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Author's Note

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Abstract

In the United States, the Latino/a population is very poorly represented in the media by being both misrepresented and underrepresented in all forms of media including: newspapers, television news, and movies. When and where there is representation, it typically is a negative portrayal of a Latino character or story. This passive racism assigns these people a negative connotation regarding their ethnicity and as a result, it has a destructive effect on their population. Through the use of scholarly articles and documentations, research will show how these stereotypical portrayals negatively impacted Latino lives. The misrepresentation of Latina/os in mainstream media is an issue of significance because this minority group accounts for almost a fifth of the United States' populace.

Keywords: Underrepresentation, Misrepresentation, Stereotype, Latino/a

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For decades, the United States has been viewed as a beacon of hope to those in search of a better life and hoping to plant their own roots in the ‘land of the free’. For some, living in the land of the free does not come without restrictions or setbacks. In mainstream media, there is an ongoing phenomenon of misrepresented ethnic groups, specifically, the Latino/a population. This issue is prevalent in many forms of media including movies, news, cartoon, and documentaries. Media seldom presents the Latino/a population and when it does, it fails to portray them accurately. The misrepresentation and lack thereof has negatively impacted this ethnic group as it has created an unjust stereotype. In 2010, at 50.5 million people, the Latino population constituted roughly 16.3 percent of the United States populace and has only increased since then (“Population of,” 2010). They are the majority minority in this nation with an estimated one in six adults and one in four children being Latino/a (Picker & Sun, 2012). For this reason, the issue this group is facing is important to address.

Though Latino/a population is the second largest ethnic group in the United States, the news coverage of them is very disproportionate to the percent of the population they account for. In a study conducted by the Pew Research Center, researchers reviewed 34,452 news stories over a six month period and found only 645 stories on air and in text were related to Latino/as. Out of the stories related to Latino/as fifty-seven of the stories contents pertained to the lives of Hispanics in the United States. Over two thirds of the stories covered on Latino/as are about a negative topic. The second most popular

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Hispanic related topic covered during this study was the Mexican drug war and the following two most popular topics were the swine flu outbreak originating in Mexico City and immigration. Hispanics were mentioned in news about immigration ten times more than other ethnic groups. The study found that Latino/as were more likely to be mentioned in the news paper than on television news at 4.3 percent of the documents reviewed in the study (“Hispanics in,” 2009). In a digital era, print news is the least consumed form of media. With print news being the form of media that gives the most attention to Latino/as while still making up limited amount of stories, it is clear their stories rarely reach the minds of most consumers. As a result, the types of stories covered are extremely influential to the reputation of Latino/as and impacts the way they are perceived by the public. Unfortunately, most news stories regarding Latino/as are far from positive as the majority of stories covered are about crimes. News portrays the Latino/a population as criminals, violent, and low quality American citizens or even illegal by presenting only select news stories. These stories are chosen because they grab the attention of viewers but only showing crimes does not accurately represent the Latino/a population and reflects on those in the nation who abide by the rules and contribute to society in an undeserving unfavorable way. The terminology used by news casters contributes to this negativity. Latino/as are often referred to as illegal aliens which has been associated with rapists and murderers. They have been called animals in news reports of crimes as well (Picker & Sun, 2012). Those terms strip them of their quality as human being and ability to possess complex feeling and emotions. In turn, this affects the

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way they are perceived and treated by others. By dehumanizing them, it makes them more susceptible to poor treatment because it becomes more justifiable. For some Americans, especially those living in areas with little to no cultural diversity, news is the main contributing factor that shapes their perception of other races.

In addition to there being few Latino/as on screen, there also is a lack of Latino/a presence behind the scenes in news rooms. Journalists typically begin their careers in the news field by starting out in a small organization and working their way up to higher positions before securing a job at a larger company. But, small news stations are the least likely to hire minority workers. For those that do get hired, minorities are also the least likely to be promoted to a higher position that would increase their likelihood of being able to land a job at a larger news station (Barthel, 2015). The absence of Latino/as behind the scenes contributes to their absence on the screens. Latino/as are not in the writers' rooms to tell their own stories or make them important. There also is not writers who care about Latino/as and their lives in the news rooms to make sure they are represented and depicted accurately.

Negative portrayals of Latino/as in media does not stop at news. For decades, Latino/a characters have been present in films and movies. During the early years of Hollywood productions, Latino/a characters were played by white actors with dark makeup and tanned skin. Latino/as did not make the cut to play Latino/as. This, in a sense, white washed the presence of Latino/as. All interpretations of Latino/as and their portrayals were made by white writers and white actors rather than Latino/as who lived

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the life, experienced the culture, and wore the skin color every day. The absence of Latino/a contribution to the creation of their characters plays a role in the misinterpretation of their race and culture. It also only shows one side of their story. Their image in film is monopolized by the ideas of white writers. Over the last few decades, this issue has seen change. Though the most successful Latino/a actors are those with the most white characteristics, it is a step in the direction of progress. One thing has stayed relatively the same: The types of characters Latino/as are shown as. In movies Latino/as are often shown as the bad guy. There are innumerable examples of Latino/a villainous characters. Latino men are often displayed as violent, abusive, and criminals. Women are presented as highly sexualized playing roles as prostitutes, women with fiery attitudes, and even maids trying to sleep with the man of the house. One Latina actor stated she alone had played the role of a maid one hundred and eighty-seven times and she would prefer being jobless to representing the Latina population, her population, in that way again. Darker colored women and men alike were cast in more violent rolls and played tougher characters. This created an association between darker skin and poor nature. Children's' movies also played on this theme. Though the Latino/a characters were not as aggressive in kid's movies and cartoons they were still predominantly the antagonist character. One specific example of this is Walt Disney's 1988 animated film, *Oliver & Company*, in which a Chihuahua named Tito spoke with an accent and in a moment of trouble, was the character expected to be able to hot wire a car. Tito was not one of the bad guys in the film yet, of the good guys he was the character expected to

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know how to do something that was a crime (Picker & Sun, 2012). The combination of these factors creates a negative stereotype of Latino/as that they are exposed to at a young age.

Amongst the many adversities life has to offer, from a young age, Latino/as face the repercussions of stereotyping that are produced by media. Stereotypes affect people's perceptions of themselves and lower self-confidence. A study conducted by Professor Michael Inzlicht of psychology, from the University of Toronto, found stereotyping has lasting negative effects on those stereotyped. By placing test subjects in a situation where they had to perform a task under the pressure of a stereotype and having a control group perform the same task without a stereotype, the researchers could interpret the results. They found that those placed in the situation where they were stereotyped were more likely to over eat, be aggressive, make irrational decisions, experience difficulty focusing, and perform poorly on cognitive skills tests (Kemick, 2010). Another study conducted by Stanford University also revealed negative consequences produced from stereotypes. It found students treated by a stereotype were more likely to take part in deviant behavior such as cheating on tests, abuse alcohol, do drugs, and bully peers amongst a number of other activities. They also had a less productive attitude towards tasks assigned when threatened. Students who were the minority showed a significant increase in response to a threat when compared to the white majority also studied (Belmi1, Barragan1, Neale1,& Cohen,2014). This makes it clear that stereotyping the Latino/a population has negative

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impacts that cause more problems than low self esteem. It holds them back and sets them up for failure rather than success.

Amongst the negative showings of minorities in media, a few movies in the past year have diverted from the trend. In November of 2017, Disney released the movie *CoCo*, which was about a young Mexican boy and included many cultural aspects of Mexican heritage. The movie brought in \$209 million at the domestic box office and \$757 million worldwide. It was also nominated for a number of awards at the Golden Globes (*CoCo*). Another movie produced featuring a minority group is the *Black Panther*, released early in 2018. It is the second fastest movie to reach \$400 million at the domestic box office and has remained in the top on charts for five consecutive weeks (Mendelson, 2018). This movie featuring almost entirely African American actors has amassed large success even though the black population makes up only 12% of the United States population compared with the 16% made up by Latino/as ("Population of," 2010). This is proof catering to the minorities desires in entertainment will not hurt profits. These films are highly successful and will be consumed by many races other than the ethnicity featured.

As the Latino/a population continues to grow and makes up nearly a fifth of the United States demographic makeup, it is important to encourage their success. They are contributing members to the US economy and society. They are teachers, coaches, college professors, doctors, and many other things. But above all else, they are humans and United States citizens all the same. Helping them reach their full potential will only

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benefit the country from boosting their self esteem to encouraging and giving them confidence to pursue higher careers. The United States is not made up of white people alone. People of all races have traveled long and far to build a life here. In under representing and misrepresenting races, media does not reflect this diversity of cultures and colors. If media reflected this diversity, it could enhance everyone's understanding of their identity as an American because being American does not mean having white skin, to each its meaning may be a little different and can represent a multitude of things. How free is this nation really with citizens bound to stereotypes they cannot break free from? If a picture is worth a thousand words, thousands of bad words can paint a very awful image.

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