and documenting things like how many trees have been cut down, how many caves have been filled in, and other things that affect the environment. The data from news

reports will also include data on the environment but also on reported attacks on those who are protesting the Maya Train project as well as on attacks on those who identify as Indigenous in general. There was supposed to also be a data table with past attacks from a range of years (2015-2018) before the Maya Train Project in order to compare it to when it was started and now that it is running in order to test my hypothesis and answer my research question on how social perceptions change during projects like this one but this data was very scarce even in news articles and so I was unable to collect and create this data table. The data on deforestation I also argue supports my argument that this project will have long term negative impacts on the environment since the Yucatan jungle is a net carbon sink and Mexico gives off high amounts of greenhouse gas emissions and with the government cutting down so many trees and causing a high rate of deforestation that the environmental situation will be getting worse and in turn this will have a negative impact on the Maya people as there are more susceptible to diseases that thrive in heat as well as high rates of death of heatstroke and since their water sources were being destroyed and contaminated with the building of the Maya Train tracks that this rate will only increase.

I also went through news articles and NGO documents as well as the Mexican government's databases on Indigenous groups in order to gather information on the environment and the people in the region. This was a lot more difficult because there was a lot of conflicting information and so I did my best to balance and take the information and data from trustworthy sources or data that seemed to be repeating in multiple sources. While I took into account the numbers the Mexican government was documenting I did not use much of their data since many NGO groups and activists have warned about the government's gross underestimation of the

amount of deforestation and damage that the Maya Train project is having on the region because of the President's involvement in the project.

All this data will be put on graphs or tables and all of it is important in order to show if my theoretical expectations are supported or not supported. The data also gives a wide range of information on how the Maya Train project has changed things in the past three to four years that it was being built, and if environmentalists and Indigenous councils were right in worrying. This also gives insight to how projects if harmful can continue and how so many projects of this nature are allowed when it benefits those who are not the minority in a country and the way people turn on those around them when it comes to possible financial benefits. The data also gives light into what ordinary people think about the project, what they think about the Maya people, why they have these assumptions of them and how they may have changed based on media reports and government reports of Indigenous council groups trying to stop the project.

6   EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

This section lays out the empirical findings of the interviews and surveys conducted on the fieldwork trip as well as the supplementary data gathered from media sources. In this section there are actual narratives from the interviews and surveys with pseudo names given to participants for their privacy.

As shown in Tables 6-1, 6-2, 6-3 and 6-4 there was an overwhelming number of people who I interviewed and surveyed that had negative perceptions of the Maya Train project after it started. In Table 6-1 there are the results from the Interviews I conducted with participants who identified themselves as Indigenous. In this table there is unanimous agreement that the Maya Train project will negatively impact the Maya people and that the government treats these individuals poorly. While all the participants documented in Table 6-1 were Indigenous people they still reported highly for question five but more on the second half of the question as they all reported being told negative things about the Maya people.

Table 6-1: Interviews-Perception of the Maya Train and Maya people

	Positive	Negative	Neither
Q1:To start, what do you know or what have you heard about the project called the Maya Train that is being built here in the Yucatan? Where did you hear this information?		10	
Q2: From what you have heard, how do you feel about the project continuing?		10	
Q3: There are articles out that Indigenous councils and environmentalist groups are trying to stop the project, what do you think about this?	10		
Q4: What do you know about the Indigenous groups who live in the Yucatan jungle? What experiences have you had with these groups?	10		

	Positive	Negative	Neither
Q5: What do you think about the Maya people specifically? What have you been told about this group of people?	6	4	
Q6: How would you say the government treats those who are Indigenous?		10	
Q7: How do you think the Maya Train project will affect these people?		10	

Sources: Interviews from Indigenous Respondents

Table 6-2 documents the results from the interviews conducted with participants who identified themselves as non-Indigenous. These results were more scattered but a majority were negative. There were still some who believed that the Maya Train would benefit them because they were not Indigenous.

Table 6-2: Interviews- Perception of the Maya Train and Maya people

	Positive	Negative	Neither
Q1:To start, what do you know or what have you heard about the project called the Maya Train that is being built here in the Yucatan? Where did you hear this information?		5	
Q2: From what you have heard, how do you feel about the project continuing?	2	3	
Q3: There are articles out that Indigenous councils and environmentalist groups are trying to stop the project, what do you think about this?	2	3	
Q4: What do you know about the Indigenous groups who live in the Yucatan jungle? What experiences have you had with these groups?		3	2
Q5: What do you think about the Maya people specifically? What have you been told about this group of people?	2	1	2
Q6: How would you say the government treats those who are Indigenous?		5	

Q7: How do you think the Maya Train project will affect these people?		5	

Sources: Interviews from Non-Indigenous respondents

In Table 6-3 the survey results from surveys conducted with Indigenous people were documented. There was also a high report of microaggressions and negative perceptions of both the Maya people and the Maya Train. Some of the people surveyed here though had a higher number who still believed they could benefit from the Maya Train project but it was still not a significant number and some had stated they had not seen benefits yet but were "hopeful" of them.

Table 6-3: Surveys-Perception of the Maya Train and Maya people

	Positive	Negative	Neither
Q1: What have you heard of the project called the Maya Train?	4	1	
Q2: Do you think this project will bring in revenue in the form of tourists?		5	
Q3: Will you benefit from tourism brought in by the Maya Train?	3	2	
Q4: How do you think the Maya Train project will affect the environment?		5	
Q5: How do you think the Maya Train project will affect the Maya people who live off the Yucatan Jungle?		5	
Q6: Are you of Maya descent?	5		
Q7: What do you think of the Maya people?	5		
Q8: What have you been told about the Maya people?		5	

Q9: How do you feel about the Maya council, other Indigenous councils, and environmentalists trying to stop the Maya Train project?	5	

Sources: Surveys from Indigenous respondents

In Table 6-4 the survey results from surveys conducted with non-Indigenous participants was documented. Many more of these participants had negative views on the Maya Train. There was more documentation of microaggressions being shared from these participants and personal stories of being called a slur or racist nickname or calling someone one of these slurs or nicknames. There was a shift at this point in my fieldwork where it seemed that more non-Indigenous participants were listening to interviews or listening in on how Indigenous people that were participating in my fieldwork were answering questions and they proceeded to answer along the same lines. I'm not sure if it was a fear of answering incorrectly or if they had no opinion themselves and went along with the majority.

Table 6-4:Perception of the Maya Train and Maya people

	Positive	Negative	Neither
Q1: What have you heard of the project called the Maya Train?		10	
Q2: Do you think this project will bring in revenue in the form of tourists?		10	
Q3: Will you benefit from tourism brought in by the Maya Train?		10	
Q4: How do you think the Maya Train project will affect the environment?		10	
Q5: How do you think the Maya Train project will affect the Maya people who live off the Yucatan Jungle?		10	
Q6: Are you of Maya descent?		10	

Q7: What do you think of the Maya people?		10	
Q8: What have you been told about the Maya people?		10	
Q9: How do you feel about the Maya council, other Indigenous councils, and environmentalists trying to stop the Maya Train project?	8		2

Sources: Surveys from Indigenous respondents

While conducting interviews and surveys in the Yucatan Peninsula, specifically around Cancun, I began to notice that there was a fear of the government and of my research going back to the government. While not a question in my survey or interviews participants shared that when first hearing about the Maya Train project they were ecstatic for it to begin because they figured their towns would be renovated and that their sales would go up (all of the subjects I conducted interviews and surveys with were vendors). This opinion has changed now that it is running and their promised riches have not been delivered. There were in my interviews casual insults thrown at the Maya people and different rude ways that people in Cancun referred to the Indigenous people of the region. Many of my participants did not see how they were referring to these people as being bad. Maya people that I interviewed also knew of how they were referred to and say that it is common and that they themselves, while not fans of how they are referred to or treated say it is easier to go along with it. They stated that they know the social perception of them is less than. I was also surprised that many citizens when I asked about how they were referring to the Maya people as rude said it did not matter because no one would care because they were "solo indios" which means "only indigenous".

There were some interviews and surveys that stuck with me from my fieldwork. In one interview that I did with a gentleman pseudo name David, he told me about the struggles he was having as a taxi driver and how he started selling hand-made items down the popular vendor

streets to make more money. David was one of the non-Indigenous vendors I interviewed and his experience as someone who has darker skin in the region and as someone who should have benefitted from the high season with more tourists gives an idea of how regular people are being affected by the Maya Train.

> David: I typically drive taxis, that is my main job but now with the government offering free rides to train stops I am not being paid for those trips but my company is. "Los gringos" (how he refers to white tourists) are not tipping for free rides. So when you ask if I will benefit from the tourists, no I don't and now I sell things I make or my wife makes to make money.
>
> Me: Wait so they don't tip you because the ride was "free"?
>
> David: Yes. They don't see the need to. What makes matters worse is that many of them are rude. They think I do not speak English and so they say rude things about my appearance and debate if I am Maya because I am "pretio" (have darker skin). They're not the worst. The worst riders are the ones who come from other places in Mexico and try to call me "compa" (friend) but then also in the same conversation call me "El Indio". I am not Maya!

Another interview with a woman pseudo name Erica was a vendor who identified as Indigenous had interesting things to say about the government. This participant went on a bit of a tangent but it was important to see her passion in order to really understand the perspective and how the people here really feel. I also kept her interview because she does leave in some words that are microaggressive terms.

> Erica: El pinche governo (the f-ing government), likes to tell us how to live and what's good for us but they don't listen to us! They destroy our homes so they can play with

trains, they call us indios, they call us stupid but we've taken care of the land! Now their

toy isn't doing what they said and we are suffering for it. They call us poor but we are

poor because of them! They are afraid because "india marias" aren't tontas like they tried

to make us think we were and we are speaking out against them. The conquistadors never

left, they just changed their faces.

In a survey filled out by a woman pseudo name Patty, she answered number 8, "What

have you been told about the Maya people?" with this. She also answered that she was of Maya

descent in question 6 of the survey.

Patty: The Maya people are called many things depending on who you ask. They are

indios (indians), they are tontos y estupidos todos (dumb and stupid all of them), son los

que se miren narizotes (they are the ones who have/appear to have big noses). Son las

indias marias (they are the India Maria a tv character that is stereotypical). They are

everything bad because they have dark skin, live in the jungle, and they don't have

Spanish blood. The government says this, even our friends and neighbors. I had one

"friend" who always called me "La India Maria " or tried to tell people my nickname was

"la india". We are told everything but the truth about them.

Table 6-1 displays the results from the interviews conducted with Indigenous people and

Table 6-2 displays the results of the interviews conducted with non-Indigenous people. I

quantified how many interviews out of the 10 (for the interviews conducted with Indigenous

people) and out of 5 (for the interviews conducted with non-Indigenous people) that I did

contain positive, negative or neither positive nor negative opinions or speech on the Maya people

or Maya Train project. I organized the table by having each question and how many out of the 10

or 5

interviews had a negative, positive or neutral opinion on what was being asked in said interview question (an example of the interview script can be found at the end as appendix 2). From the data gathered in my interviews I was able to determine that people overall had a negative perception of the Maya Train project now that it is running although they had been told it was going to do great things in the beginning when first hearing about the project. While people seem to not have a negative or positive view of the Maya people when directly answering my interview questions, when analyzing for microaggressive speech there was much in my interviews. What was surprising is that there was a majority of the participants who were even upset with the government and bold enough to speak negatively about the Mexican government and the President himself.

Table 6-3 is the data from the surveys I collected from Indigenous people while table 6-4 is surveys filled out by non-Indigenous participants. Question 6 I reported how the person answered, if they were yes of Maya descent I put them as positive if not as negative. Question 6 is the only question where participants answered in only yes or no and did not give any follow up information. I felt that it did not give insight into social perceptions since participants only answered yes or no. There were no added comments that were indicators of negative or positive feelings on this question. This is the only question where negative and positive are not indicators into social perceptions but just if the person identifies in that way or not. Like in the interview, people in the Cancun do not like the Maya Train project while in the beginning they did hear good things and were on board if the project did benefit them financially. Surveys did show that there was much microaggressive speech against the Maya people in the form of stereotypes and indirectly calling them rude nicknames and referencing them in ways that are rude but seen as common.

Table 6-5: Data from 2020-2024

NGOs/Media sources	Deforestation	Water/Caves	Disruption to animals
CartoCritica	10,831 hectares (26,764 acres)	110	Yes
Conde Nas Traveler	3.4 million	Not reported	Not reported
The Independent	9 million	Not reported	Not Reported
El Pais Mexico	Not Reported	122	Not Reported
Time	300,000 (realistically 9 million)	several	potentially

Sources: Duran (2023), Independent (2023), MND Staff (2024), Lichtinger (2018), Kishwari (2023), Soraya (2023) and Sanders (2023)

Many NGO groups have conducted trips to the Yucatan in order to collect satellite and drone images of the area in which the Yucatan jungle is going to be built. The images collected by the NGO CartoCritica in 2023 show that 10,831 hectares (26,764 acres) are currently being used for the Maya Train project with 61% of the area deforested (Duran, 2023). In order to gauge the amount of damage being done to the Yucatan jungle I gathered data from different NGOs and news outlets investigating the Maya Train project and put their results on a data table labeled, table 6-5. The data has the different rows, if there is data on deforestation and what they document it at, if they document waterways being affected like caves being filled in the Yucatan jungle, and if they document any disruption to wildlife. The disruption to wildlife is being defined as anything from the animals' homes being filled in or destroyed to the animals being killed. The data was going to be broken up into different table starting from 2020 to 2023 but since the project took a pause there would be a year or two with no data and so I combined all the years the project was running from and will compare it to another table of the deforestation rate and closed waterways from before the project commenced. Another data table is the amount of deaths, threats and attacks on the Maya people and Indigenous groups in the region as well as

displacement. This data was gathered from news outlets and NGO groups as well as tribal council documents. The data in this table will be compared to some of the data gathered in the interviews and surveys I conducted in Cancun. Table 6-5 displays the data that was collected from various sources on deforestation, water and cave disruption, and if there is any disruption to animals in the Yucatan jungle.

The data in Table 6-5 includes different media sources accounts on how the building of the Maya Train has affected the environment thus far. The number of trees that have been cut down is estimated to be 9 million but the government is reporting that only 300,000 have been cut down and this is argued to be due to how a tree is defined. The amount of caves and water sources that have been reported to be filled in or tampered with is an estimated 122, there could be more as not all caves in the region are documented on maps and so there could be more than activists thought. Disruption to animals is less reported with many activists and groups not knowing the exact amount of animals that have been hurt by the Maya Train project but if caves are being filled and trees cut down activists estimate that many animals have lost their homes in the jungle although they can not give a number on how many. Most of the groups and articles focus on one sole issue for the most part, whether it be deforestation or the disruption of caves (those being the main two issues discussed). When looking at the reports from the government there seems to be an inaccuracy there as well with older reports having one number and new reports having numbers that are a smaller quantity than those previously reported. That is why only media reports were used for this portion of the project.

Table 6-6: Attacks, Deaths, and Displacement 2020-2024 (during and after Maya Train Project)

	Amount of deaths	Amount of attacks	Displaced
Indigenous community members	20	35	

environmentalist/activists	45	55	
Uncategorized citizens			3,000 people
total	65	90	3,000

Sources: Cuffe (2023), Graham (2023), Morris (2023), Gudwein (2023), Independent (2023), Al Jazeera (2023), Jensen (2023), Miguel (2023), Infobae (2022)

Table 6-6 shows the amount of people who have been attacked or killed while the Maya Train project has begun being built and now that it is running. I compared all the numbers and took the mean from all the available data that I collected and had access to. At first I was going to calculate the amount of deaths and attacks on these groups before the Maya Train Project began in order to compare but the data available was more scarce than the data of deaths and attacks during the Maya Train. When looking at the Mexican government websites and their reports I was unable to find data or accurate data because the government lumps in all deaths of Indigenous people whether it be from disease, heat stroke or homicide.

The Maya Train project, while being named after the Maya people, is thought of by some in the community as another tool the government is using to exploit their ancestors (Porras, 2023). This is not the first time these people have been exploited by the government to attract tourists but it can also have a negative impact on the environment and the wildlife that calls the Yucatan jungle their home. Allowing projects like the Maya Train to continue despite the possible negative impacts it could have on the environment and the Maya peoples quality of life is of significance because the Yucatan jungle is an important net carbon sink as well as the home to some endangered animals like the jaguar (Porras, 2023). The Yucatan jungle is also home to the Maya people who are being pushed out of their land for the tracks of this train but the land is what the Maya people love the most, it is what fuels them both spiritually and physically (Kishwari, 2023). If this project continues many will be pushed out of their homes, unable to live

off the land, water sources could be contaminated, Maya people will be cut off from the rest of the world to accommodate the route of tracks, animals will be disturbed, and hundred of thousands of trees will be cut down negatively impacting the ecosystem (Porras, 2023). If and how this project continues is critical to the survival of the Maya people and the ecosystem of the Yucatan jungle. The government is strongly pushing for the project to continue and finish by 2024, stating that it will increase tourism and in turn increase the revenue of not only the country but also of the people in smaller towns that will be near the future stops of the train. All this is based on hypotheticals but there is no evidence to suggest that this vendors and towns will financially benefit from this project but already about 300,000 trees have been cut down to accommodate the tracks needed for the train and water sources like cenotes could have already been contaminated or filled in but as the government is trying to stop environmental testing many are unsure of the damage that has already been done to the environment and the Maya people. Now that the project is up and running there have been multiple protests with activists laying in the road to try and stop the roads and be seen protesting by tourists. From all the data I gathered I conclude that social perceptions can be a reflection of how Indigenous people are treated and when it comes to projects that could economically benefit people that these social perceptions of a vulnerable group will be low but that the perception must be low to begin with for the project to even be passed in the first place.

Since starting my thesis project the train has finished being built in certain areas and stations are opening up at a gradual rate. Now that the train is running there will be more information on its effects and the amount of tourism being brought in. With knowledge that a new station connecting Cancun to the famous Playa de Carmen had just opened I went into my interviews knowing that I wanted to bring this up to my participants. The Maya Train was

introduced by the President and government of Mexico as a project to increase tourism in the

region and bring in more revenue for citizens and towns in surrounding areas close to train

stations. My interviews show that those living in Cancun the train has actually stolen

opportunities for many to make money. Many vendors that I interviewed talked about how low

sales had been from them saying that many tourists were uninterested in what they were selling

because they had bought similar products while riding the train from the shops on the train or at

other sites. Many vendors also told me that they worked at times for local hotels or as shuttle and

cab drivers and that the train was negatively affecting these jobs as well. While the Maya Train

was claimed to be a profit bringer many locals are saying the only ones benefiting from it are the

government who collects the money from the train tickets and bigger brands and companies that

work with the government to sell "traditional" objects to tourists but not local artists or

craftsmen.

7   IMPLICATIONS

CRT is a theory with evolving branches but none of these branches are a fit for Maya people. There needs to be a new form of Crit that is composed to look at the unique struggles that the Maya people face in Mexico. Mexican society is prejudiced and it does have a hierarchical system that was left over from colonial times. This hierarchical system in Mexico has created a similar system to the United States that privileges whiteness. This similar system allows for Crit to be applicable to the Mexican legal system and systemic structure but we do need to take into account the unique experiences of the Maya people. The theory is always evolving and it can continue to evolve to include the Maya people with a MayanCrit.

By using microaggressive speech as the analytical tool for my data I was able to analyze individuals and their perspectives to give a perspective on the structural system in place in Mexico. There needs to be a decolonization of Mexico. There needs to be a decolonization of states like Mexico whose systems still take on the colonial hierarchies and whose people still have embedded into them the lies and misinformation fed to them by colonial powers to keep them at the bottom (Ousicanqui, 2018 & Quijan, 2024).

For researchers like myself who are Latinas/os/x or even those who live in Mexico who do not identify themselves as Indigenous there needs to be an emphasis on learning more about how we use language and the perspectives we have of minorities and how those can be harmful. There also needs in academia to be a more open conversation of the ways in which prejudices in Mexico take form and the fact that prejudice still exists. We also in academia need to uplift the voices and give space for Maya women and men to be heard as this is their experience. There should also be

less exclusivity on the works that are paid attention to and more attention should be given to forums

and talks hosted by Indigenous people.

8   CONCLUSION

Research on the Maya Train should continue as there is more to find out about how the project progresses and its effects on the Maya people and the environment. It would be interesting to also see how people's social perceptions change and how the protests continue if they do continue. The study did face some limitations. I only had three days to gather interviews and surveys when in the region of Cancun, limiting the amount of time that I was able to give each interview. I was also limited in the fact that I was only meeting with these participants once and was per my IRB limited to this one interaction and not allowed to contact these participants in order to gather follow up information especially for my surveys. I would have also liked to have gone to actual Maya villages and spoken to more Maya people who live more isolated and gotten more of their opinions on the project. I would have also liked to visit the villages with someone who spoke any of the Maya languages. While Spanish is my second language I also had the limitation of not being up to date on slang and had to also take the time to ask people what certain new slang words meant, cutting into my interview times in my first few interviews.

While conducting interviews and surveys, many people hesitated to speak to me because they feared that I worked for the Mexican government. I knew that this could be a possibility but considering my accent is different to native Spanish speakers and that I had paperwork to prove I was from the United States and not Mexico, it was still a limitation I faced in the beginning of my research. It was also interesting to see the fear that people had in speaking out about a government project and really helped my research in giving an added layer into it. There was the added limitation of my IRB. I did not have permission to interview or survey in certain areas like the

hotel I stayed at which would have given another layer of insight to the tourism situation in the region now that the train was up and running. Seeing as hotel stays and hotel transportation are a large part of revenue for works as they are tipped by tourists or if hotels are full more staff is brought on, it would have been nice to have their input on how they perceive the train to be affecting them in terms of tourists needing transportation or to collaborate with the information some vendors were giving me about people not staying in hotels for as long because they were using the train to travel to other regions of Yucatan and staying in multiple hotels. I would have also liked to interview drivers on how they felt about transportation situations and how they felt about some transports having to be free if tourists were going to a train station to ride the Maya Train. Not having this input limited the conclusions that I could draw about the tourism effects and as I did have second hand information I would have liked to verify it with workers in those fields.

When gathering data and information about the razing of trees and filling of underground water ways from news outlets and NGO information there was also the difficulty of not having accurate data. Different sources were quoting different numbers and it was difficult to decipher which were the correct ones. There was also the difficulty of government sites and informationals on the train claiming different numbers. This mismatch of information makes it difficult to determine what the true numbers are and as I was unable and without the time or resources myself to determine the true amount of deforestation, caves being filled in or waterways being contaminated, and the effects on animals in the area. While I faced these limitations both in the field and at home analyzing data, the data gathered in this research project is the most accurate account that I was able to give with the data I had available. Because of these limitations research into the Maya Train and social perceptions in Mexico should continue as a lot can still be said, done and discovered about it.

Social perceptions can be altered and changed by influence of outside sources but they can also be passed down from past generations. These perceptions can be changed by media or propaganda but social perceptions of a group can tell a lot about their treatment in society. Using CRT and Green theory I analyzed qualitative data for microaggressions and connected this to people's everyday social perceptions of my case study the Maya Train project and the Maya people and how these social perceptions and microaggressions in turn were affecting the Maya people and the environment before the train project started, in the beginning of the train's building where there was the idea of economic gain and these two groups were in the way of its progress and lastly now that the train is running. I also analyzed quantitative data in order to determine how the environment was being affected by the Maya Train as well as to determine the treatment of the Indigenous community before, during and after the project by gathering data on attacks and threats posed to this community. With all this information and data from my own interviews and surveys I was able to determine that social perceptions do have an impact on the Maya community in the region. There were many microaggressive speech forms in my interviews and surveys while there was also animosity toward the Maya Train project itself.

Mexico was colonized by the Spanish and much of the colonial hierarchy and colonial legal system are still embedded in the government and society. Mexican society is prejudiced to those of Indigenous descent and many argue that this is left over from the colonization and forced self-hate that was embedded into *Mestizos* while the Spanish ruled. There needs to be an implementation of a MayanCrit so that a systemic change can happen in Mexico that gets rid of this colonial influence. As my participant said, "the conquistadors never left, we just changed our faces."

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Appendix A. Survey Questionnaire (Translated to English)

A.1.1   Survey Questionnaire (translated to english)
(Space was left for participants to fill out more information if they felt it was necessary)

Q1: What have you heard of the project called the Maya Train?
Q2: Do you think this project will bring in revenue in the form of tourists?
Q3: Will you benefit from tourism brought in by the Maya Train?
- Yes
- No
- I have been told I would

Q4: How do you think the Maya Train project will affect the environment?
- It wont
- Negatively
- Positively
- Won't really have an
  impact

Q5: How do you think the Maya Train project will affect the Maya people who live off the Yucatan Jungle?

- It won't
- Negatively
- Positively
- Won't really have an impact

Q6: Are you of Maya descent?

- Yes
- No

Q7: What do you think of the Maya people?
Q8: What have you been told about the Maya people?
Q9: How do you feel about the Maya council, other Indigenous councils, and environmentalists trying to stop the Maya Train project?

- I don't like it
- I agree with them
- They're ruining an opportunity for people
- They're doing the right thing

Appendix B. Interview Script (Translated to English)

Hello, thank you for agreeing to this interview. I would like to reiterate that if at any moment you would like to stop you may leave at any point or if there is a question you would prefer not to answer we can skip the question and if you are comfortable, we will continue with the rest of the interview. If you do not understand a question, I can provide a clearer explanation. I do not in any way shape or form work for the Mexican government nor will I be reporting what you say here today to them.

To start, what do you know or what have you heard about the project called the Maya Train that is being built here in the Yucatan?
Where did you hear this information?

From what you have heard, how do you feel about the project continuing?

There are articles out that Indigenous councils and environmentalist groups are trying to stop the project, what do you think about this?

What do you know about the Indigenous groups who live in the Yucatan jungle? What experiences have you had with these groups?

What do you think about the Maya people specifically? What have you been told about this group of people?

How would you say the government treats those who are Indigenous?

How do you think the Maya Train project will affect these people?

Thank you for your time. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.