

Latino Representation Continues To Bring Diversity Into The Media

By Alexis Austin

Over the years, Latinos depicted in the media have had various reputations. Their roles ranged from criminals to the Latin lover and to the independent woman. Stereotyping has become a major theme of Latino representation in films and shows.

With the rise of movements such as Black Lives Matter, the fight for Asian lives and protection for Latino street vendors, violence against people of color has become a growing topic in the United States. During this time, people of color are highlighted on the media. Depending on the film and television show, they are represented negatively and positively.

Mary C. Beltran, an associate professor at the University of Texas at Austin, grew interested in the topic of role models in television for kids due to working with teenagers and people of color. Beltran said characters of different ethnicities are more common in children's programming since it's easier to bring in new actors.

She said actresses like Demi Lovato and Selena Gomez, who are half Mexican, are great examples of Latina representation. Both began acting at a young age in childrens' television shows and became well-known figures among younger generations.

Although Latino actors have a wide variety of backgrounds, Mexican Americans and Puertoicans were the majority, Beltran said. She had the opportunity to talk to actors and writers and learned that Puertoicans had a higher chance in an acting career. Most were from the New York area and went to performing arts schools.

"Families didn't have to have wealth or money since schools offered acting classes so (they) would have a more expansive resume" said Beltran.

Television compared to movies offers more for Latino actors. Beltran said it's because television has many opportunities, lots of outlets, and the projects are more affordable compared to the expenses of a feature film.

The amount of stereotyping used in media lowered over time. Latinos in villain roles lessened and Beltran said it depends on the genre. Latinos portrayed in those roles are rare unless you're watching crime shows where there's mentions of drug cartels.

Beltran said another common stereotype was the view of Latinas as strong, capable, feminine, and independent characters. Although it can be a positive interpretation, she said these characters can

sometimes be exaggerated. After being given the strong Latina woman role, it becomes difficult to see Latinas as professionals or seen in different environments.

Charles Ramirez Berg, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin, said some stereotypes are still prevalent today. When his students are taught about Latino images, they go back to historical films and silent films. Especially in westerns, Latinos played roles as drug runners and involved with drug cartels. Nowadays, there's been a shift in genre from westerns to crime where Latinos are portrayed as criminals who want to make money.

In his book, "Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, and Resistance", Berg mentions the "six basic Latino stereotypes: el bandido, the harlot, the male buffoon, the female clown, the Latin lover, and the dark lady" (66).

"Sometimes the stereotypes were combined, sometimes they were altered superficially, but their core defining-and demeaning-characteristics have remained consistent for more than a century and are still evident today," Berg writes (66).

Berg said although stereotyping is still happening, there's been shows that highlight the character as a person rather than their ethnicity. For example, the character named Garcia in the show "Criminal Minds" is portrayed as a computer genius and gets everything running for the detectives. Berg said she's a great example of being Latina, a hero, and good at what she does.

"Characters like this are powerful because they don't follow stereotypes, letting Latinos and Latinas just be people. Let Latino characters be people and not have to explain their ethnicity," said Berg.