

LISTENING to LATINA/O Youth

Television
Consumption
Within Families



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Introduction

The changing demographics of the United States have prompted much discussion for business owners, educators, public officials and the general public. The recent wave of immigrants from all over the world is an influential component in the social, political and cultural fabric of daily life. Latina/os as a group have been in the spotlight as demographic data reveals significant population growth. As a result, Latina/o children are an important part of youth culture, and understanding the ways in which they use and understand mass media will help provide insight into the dynamic role media play in the everyday life of all youth. By focusing the research on youth in the context of their family dynamic, this investigation exposes media consumption patterns in hopes of unraveling the stereotypes and opening up the discourses regarding Latinidad.

The media industry has built great fortune by relying on stereotypes for pan-ethnic programming, so there has been little incentive to change this approach, but as new media technology challenges the industry to contend with new delivery systems, it must reinvent itself. Traditional media—newspapers and television—must learn to survive within a multiple platform media environment. Even though it appears that new media have replaced many of the traditional forms, it is clear that television viewing still plays a dominant role in the leisure time activities of families, especially in the home. In fact, the average American's viewing time is close to four hours per day. Television has remained relevant in the current multimedia environment by reassessing its strategies; prime-time television has found success with competitive reality shows, dramatic series and the ever popular situation comedy, while cable networks are succeeding with niche programming aimed at narrow audience segments. Examples of narrow-

casting include Spanish-language networks and Latino-themed programs that aim to reach the emerging Latina/o¹ population.

Since the release of the 2000 Census and subsequent information confirming the expansion of the Latina/o population, industry executives have been interested in selling this audience to advertisers as a way to capitalize on what is seen as an emerging market. The collection of data for the 2010 Census, which should further place Latina/os at the forefront of the debates on the changing character of the United States, will provide information to inform agencies within the federal government, education systems, and the media industry hoping to contain, manage and sell the audience. The U.S. Census Bureau has launched a variety of campaigns encouraging Latina/os to respond to Census inquiries ensuring that the population estimates are as accurate as possible. In addition to traditional advertising aimed at Spanish-speaking populations urging the completion of the survey, the Bureau has teamed up with National Parents and Teachers Association and the Children's Defense Fund to use *Dora the Explorer* to encourage families to return their Census form. During the 2000 Census, it is estimated that over one million children were not counted and many of them were under five. Dora is an iconic figure for pre-school age children and their parents, and as a spokesperson, is likely to catch their attention. The "Children Count Too" campaign featuring Dora consists of television and radio public service announcements, web advertising, posters and handouts (Woodard, 2010).

In another campaign aimed at encouraging Spanish-speakers to complete the Census, the Bureau teamed up with Telemundo² to incorporate a Census storyline into an existing telenovela,³ *Más sabe el diablo, (The Devil Knows Best)*, produced in the United States. According to Brian Stelter (2009), the immense popularity of telenovelas, especially among Spanish-speaking first generation immigrants, "mak[es] them a prime way to encourage Hispanics to be counted next year." The story features Perla Beltrán, who has suffered as a result of her husband's murder and other problems and who will become an employee for the U.S. Census Bureau. The telenovela will follow her as she is approached by a Census re-

cruiter, applies for the job and performs the Census. There is hope that the storyline will eliminate fears, especially among undocumented immigrants, and encourage them to report their presence. While accurate accounting of the Hispanic population is optimal for a variety of reasons, Telemundo support is not surprising; Telemundo hopes to highlight Latina/o presence because the more viewers it reaches the more it can charge for advertising on its channels. Spanish-language media stand to gain financially as the numbers of Hispanics in the United States grow. Don Browne, president of Telemundo, told the *New York Times* that “If you think it’s a good business now, wait until after the Census” (Stelter, 2009) indicating the continued belief in the success of Spanish-language and Latino-themed media. Alternatively, one might fear the continuation of a pan-Latino identity imposed by institutional forces that look to exploit the numbers in the name of the market.

In 2009, Latina/os made up close to 15% of the U.S. population, and projections point to Latina/os comprising 29% of the population by the year 2050. In California and Texas, over 35% of the population is Latina/o. Many Latina/o adults are bilingual, with 68% of adult children of immigrants speaking both English and Spanish (PewHispanic.org). Young Latina/os, especially those born in the United States, are eager for media products that reflect their interests—in English, Spanish or both. As a result it is important to look at Latina/os as part of the broader American landscape to uncover patterns of behavior that shape the social process.

The relationship audiences have with media can be viewed from a variety of perspectives. Within communication studies, media use among Latina/os has been linked with identity formation (Subervi & Rios, 2005; Mastro, 2003a; Moran & Chung, 2008), hybridity (Rinderle, 2005; Molina Guzmán, 2006; Molina Guzmán & Valdivia, 2004; Straubhaar, 2007) and cultural maintenance (Rios & Gaines, 1998; Mayer, 2003; Mato, 2005), stereotyping and its consequences (Cortés, 2000; Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005; Casas Peréz, 2005), addressing the cultural and social implications of representation (Dávila, 2001a; Valdivia, 2008a; Aparicio, 2003;

Guidotti-Hernández, 2007), and from an economic perspective, the growth of new media outlets seeking an audience (Callow & McDonald, 2005; Liesse, 2007; Consoli, 2008; Romano, 2003). This book connects these perspectives to expose the context in which Latino families find themselves when interacting with media products within the home. The Spanish-language television industry has enjoyed attention from advertisers who see it as economically successful in the current television market, where English-language networks have seen audiences slip away (Wentz, 2008).

The purpose of this investigation is to respond and add to the work of communication scholars who are engaging in the examination of media texts created for Latina/o audiences as well as those who are studying the reception process of these audiences. In this sample, the participants, who were interviewed as family units, provide an opportunity to uncover the diversity of the Latina/o experience and to highlight the dynamics of media use within a natural setting—the family and the home. The research presented demonstrates that the respondents in the families I spoke with choose their content based on a variety of factors commonly seen in other studies focusing on the Latina/o audience (Barrera & Biebly, 2001; Mayer, 2003b; Dávila, 2002; DeSipio, 2003). Family members are drawn to programming that is relevant to them at a particular moment in time. To better understand how and why family members come to the television set, it is important to put together many pieces of the puzzle—social and cultural identity, content availability, and the economics of the industry. This book provides a context in which the reader can hear the family members through dialogues that were produced during in-home interviews with families who have emigrated from and/or have ancestry in Mexico. While the book's title uses the term Latina/o, I am careful to underscore that the explanations reflect the experiences of Mexicans and Mexican Americans living in San Diego County, mostly in central and southern urban areas. These families speak for themselves, and while it is unwise to generalize based upon their experiences, they do provide a rich understanding of the complexity of media consumption that may point to broader commonalities across audience segments. A total of ten families were interviewed

during February and March 2008. In March 2010, a second round of interviews were conducted and were focused more keenly on Latina/o children. Each family consisted of participants where at least one parent identified as Latina/o. Family units ranged from three to five members and were interviewed together in their homes. When possible all members of the family who lived in the home were present. Each of the children had at least one parent who identified as Latina/o.

At times I feel under-qualified to investigate issues of Latinidad because I am an outsider. I am a native of San Diego, the daughter of a Swedish American father and a mother with mixed heritage including French, German, and Algonquin from the U.S. Atlantic coast. I am close to friends who are deeply connected to Mexico, and as a child, I spent summers travelling with my mother, a historian, to Mexico and Spain, where she investigated eighteenth-century scientific exploration. My early experiences molded my understanding of the culture while my body codes me as ethnically outside of Latinidad. As a member of the dominant class, I do not pretend to understand what daily life feels like for many members of families who spoke with me. My language skills do not exclude me from peer groups, social situations, education, or the general mass media. In fact, bilingualism has always been an advantage for me. As a child living in Mexico and Spain, I was part of the investigating other and not an immigrant trying to negotiate a new social system and acculturate. My mother, too, experienced the privilege that came with her status; it was her blonde hair and young age, as well as her foreign university credentials, that rendered her access. The looks from museum guards and stubborn archivists were softened with a nod, “*sí la rubia puede*” (yes, the blonde can), and she (we) entered. These early experiences later shaped my interpretations of mainstream media stereotypes I encountered as I navigated media through my elementary and teenage years. I remember *The Cosby Show* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, but I do not remember many Latina/os on television except for “Ponch” on *CHiPs*⁴ and the secondary characters who were maids, cantina girls or gardeners. These images did not resonate with my own experiences with friends both in Mexico and

in the U.S. As a young adult I remember listening to debates around California Ballot Proposition 187,⁵ which came on the heels of many years of anti-immigrant rhetoric. I remember a family acquaintance disgruntled because of “those people” (the migrant workers he employed on his farm) who sent their kids to school, where he imagined they were not required to speak English. Because of the tone, I remember being shocked at his overt racism, but realized that I was hearing an opinion that would not be shared with those coded as Latina/o. These experiences have shaped my interest in studying the ways in which Latina/os use media to investigate how meaning is constructed and contested within U.S. society. It is important to recognize Latina/os as part of the mainstream U.S. audience rather than as a separate niche to be understood as Other.

My children are part of the most diverse generation the United States has witnessed, and it is my hope that they will grow up to embrace difference and not see it as something to be overcome. We must teach them that differences exist but that difference does not mean worse or better. One afternoon while I was listening to a recorded interview, my daughter asked what I was doing. I told her I had just finished listening to a father describe his annoyance with all little Latina girls with bobbed haircuts being called Dora. My daughter asked why; after all she had been a fan of Dora. I explained that it upset him that Dora was the only reference people could think of to describe young girls with dark eyes and dark hair, and I asked her to think of her two friends, Julia (Mexican American) and Liana (mixed heritage—Spanish, French —looks “Latina”) and asked if they looked alike. She said “no.” I asked her if they like the same things. She said “no” and described that Julia loves “girl stuff” while Liana is a fan of *Star Wars*. I told my daughter that she understands the differences between her friends because she knows them, but others may see them as the same because they both look Latina with dark hair and eyes. I explained that the frustration for the father who I interviewed was when others assumed that being a Latina girl is defined as being like or even looking like Dora because she is their most salient cultural reference. The lived experience of a pan-Latina/o identity can be

frustrating because there exists complexity and diversity within the group that is not explored in media portrayals. This simplified explanation goes to the heart of the book. By listening to families describe their media use as well as their perceptions about Spanish-language television and the representations of Latina/os in mainstream media, it became clear that the industry response to this group should be scrutinized. Latina/o children have a wide variety of interests and see themselves as central to the American experience. As media respond to this demographic, it is important to recognize that similar to any other group, it is impossible to capture their complexity within a limited range of media.

The book is organized into six chapters. Chapter 1, “Latina/os in the Audience,” introduces readers to the current demography of the Latina/o population and how that is connected to the growing interest in the media industry to justify the creations of products that will attract this newly sought after group. Further, there is an explanation of the role that Nielsen Media Research plays in collecting and distributing information pertaining to the best ways to reach Latina/os. Chapter 2, “The Latina/o Youth Market,” discusses the growth of the Spanish-language television industry as well as describing new bilingual and Latino-themed networks. In addition, children’s programming that features characters who speak English and Spanish is analyzed to provide the reader with a context from which to understand the interview data. Networks such as MTVtr3s and mun2 are introduced to explain their concentration on U.S. Latina/o teenagers. After analysis it appears that these networks perform a “syncretic identity” (Molina Guzmán, 2006) that glosses over difference and diversity within the teenage experience to present a united Latinidad. Programs such as *LatiNation* and *American Latino TV* attempt to present a “hybrid identity” (Molina Guzmán, 2006; Martínez, 2004, 2007) by acknowledging the diversity as well as bicultural status of its target audience.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 report the primary findings from the interviews. Chapter 3, “Latina/o Media Consumption,” discusses general viewing habits of family members focusing on young people’s media choices, which highlight a hybrid reality for many participants (Molina Guzmán, 2006; Mayer, 2003b). The children in

the families see themselves as typically American in their media use. Their favorite activities are consistent with most accounts of American children's viewing habits; the only distinction is their exposure to Spanish-language television, which leads to a bicultural outlook. Chapter 4, "Connecting to 'Home,'" analyzes the attraction Mexican American families have for their home media. Many families report watching telenovelas as a way to connect to an imagined home, even for those participants who have not been to Mexico in many years. In addition, the novelas act as educational supplements for the children in the home who learn about being Mexican from the programs (Mayer, 2003a; Rios, 2003; Casas Pérez, 2005). Further, while the younger participants did not report watching much news, the older children and parents responded that their preference was for news from Mexico because it was more international and kept them connected leading to a more cosmopolitan perspective. Chapter 5, "Concerning Representation: Latina/os in English-Language media," critiques the images of Latina/os in mainstream media (Valdivia, 2007; Harewood & Valdivia, 2005; Markert, 2007; Johnson, 2000; Lichter & Amundson, 1997). Participants engage in negotiated readings (Hall, 1980; Radway, 1984; Lull, 1995; Rojas, 2004) of the texts that are informed by their hybrid positioning within mainstream culture (Straubhaar, 2007; Kraidy, 2005; Rinderle, 2005; Mayer, 2003a; Dávlia, 2001a). While there was optimism as family members recalled the success of some Latina/o actors, there was a consensus that there could be more programming that integrates Latina/o characters naturally into the storylines. Finally, Chapter 6, "(Re)Imagining a Latina/o Audience," concludes by addressing the relationship audience members have with television both in English and in Spanish. The complexities of language and identity are addressed to provide insight into the ways in which Latina/o youth navigate the media landscape. The stereotypes associated with the Latina/o audience are challenged, and readers will gain a better appreciation for the rich diversity of the group. I propose that the industry resist forcing Latina/os into a market niche. What I heard time and time again from the family members is that they do not want to be isolated from the mainstream, but rather they would

prefer to be included. Listening to Latina/o youth will better serve the industry if it responds to the diversity by creating programs that include their experiences and will expand the possibility for media programming that can be enriching for all.