

How Stereotypes of Latinos in Movies and TV Influence

Negative Impressions Among White Viewers

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Introduction

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the 47.7 million Latinos living in the United States accounted for 17.8% of the nation's population in 2023 (1). Yet the UCLA 2023 *Hollywood Diversity Report* estimates that Latinos make up only 5.5% of the actors in all theatrical films. It's bad enough that Latinos, (also known as Hispanics, or Latinx) are severely underrepresented on the screen. How they are presented is also detrimental to the community. Researchers Dana E. Mastro, Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz, and Maria A. Kopacz found that of the characters depicted by Latinos, only 11% of them were shown to have high-status jobs. They were more likely to be cast as criminals, nannies, gardeners, or waiters (Mastro et al., 2008).

Not only are such stereotypes on the screen demeaning, but they can also have real world impact on non-minority viewers, particularly Whites. According to researchers Travis L. Dixon, Kristopher R. Weeks, and Marisa A. Smith, "Black and Latino stereotypes draw particular concern, especially because they misrepresent these racial groups. From both psychological and sociological perspectives, these misrepresentations can influence how people view their racial group as well as other groups," (Dixon et al, 2019). That influence can be as subtle as having impressions that Latinos are lazy and have little education, to affecting their ability to climb the corporate ladder.

So how can such stereotypes be countered or reversed? That appears to be the key question in this fledgling area of research. One study by Christian Burgers and Camiel J. Beukeboom found that removing labels and negative descriptions could have a positive impact.

They note, “Prejudice occurs in cases in which effective evaluations of members of a social category are negative,” (Burgers & Beukeboom, 2020). It might be impossible to erase such negativity, but it could be a starting point to improving the portrayal of Latinos. My goal in researching this topic is to highlight the use of Hispanics stereotypes in films and television. By exposing these on-screen myths, I would hopefully enlighten others to the truth about their Spanish-speaking friends and neighbors and stimulate discussions about cultural diversity.

Literature Review

The Misrepresentation of Latinos on the Screen

If you’re brown like me, you probably grew up searching for characters on TV who looked and sounded like you. Someone you could relate to. You couldn’t find us on *Gilligan’s Island*. And there were no Latino faces among the *Brady Bunch*. Finding someone like me among the sea of whiteness in the Golden Age of TV was a hard task. Ricky Ricardo, played by *I Love Lucy* Executive Producer Desi Arnaz was the first Latino to break the racial barrier as a featured character. In the 70s, Hispanic characters on TV shows appeared more as comedic foils instead of serious characters. Freddie Prinz’s Chico from *Chico and the Man* did help break down some racial barriers, but still Jack Albertson’s gruff character of “The Man” always made fun of Chico’s accent and culture. In the 80s the stereotypes became darker. *Miami Vice* fed the image of Latin American drug lords and criminals. Positive Hispanic characters largely faded into the background, instead to be seen mainly as criminals, maids, or a dim-witted person who barely spoke English. There was finally some positivity in the early 2000s when *The George Lopez Show* introduced us to an every-day family dealing with every-day issues, who happened to speak Spanish.

Slowly shows started adding Hispanic characters to featured parts. And even more importantly, Latino actors began to be showcased in TV series in roles that had nothing to do with their ethnicity. Pedro Pascal was the lead actor in two recent major series: *The Mandalorian* and *The Last of Us*, neither of which focused on his speaking Spanish or color of his skin. And in *Wednesday*, Jenna Ortega plays America's favorite daughter of darkness and subtly acknowledges her Hispanic roots. While it might appear that Latinos have made progress on TV, some studies show otherwise. Latinos remain significantly underrepresented in English-language television outlets. For instance, Tukachinsky et al. (2015) found that in the 1980s, Latino characters made up less than 1% of all TV characters. In the 2000s, that number increased to just over 3%.

Their counterparts on the silver screen fared just a bit better. While Jennifer Lopez, Zoe Saldana, and Diego Luna are A-list actors, their characters are rarely overtly Hispanic, meaning they don't speak Spanish in the role, and make little or no reference to their cultural background. Weeks and Smith state that mass media not only under-represents Latinos, it misrepresents them. "Both news and entertainment media over-represent Latino criminality. News outlets also overly associate Latino immigration with crime and relate Latino immigration to economic threat. Video games rarely portray Latino characters," (Dixon et al, 2019). To make matters worse, they say it doesn't appear to be just an oversight or mistake. The researchers note, "...since stereotypes appeal to and are easily processed by large general audiences, the misrepresentation of racial and ethnic groups facilitates revenue generation." Other scholars have noted that negative stereotypes of Latinos not only degrade that community, it affects how others relate to them. For example, researchers found that negative stories about Latino immigrants can

contribute to negative emotions among other groups, which in turn lead to them supporting tougher immigration laws (Atwell Seate & Mastro, 2016, 2017).

While you would think that Spanish-language media would do a better job of representing its viewers, some studies found that Spanish-language television actually reinforced stereotypes. A study by Mastro and Ortiz (2008) of characters in prime-time Spanish-language television found rich Latina women often depicted as the harlot stereotype. They were sexualized and dressed provocatively. (Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005). The authors of this paper concluded that the reinforcement of stereotypes like poverty, sexualized, criminal, and illegal immigrant will continue to add to the substantial obstacles Latinos faced due to their lack of representation.

Real World Impact of On-Screen Stereotypes

So, what kind of impact can on-screen stereotypes of Latinos have on those from other backgrounds, particularly Whites? The research team of Diana Jimeno-Ingrum, Jennifer L. Berdahl and Brennis Lucero-Wagoner examined whether stereotypes of Latinos as less warm and less competent than Whites would influence perceptions of people asked to evaluate them. Surprisingly, their study found that such stereotypes not only influenced whites, but fellow Latinos as well.

Earlier research has shown that stereotypes can be classified by competence and warmth (Fiske et al., 2002). Competence breeds respect, while warmth generates liking. The authors theorized that stereotypes might have less influence on perceptions if they are outweighed by information to the contrary. To test their theory, they gathered a group of

participants of White and Latino students. They were sorted into groups and tasked with deciding who to divide a pot of merit pay for six hypothetical employees. They were instructed to work as a group to evaluate the employees, reaching consensus on how much each deserved. The results showed that the Latino employees were evaluated as less competent and less warm than White workers. This applied both the groups that were majority-White as well as the majority-Latino groups. Whites received better ratings in majority-Latino groups. And Latinos got the least favorable ratings in majority White groups. The researchers found that instead of neutralizing or reversing the advantage enjoyed by Whites, “groups with a Latino majority exacerbated White advantage, whereas groups with a White majority exacerbated Latino disadvantage,” (Jimeno-Ingrum et al., 2009). The authors concluded, “This study advances our understanding of stereotyping in ethnically diverse work groups by examining members’ evaluations of each other in interacting work groups with a specific focus on interactions between Whites and Latinos.”

How Language Contributes to Stereotype Formation

So how can we counter these stereotypes? One research team sees addressing labeling and negative language as a place to start. Christian Burgers and Camiel J. Beukeboom address the role of language in creating social stereotypes. “The link between stereotypes and language use is generally seen as two-directional. That is, stereotypes are reflected in language use of speakers, and language use in turn feeds social-category stereotypes in message recipients,” (Burgers & Beukeboom, 2020). They theorized that people using negations to describe behavior can actually feed the negative stereotype. For example, saying a Latino is “not stupid” instead of saying he’s smart implies that he is the exception, not the rule, when it comes to intelligence for Latinos.

However, saying someone is “not smart” rather than “stupid” could have the opposite effect. To test their theory, they formed a study group where the participants talked about a hypothetical new employee, and to give their impressions about him after hearing stories about him to use the negating theory. Their results should be that when a target group was presented with generic or positive labels, versus those that were specific or negative, the group had a higher perception of the hypothetical employee. The authors concluded, “These findings also have important implications for the communication of prejudiced beliefs. Prejudice occurs in cases in which affective evaluations of members of a social category are negative.”

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There are a variety of communication theories which could be applied to study the effects of Latino stereotypes on the big and small screen. For instance, the *cultivation theory* states that long term exposure to television can shape a person’s world perception (Gerbner, 1969).

However, I see *social identity theory* as the best tool to study this topic. The social identity theory first proposed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s states that people derive part of their self-concept from being part of social groups (Tajfel, Turner 1979). The researchers identified three stages of social identification: *Social Categorization*, *Social Identification*, and *Social Comparison*. This last category is probably the most critical to this study. Tajfel and Turner contend that once we identify as being part of a group, we compare our group to others. This can create competition and hostility between groups. They claim that social comparison is critical to understanding prejudice, because once groups become rivals, it leads to forced competition. As referenced earlier, the team of Diana Jimeno-Ingrum, Jennifer L. Berdahl and

Brennis Lucero-Wagoner used social identification theory to study the real-world impact of onscreen stereotypes on white viewers. Other researchers have also used social identity theory as a tool to study the effects on self-conscious emotion and implicit ingroup attitudes from stereotypic film portrayals. The research team of Toni Schmader, Katharina Block and Brian Bickel examined the reactions of Mexican American and European Americans to stereotypic film clips of Latinos (Schmader, et. Al, 2015) One study showed that that the on-film stereotypes had a negative effect among Mexican Americans, regardless of the realism of the portrayals. A separate study showed that both groups felt more self-conscious when another member of their openly laughed at negative Latino stereotypes.

Both studies showed a more negative reactions to stereotypic clips among Mexican Americans, as well as greater enjoyment of stereotypical film clips among European Americans (Schmader, et al., 2015).

Conclusion

Changing the misrepresentations of Latinos on the screen is not something that is going to happen overnight. Until Hispanics start filling the roles of directors, producers, and other film executives, the push for a balanced representation will come slowly. But it is coming. Recent films like *A Million Miles Away* and *Flamin' Hot* show how immigrants can reach achieve their dreams through hard work and dedication. But still Hollywood is going to need a lot of convincing. Studies like the ones above will be strong for those who are brown like me willing to fight the fight.

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