

Challenging Gender and Racial Stereotypes in Online Spaces

Alternative Storytelling among Latino/a Youth in the U.S.

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Media play an important role in perpetuating racial and gender stereotypes that harm the self-esteem and self-concept of marginalized youth, especially for Latino/a youth in the US context. However, this article illustrates that through a participatory media and media literacy approach, media can also become part of the solution. The main aim of this article is to document *Latinitas*, the first digital magazine in the United States created by and for young Latinas that challenges stereotypes through participatory digital storytelling. Explored through an interview with one of *Latinitas*' co-founders and press coverage about the organization, this case study sheds light on the importance of alternative community-based initiatives for minority youth to redefine their identities in their own terms. The findings shed light on how to design alternative youth media programs, negotiate funding, build relationships with the surrounding community, and adapt to the changing media landscape. Such initiatives point to the importance of media literacy programs and participatory storytelling initiatives aimed at redefining youth identity and empowering youth voices.

Existing research informs us that media play an important role in the formation and sustenance of gender stereotypes (Mazzarella, 2013), which are also culturally constructed in ways that intersect with other markers of identity and difference, such as race/ethnicity and socio-economic status (Rivera & Valdivia, 2013). One group in the United States that is particularly affected by this phenomenon, and in predominately negative ways, is young Latina women (Molina-Guzman & Valdivia, 2004; Valdivia, 2010). Because of this, it is important to document interventions that focus on how Latina youth can use media to challenge cultural and gender stereotypes and tell their unique stories through participatory digital storytelling. One important community-oriented media initiative is *Latinitas*, the first digital magazine in the United States that is designed for and produced by young Latinas. This case study illustrates the role of community-ori-

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ented media initiatives in empowering marginalized youth to go beyond stereotypes to redefine their identities in their own terms, especially in online spaces.

Images of Latino/a youth in popular media

Although Latinos and Latinas are making important strides in media, education, art, and business in the United States, they are a group that still faces a significant amount of discrimination in the United States (Feagin & Cobas, 2014), in no small part due to limited media representations. As the Latinidad population in the United States continues to grow, it becomes harder to ignore their absence and false representation in media. At the root of the ambiguity surrounding this group is the label “Latino/a.” Valdivia (2010) notes that this terminology is a “US-created category...and most often linked to populations of Latin American origin living in the United States” (p. 6). And although Latinos/as are a complex and diverse group of people, with unique cultures, cuisines, music, and dialects, the media typically homogenizes this group and their depictions/representations (Valdivia, 2010; Molina-Guzman & Valdivia, 2004; Molina-Guzman, 2010; Rivera & Valdivia, 2010). Latinos/as are also typically reduced to the label “brown,” although their shades of skin tone are as diverse as their array of cultural characteristics (Valdivia, 2010). This reflects the tendency to look at and analyze Latino/a bodies as “hybrids,” challenging the White-Black binary. Guzman and Valdivia (2004) note, “While remaining at the margins of representations of whiteness, they also exist outside the marginalizing borders of blackness” (p. 214). This ambiguity and state of “brownness” is less threatening to White audiences and deemed important by media producers, in order for stories involving Latino/as to be consumed by a broader audience (Pinon, 2011; Valdivia, 2004). Valdivia (2009) adds that this leaves young Latinas to make “identification and identity formations across race and ethnicity, composing hybrid subjectivities out of a hybrid media diet” (p. 76).

The constantly growing Latinidad population also makes addressing children’s programs a necessity, as representations of young Latinas are especially limited. Although there are scarce shows created for these audiences, *Dora the Explorer* plays an exceptional role on television because her character addresses many criticisms of common Latina stereotypes and combats prescribed gender norms (Ryan, 2010; Guidotti-Hernandez, 2007). She identifies strongly with her Spanish heritage, but does so in a way that does not make her an “Other.” She is also very relatable and draws a diverse audience. Dora’s character “signifie[s] gender equity, empathy, and solidarity across individual differences, demonstrating the potential nature of decoding Latinidad as a liberating social force, with feminist underpinnings” (Guidotti-Hernandez, 2007, p. 214). However, although Dora is most often praised for her novelty, she is not free from criticism. She’s often critiqued for the ambiguity surrounding her “Latin-ness” and her arguably “whitewashed” portrayals (Guidotti-Hernandez, 2007). Although the character is not perfect and falls

victim to ambiguity, Dora's character is taking a step in the right direction and can serve as an example for improvement.

Media depictions also often counteract traditional gender roles and values within Latino culture. The culture promotes subservient women, who value marriage and family, while men are characterized as being "macho" and the dominant providers for the family (Lopez et al., 2013). Instead, the media represents Latinos as having limited intelligence, inarticulate speech, laziness, and verbal aggression" (Mastro et al., 2008, p. 2). They are also branded as the over-sexualized "Latin lover." Rivadeneyra (2006) also notes that the news tends to frame Latinos as "a social problem, focusing on crime stories and the negative effect of immigration" (p. 394). Luckily, Latinos are now seen in more major roles. However, because consumers in dominant racial groups get much of their information about Latinas from the media, stereotypical depictions of Latinos also become more harmful if these characters are more visible (Mastro et al., 2008). Mastro & Behm-Morawitz (2005) add that television is "a site of cultural politics where reliance on stereotypes exists, reinforcing the dominant ideology about race rather than challenging it" (p. 124).

Depictions of Latina women have changed very little since they first appeared on the screen (Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005; Molina-Guzman, 2010), which has been shown to influence audience's real-life perceptions of Latinas (Mastro et al., 2007). When Latinas turn to the media to help them negotiate their identity, they find representations that are often stereotypical and negative, as well as ambiguous (Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005; Mastro et al., 2007; Valdivia, 2004). Latina characters are also typically constructed around their bodies, and overly sexualized and exoticized (Merskin, 2007; Guzman & Valdivia, 2004). They also "function as a sign, a stand-in for objects and concepts ranging from nation to beauty to sexuality" (Guzman & Valdivia, 2004, p. 206). The body becomes a symbol of the Latina, reflected with tight and form-fitting clothing, typically bright and accentuating of curves. Esposito (2009) adds, "Media representations of the Latina body thus form a symbolic battleground upon which the ambivalent place of Latinos and Latinas in U.S. society act out" (p. 526). Valdivia (2009) adds that increased media representations does not necessarily open up the opportunity for more equal or accurate representations. Therefore, focusing on girls and young women in this context is much needed.

Latino/a children and young adults are negatively impacted by stereotypical media representations. Because adolescence is an important time for identity development, exposure to negative media effects may be most detrimental for this age group (Rivadeneyra, Ward, & Gordon, 2007). Media portrayals have been shown to negatively impact psychosocial functioning, self-esteem, and academic outcomes (Rivadeneyra, 2006). The media have also been linked to negative body image. Young Latinos/as are in a particularly interesting position. Many are first or second-generation Americans who not only have to negotiate their identity within American culture, but also within their own families (Schooler & Daniels, 2014). As Schooler & Daniels (2014) explain, "Due

in part to complex histories of colonization and immigration, Latino/as inhabit both real and metaphorical ‘borderlands,’ bridging multiple cultures, races, traditions, and communities” (p. 13). Latino/a youth have much to negotiate in today’s mediated world.

Beyond the stereotypes: Participatory media practices and media literacy education

In this interesting scenario, media content is not only the problem, but is also the solution. Digital media formats and community-based initiatives are putting media in the hands of the underrepresented, in order to respond to mainstream depictions of minorities and to create more positive representations. Participatory communication seeks to “empower people to have greater control over decisions that affect them and, in this way, to foster social equity and democratic practices” (Morris, 2003, p. 226). Morris (2003) adds that it is not necessarily what is produced that matters the most, but the process of creation. This is also at the heart of media literacy, which teaches audiences how to analyze current media and produce their own. Youth are able to combine their love of popular culture and engaging in real-world issues, giving them a means to “change the world” (Jenkins, Sherstova, Gamber-Thompson, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Zimmerman, 2016). Participatory media also offer youth a common ground where they can share their story, regardless of their unique historical, cultural, economic or social backgrounds (Fisherkeller, 2013). However, as Fisherkeller (1999) notes, media educators not only have to focus on how media images impact young audiences, but also how these images interact with their real-life experiences with racism, sexism, and power.

Children are often the most neglected groups in society and affected the worst by poverty, violence, famine, and abuse, especially those from low-income families or socially marginalized groups based on race or socioeconomic status. Educational interventions focused on the development of gender-media literacy for teens promote the stories of children who would otherwise be voiceless in society or whose stories are typically told by those in power. It gives children a form of expression and helps them navigate their place in the world. Fisherkeller (2013) notes that there are still gaps for certain groups in terms of access to digital outlets, which opens up opportunities for organizations and non-profits to step in and help give marginalized groups a platform.

Latinitas: Redefining what it means to be young and Latina in the U.S.

Latinitas is helping to combat these same barriers to young Latinas and is putting empowerment back into their hands through participatory media. Founded in 2002, this Texas-based non-profit organization is helping young Latinas thrive through the creative

use of media and gives young Latinas an outlet to explore culture, racism, stereotypes, history, fashion, beauty, art, and poetry (Latinitas, 2013). *Latinitas* began as a class project in college for the organization's co-founders Laura Donnelly and Alicia Rascon. While New York-based Donnelly describes herself as a "sliver" Latina, Rascon was born in Mexico and grew up in El Paso, TX. However, what both of their upbringings revealed and their work with *Latinitas* reminds them of daily is that Latinas are often voiceless, in their personal lives and in the media. As Donnelly explains, media portrayals are "intensely stereotypical and hurtful... You would think that by now [Latinitas] would be obsolete, but it's a pain that we're not" (L. Donnelly, personal communication, September 2, 2016). Latinas are still seen as an "other," although they are a significant population within the United States. Although *Latinitas* has been able to build relationships with cultural and Latino/a-oriented organizations in their area, this perceived "otherness" has kept many corporations and groups from offering funding and other resources.

Media-based youth initiatives take many forms and *Latinitas* provides a solid example of how to design such programs, negotiate funding, build relationships with the surrounding community, and adapt to the changing media landscape. The organization is designed as an afterschool program and currently serves 2,500 girls in Austin, Texas and 1,000 girls in El Paso, Texas. Prior to their current locations, the founders utilized free space around town, including libraries, while their organization was getting off the ground. There is also a summer camp, as well as periodic conferences and workshops that allow their resources to be available to Latinas all year long.

Latinitas's main platform, the digital magazine, is broken up into two publications, one for teens over 13 years old and one for girls under 13. Both versions are broken up into six sections, which cover topics such as beauty/fashion, education, media representation, art/poetry and health. Writers also cover "hot topics" and political issues, as well as highlight the work of inspiring Latinas within their communities. Along with the digital magazine, *Latinitas* also has several social media outlets, including a real-time forum where young women aged 13-25 have the opportunity to discuss issues that are affecting them right now. They have over 4,000 followers on Facebook, over 6,000 on Twitter, and have hundreds of "views" on their YouTube channel. Because of media's flexible nature, *Latinitas* has had to continually update their workshops, in order to train the young women in the latest technologies. They have even bridged into more "intense" technology, including robotics, coding, and game and app creation.

Sustaining a community-oriented youth media initiative: Challenges and opportunities

Organizations like *Latinitas* that are geared towards helping minority youth not only have to consider how to promote themselves and their work to mainstream audiences, but must also balance the cultural traditions of the families that the children belong to.

Oftentimes, when young Latinas join, it is the first time they are told they can strive for more. Donnelly described a story of a young member who dreamed of going to college, but her grandfather would rip up every acceptance letter because a young Latina going to college broke the cultural norm. Eventually, she was able to negotiate her education with her family, no doubt given empowerment through her involvement with *Latinitas*. Leaders at *Latinitas* also have to deal with parents who are unable to give their children the proper support, because of work schedules or lack of education. Additionally, Donnelly was quick to point out that schools are not providing the supplemental support to young adults and children in these groups either.

The turmoil surrounding the 2016 Presidential election and the increased focus on immigration and illegal immigrants has reinvigorated fear in many young Latinos/as and their families. As Donnelly reveals, “I don’t think the average American knows how intensely persecuted they feel” (L. Donnelly, personal communication, September 2, 2016). Luckily, the platform provided by *Latinitas* gives young women the space to negotiate these feelings. Donnelly adds, “Letting them react to it, giving them a place to express anxiety about it [is] really...there’s transformation.” She also emphasized the countless times she’s seen media give young women confidence to tell their own story. As she explained, “There’s a persona to an immigrant child that often makes them feel like they have to make themselves invisible and they often lack platforms to allow them to come out of their shell. This is where *Latinitas* steps in.”

Although *Latinitas* is a non-profit organization, the founders have to market themselves “like a mainstream business.” Much of this requires face-to-face meetings with funders, businesses, and other non-profits. As Donnelly notes, it’s important to work with other organizations “to build unity and share resources” (L. Donnelly, personal communication, September 2, 2016). Creating a collective with fellow organizations and the community is a powerful tool. *Latinitas* must also maintain a media presence of their own, so the surrounding community can be kept up-to-date with their activities. And while burgeoning activists may be overwhelmed with the notion of starting a media-based initiative, Donnelly clarifies, “When you create a startup, you think you have to know everything and I learned valuable lessons that I didn’t need to know everything” (L. Donnelly, personal communication, September 2, 2016).

Latinitas has been recognized by news outlets such as *The Austin Chronicle*, *El Paso Times*, *The Austin American Statesmen* and *NBC Latino*. Founder Laura Donnelly says the organization has helped over 20,000 thus far, and has been in over 112 schools, libraries and community centers (Badgen, 2015). This year, *Latinitas* was one of only 13 organizations nationwide to be awarded a \$25,000 from Google, money the organization intends to put towards expanding its youth-oriented programs (Gallaga, 2016). However, although such recognition is important and illustrates the impact *Latinitas* has had on the community, it is the impact they have on the young women who go through their program that should be highlighted. This organization is an example to illustrate how a media initiative can highlight the minority condition,

youth empowerment, and the relationship between education programs and the surrounding community.

Despite what we can learn from how *Latinitas* operates, nothing remains more important than the impact of those young Latinas it supports. As founder Donnelly explains, “The immense confidence they get is super powerful” (L. Donnelly, personal communication, September 2, 2016). Young Latinas are able to address heavy-duty subjects, including sexual harassment, family issues, bullying, and immigrant abuse. Donnelly adds, “They have an opportunity to shed light on alternate perspectives or a positive portrayal or a REAL portrayal” (L. Donnelly, personal communication, September 2, 2016). As one *Latinitas* blogger describes:

In a blog you are sharing *your* perspective but that doesn’t mean that your sentiments are exclusive. I acknowledge that everyone has a unique story that is all their own, but I also believe that our personal stories can reach out to create communities. Simply stated, I am saying that blogs can allow us to be a part of the larger Latina familia: a familia that laughs, cries, and succeeds *together*. Personally speaking, as an avid reader of blogs written by Latinas, I have been able to find a place online where I feel welcomed but also challenged to expand my perspective.

Media-based initiatives designed for children and young adults, like *Latinitas*, is one of the rare opportunities for minority youth to tell their story. Another young member who participated in a *Latinitas* camp reflected:

It inspired me to put my life in perspective and reminded me to take one day at a time in order to reach your goals. It was inspiring to hear how we are all going through the same worries and stress, and that we are not alone in this.

The young women at *Latinitas* have published pieces on “breaking stereotypes,” the impacts of Supreme Court ruling on Latinos, “what feminism means to me,” “street harassment,” and ways of getting involved in the community. *Latinitas* is a place where girls and young women negotiate their role within their own communities, as well as the world, and learn how to have a voice within it.

Conclusion

Media are responsible for perpetuating dangerous racial and gender stereotypes that harm the self-esteem and self-concept of marginalized youth. However, they are also empowering tools that can give marginalized girls and boys a voice and an outlet to challenge stereotypical mainstream media representations. Although *Latinitas* is an incredibly important exemplar of how media can be used positively, this is only one of many other such initiatives. Alternative community-based media initiatives are worth

our attention, as they are making a significant impact on children and young adults. Such initiatives point to the importance of media literacy programs and participatory storytelling initiatives in redefining youth identity and empowering youth voices.

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