

# Latinos in the U.S. Media

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The media in the United States is unfair to, and misrepresentative of, Latinos, Hispanics, and Latin Americans. To say that our media refer to a certain minority in a poor light is not going out on a limb. This is the case with a variety of groups. This particular segment of the population, however, is in need of special examination when dealing with this topic due to the fact that they are now the largest and fastest growing minority group in this nation. Misrepresentations of an entire population and culture affect that population and culture a great deal. For Latinos, these affectations include foreign and domestic policy, civil rights, the job market, the justice system, and many more institutions designed to be fair to all with disregard to race, creed, or culture. Furthermore, this is such an important topic to investigate and discuss because of the globalization of business, culture, and language make it more necessary than ever to bridge the gaps of understanding and extinguish the misunderstanding and stereotyping that are begun and perpetuated by media and its consumption in this country. To accomplish this, we must first begin by identifying the underlying issues that exist today for Latinos both in the U.S. and other countries with regard to the media. We must also investigate this population's participation in this entire issue from many perspectives. And we must devise methods of instruction and integration to better inform and instruct our citizens when absorbing and analyzing the messages they are inundated with every single day of their lives.

This essay will be divided into two main sections. The first will include an explanation of the problem at hand. I will give detailed descriptions of media representations of Latinos seen and heard daily in this country, comment on the frequent lack of media representatives from the Latino community, and I will point out a few exceptions to these norms. The second section will be an examination of the Latino community's participation as creators and consumers of popular media culture.

## Part I – The Problem

The representations of Latinos in the U.S. media are degrading, insensitive, racist, and very, very inaccurate. This Latino imagery is responsible for the social standard by which many in this country judge the entire Latino community. Our ideas are created not out of reality but from this standard that tells us what is the norm. Often times, this is an invented norm, and it is the responsibility of the consumer to perform critical analysis. This is a norm that allows many stereotypes and lies to be reinforced hundreds of times weekly through the main outlets of these (mis)representations: television and film.

There are two major consequences of the existence of these normalized representations. The first, as mentioned earlier, is that stereotypes are created, believed, and perpetuated through the constant barrage of these messages we are met with constantly. Stereotypes and prejudice need to be fed, and the media outlets in this country do their very best to give them what they need to not only stay alive, but to grow to enormous and monstrous proportions. This is especially dangerous due to the fact that many people, people from the majority, use these representations to form their judgements and notions with very few real-life experiences with the Latino cultures. The second consequence lies in the hearts and minds of the Latino community. This comment is even more true for the younger members of this community. There is an enormous amount of damage done by our media to the self-image and psyche of the typical Latino. To see oneself and one's culture constantly and consistently represented as exotic and foreign, poor and lazy will make a person accept these representations as truth and fact.

Next, the quality of media representations of Latinos in the U.S. is exceptionally low. There are some very common portrayals of Latinos in this nation's media, and most of them are negative. Unfortunately, these depictions give a great many people the majority of their exposure to these cultures. We are much more likely to see Latino characters portrayed as poor, uneducated, lazy, and violent. Another popular representation is of people with very poor language skills. You will rarely encounter on television or in film a Latino character without an thick Hispanic accent. In addition, we see Latinos depicted as gang members, teen mothers, illegal immigrants, drug dealers and traffickers, and common criminals. It is even a media-reinforced notion that Latinos are all Spanish speakers. There are numerous members of this community who are fourth and fifth generation citizens of this country and speak very little Spanish. No other minority group is represented so frequently or fervently in such a negative and careless manner. And when this community is actually represented in a light other than the previously mentioned roles, they assume minor roles like maids, janitors, cooks, and mechanics. The assumptions conveyed in these messages are without foundation and lead the public to very inaccurate conclusions. To explore first hand the effects of media misrepresentations for the Latino community, I conducted a survey with four sections of my Spanish III class. This equals 129 students in all. These students come from a variety of racial, economic, and cultural backgrounds. There are, however, no Latinos answering any of these questions. I very specifically asked them to answer all questions based on stereotypes they were familiar with, and not ones they actually subscribed to. Here are the results:

Question #1: Name the VERY FIRST stereotype that comes to mind that you know exists about people from Mexico.

Question #2: List ALL of the stereotypes that you know exist about people from Mexico.

Question #3: Do you have a personal relationship with someone from Mexico? The students' response to this question was overwhelmingly low. Out of my 129 students, only 17 reported that they did in fact have a personal relationship with someone from Mexico.

Once this survey was completed, we moved onto another activity. After calculating the results, I shared them with my classes a few days later. My students were at times astonished at the negative nature of the responses. They were able to see that it wasn't just them as individuals that knew of these stereotypes. Our conversation led, based on the last question, to the origination of these notions. There was great concern expressed throughout our exchanges that people in society were getting their information from an external source and not from interpersonal relationships. I then asked each individual to examine the possible sources of these notions, and more than 8 out of 10 students said that it was their belief that the sources were television, film, and print media. The following is a collection of additional statistics that will give more clarity to the argument that the U.S. media portrays the Latino community very negatively:

- Out of 1200 children of all races between the ages of 10 and 17 polled, over half agreed that people of color are shown in media contexts in a more negative light than are whites (National Hispanic Foundation for the Arts 1)
- The vast majority of Latino male characters appeared in prime time television as police employees or criminals (National Hispanic Foundation for the Arts 7)
- The vast majority of Latina characters appeared in prime time television as nurses, clerical workers, or domestic workers (National Hispanic Foundation for the Arts 7)

And the following is a list of findings from a study produced by the National Association of Hispanic Journalists regarding Latino portrayals on network news programming:

- Research shows that the image of large brown masses of people is a common backdrop for network news stories concerning Latinos solely for the purpose of providing negative visual cues to the viewer (Méndez-Méndez 3)
- Visual images are common which depict Latinos as a transient culture solely for the purpose of providing similar negative visual cues to the viewer (Méndez-Méndez 3)
- Even though illegal undocumented immigrants constitute an extreme minority of this community in the United States, 1/5 of all stories in 2000 related to Latinos dealt with illegal immigration (Méndez-Méndez 6)
- 10% of all stories on the news in 2000 regarding Latinos dealt with crime (Méndez-Méndez 6)

This same study also describes in further detail some practices very common in network news that serve to perpetuate the stereotypes in question. It states that there exists a them vs. us tone in the reporting of news related to Latinos. In a documented report dealing with Mexican immigration, it was declared that, “Five years from now there will be more of them than there are black Americans.” and “Many Latinos say that it is about time that we get to know them better (Méndez-Méndez 11.)” There is no effort to associate Latinos with the mainstream U.S. culture in statements like these. There was also the recognition that “the sound of salsa music and the music of Mexican mariachis was used to contextualize, allude and refer to Latinos, Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans. Regardless of the seriousness of the story... (Méndez-Méndez 11.)”

Another factor that must be explored is the quantity of the media representations of Latinos. This is a community that has been historically mistreated, and many times, ignored. As stated in the report *Latinos on Prime Time* by the National Hispanic Foundation for the Arts, while making up over 12.5% of the population of the United States, Latinos were placed in only 4% of the prime time roles in the 2001-2002 prime time season. These characters comprised only 2% of the primary recurring roles, and four out of five Latino roles were secondary or tertiary. An equally important issue at hand is the trend of not hiring Latino professionals as media creators or executives. Without representation at the top, there are no professionals to advocate for the fair treatment of the actors and the fair depiction of the characters. This is an example, both at the executive level and at lower levels, of underrepresentation causing misrepresentation. There are simply too few players in this game to create new positive ideas and eliminate old negative ones. As long as this continues, it will only reinforce the fact that Latinos are not recognized as important parts of the culture of the United States.

The exceptions to these aforementioned rules, albeit possibly the bone being thrown to the dog, are hopefully a sign of change. Some programs did reflect well on the Latino population and gave these actors prime roles. Perhaps the most popular and current was Jimmy Smits' role on the ABC program *NYPD Blue*. In addition, the Hispanic musician Rubén Blades was cast in the recurring and highly visible and respected role of a hospital administrator on the ABC program *Gideon's Crossing*. This show has since been cancelled, but Blades remains one of the few mainstream Latino actors. A film that falls into the category of exceptions to the rule is Edward James Olmos' portrayal of the Jaime Escalante in *Stand and Deliver*. This film is about a teacher and positive role model for Hispanic kids in an inner city high school in Los Angeles. Although the film is from the mid-eighties, it remains recognized as a well-respected piece of art from this population.

## Part II – Latinos as Media Participants

In this section, I will take a look at this issue from a different perspective. I will first examine the issue with regard to the Latino Community's role as media target. This is a rapidly growing community with rapidly growing resources. Consequently, they will be targeted by advertising through the media. Unfortunately, this is often done through a very disrespectful and even racist approach. After that, I will comment on the fact that there is a disproportionately low number of media outlets created for this population. I will also analyze the seemingly common lack of participation in this community. This is a sector of our population that seems to be on the outside looking in when it comes to media fairness and use. Lastly, I will examine a set of exceptions, however few, that give Latinos the opportunity to participate in and consume fair and just media products.

I will first examine Latino participation in the media as advertising targets. As noted earlier, their every increasing wealth and success as important contributors to this society, albeit often times unrecognized by this very same media, has given rise to their specific targeting as product consumers. This group is being constantly bombarded with advertising for every product under the sun. Sadly, this is often times done in a very discriminating manner. To expand, I will refer back to an advertisement I commented on for a previous assignment.

The ad that caught my attention regarding this issue is from an edition of *People en español*. It is an ad for Eternity for both men and women. One side of the ad is written completely in English, while the other side is entirely in Spanish. The side I will comment on is the one in English. At the top appears the word ETERNITY. In the middle of the page reads love, sweet love. And at the bottom is the name of the company Calvin Klein. There are two photos on the front side, and both are in black-and-white. The top is a close-up shot of a family of four laying in bed. The parents are young, white, and very good-looking. The two kids are girls about 6 or 7 years old, and could be twins. The parents both have dotting smiles on their faces while looking down caringly at their daughters. The two girls, in contrast, are laughing wildly and having a wonderful time. The bottom picture is the mother from above smiling wider than before and looking up, again very caringly, at one of her daughters. Her daughter has seemed to have struck a very glamorous pose and is wearing a serious face and staring into the camera. She is also wearing a tiara.

First the placement of this ad in this particular magazine is worthy of comment. This is a very young, very rich white couple with two beautiful blonde daughters wearing expensive jewelry. This, however, is not the intended audience. The intended audience is not white and is not rich. They are middle to lower class Hispanic women, and some men. This is simply saying that if you can't be white and rich, then you can act like it by buying our cologne and perfume. This is a perfect example of products and advertising creating a "reality." You are not simply going to smell good. You will also at least be able to pretend that you have and are something you are not. "Your goals should be to speak English, be rich, and have a beautiful white family." This is not only false and unattainable, but it also makes this group of people start to feel negatively about who they actually are by telling them that they should be someone they're not.

The sparse availability of media outlets and reliable unbiased media sources for the Latino community is also of great concern. There are too few media outlets geared for Latinos in the United States with regard to the language used and the nature of the content. As a result, these people are often times not able to participate and consume. This also frequently results in members of this community simply not wanting to participate and consume. This is more true in areas further from Latino concentrations (the Southwestern U.S., Chicago, New York City, etc.) The Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area is an example of this. Latinos here are offered very little in the way of reliable media that suites their interests. What they are presented with instead is useless to them as non-members of the white, middle class,

Midwestern section of the population. This in turn constantly reminds them that they are marginalized in this society and not important enough to merit an effort to be reached out to and included.

The argument to this commentary is usually a remark about the existence of “the Spanish channel” from most cable providers. First of all, one channel out of 200 obviously does not constitute sufficient media outreach. There would be anarchy in the streets if there were only one or two channels televised in English. Also, the quality of the “Spanish channel,” whether it be Univisión or Telemundo, is very poor. There is very little in the way of reliable news and entertaining sports broadcasting. Instead, the programming is most often gaudy variety shows and controversial talk shows. Also, the intended audience is all of Latin America and not individual populations within this geographical grouping. This dilutes the cultural aspects of the programming so that none of the viewers can connect with its content. The target is so broad that it reaches no one at all.

It is also argued by some that these people face economic discrimination and hardships due in part to the variety of stereotypes placed on the Latino community through the media. This in turn allows them a much smaller amount of money to spend on that very same media. Many simply don’t have enough money to buy new DVD players or satellite television systems. Without being able to access any media outlets, many in this population are often withdrawn from it and forced into a role of non-participant.

The most pressing question to this whole discussion is not whether or not there is in fact a problem – there is. We are bombarded daily with images and sounds representing Hispanics as dirty, stupid, lazy, violent, promiscuous, immigrants invading our country illegally working as cooks, maids, and janitors. We see this imagery in film, television, music and theater. It is propagated so much so that we have a very large number of white suburban high school kids who subscribe to these myths just because they “saw it on T.V.” It is not, however, the poor and ignorant high school kids who are most affected by this institutionalized discrimination. Instead, it is the psyche of the clean, smart, hard-working, peaceful, moral immigrants coming to our country legally working as cooks, maids, janitors, doctors, teachers, firepeople, and civic leaders. This is an entire section of the U.S. population – many of whom are citizens with supposedly the same rights as anyone else – that is given the message, sometimes subtly and sometimes not quite so, that they are second class citizens with second class importance placed on their lives.

The most important question is this: Who is responsible for fixing this dilemma? Simply recognizing that a problem exists is only a fraction of the process toward solution. We as a society must take the next step toward a remedy for a very grave problem. We cannot hope for the government to step and take action. The First Amendment implications are too great. The first step toward a solution lies at the feet of the entire U.S. media. This may seem to be an ambitious goal, but it is where the beginning lies. It is crucial for success that these people, and let’s not forget that these are still people and not enormous faceless monsters, finally take responsibility for the social and civic damage they do with their reckless and racist depictions. It is necessary to go from accepting an institutionalized wrong to attacking it.

We as media consumers also hold a great deal of the responsibility for solving this problem. We must hold the media responsible for their actions while examining our own. We must more critically analyze what is being served to us instead of blindly devouring it without criticism as we’ve become accustomed to. We must stop making the easy choice of remaining silent and passive. We all must advocate for the change we hope to see. We – you, me, us.

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