

# **A Reception Analysis: Latina Teenagers Talk About Telenovelas[i]**

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## **Abstract**

As the population of Latino teenagers continues to grow in the U.S., it is important for researchers to look at what they may be learning about from television programming. This project studies a particular interpretive community to determine the role entertainment in Latina teenagers' understanding of romantic relationships in the United States. The findings show that the teenagers actively use the mass media to reaffirm their own system of values and judged the characters' promiscuous behavior as wrong.

Scholars and the general public have debated the influence of television on society since the medium was invented. Television's role in people's lives has been described as all powerful or dismissed as nothing more than a quiet diversion, depending on the point of view. What we do know is that television is an important cultural force for an increasingly diverse population. It is my feeling that the influence of television lies between the two extremes -- somewhere on the continuum that is actually impossible to pinpoint because television, as a social force, must be included with all the other factors that create one's persona. In other words, television influences how persons understand themselves and the world around, but it is the nature of that influence that fuels this project.

The cultural environment of adolescents, especially in Southern California, has changed to include a large group of Latinos. This ever-increasing segment of the population has not been ignored by the television industry. Spanish language networks have expanded and developed to serve this growing audience. The most popular network in Southern California is Univision. Televisa, the largest broadcasting network in Mexico owns 25% of Univision (Rodriguez, 2003). Univision's popularity among Spanish-speaking households is evidenced by its 37 percent share of the Hispanic/Latino audience (Univision Press Packet, 1999). Nearly 70 percent of Univision's audience is Mexican or Mexican American (Rodriguez, 2003). Teenagers are, of course, part of this group. Univision, like its English language counterparts, has created programs that attract teenagers to the set. The popular Spanish language network has attracted the teen audience with telenovelas that deal with teen issues, such as dating, peer pressure, drug use and parental issues, while using young actors to provide identifiable characters for this audience.

Like most dramatic prime-time fare, telenovelas typically revolve around romantic relationships and sexual interactions -- whether explicit or implicit. And for their part, teenagers are interested in learning about their sexuality, but often cultural norms make it uncomfortable for adolescents to ask questions about the very thing that is often on their mind. The mass media offer an easy and prolific source of answers to the questions teens are often too embarrassed to ask out loud.

Accordingly, researchers have, for decades, investigated the potential impact media representations of sexual activity have on child and adolescent's understanding of sexuality. Television programs are a cultural text that may teach young viewers cultural norms and expectations and, thus, ways to interact in daily life, specifically related to dating and intimate relationships. The primary result of this inquiry, however, has been to reveal the complex nature of audience interaction with media content.

Content analysis studies in the United States related to sexual activity have focused on predominantly Caucasian audiences watching American made soap operas (see for example, Heintz-Knowles, et al., 1997; Greenberg and Busselle, 1994). Nevertheless, it is important to include in the study of television effects an increasing population of Latin Americans who are watching entertainment television. Cultural

differences in both the content and of the audience are factors that cannot be ignored. It is a mistake to take research conducted on Caucasians and content targeted especially to them and apply it to Americans with different cultural backgrounds.

The teenage population is changing in America and, as with all age groups, teenagers are more culturally diverse. The rate of growth among the Latino population is greater than for any other minority group. Latino owned businesses are increasing and their economic and political power is changing the face of the United States. The growth of the Latino minority has encouraged the mass media industry to serve their needs by providing Spanish-language programming. The television network Univision has become one of the most popular networks for Spanish-speaking audiences, receiving a 37 percent viewing share of Hispanic households in the United States from September 1997 through May 1998 (Univision Press Packet, 1999).

The theoretical foundation of this study comes mainly from Social Learning Theory and Active Audience Theory. Each of these perspectives provides information about the potential effects of television content on audiences. Social Learning Theory explains how teenagers may imitate the observed behavior shown on television while Active Audience Theory provides insight into how audiences interpret and interact with the mass media.

Nariman (1993), who studied the impact of telenovelas on audiences explains: "...the largest portion of learning involving one's adaptation to society takes place through such observational learning" (p. 38), especially when it comes to new experiences. If a teenager has little or no experience with an activity the observational learning from others becomes more important. Brown and Steele (1995) add that:

Modeling will occur more regularly when the model is perceived as attractive and is similar to the imitator and the modeled behavior is salient, simple, prevalent, has functional value and is possible. Thus, the theory would predict that teens who spend more time watching television will imitate behavior that includes depictions of attractive characters having sexual intercourse who rarely suffer any negative consequences (Brown and Steele, 1995, p. 22).

Social learning theory, therefore, provides the foundations to study the possibility that teens will imitate the behavior of characters in telenovelas with whom they identify -- specifically teenagers and young adults. The characters seen in Spanish-language programming may be particularly attractive to young Latina viewers since images of Hispanic characters on traditional American television are few.

A trend in audience research has been to use qualitative methodologies to uncover how audience members interact with the mass media. Klaus Jensen (1987) explains that qualitative audience research can better reveal how viewers make their own sense of the media based on their personal circumstances.

Buckingham (1998) explains that much previous research on adolescents and television has neglected the notions of this active response. He states:

The notion that children might actively construct meanings from what they watch, and that those meanings might be diverse or ambiguous -- let alone that socialization itself might be an equally uncertain and contested process -- is only now beginning to be recognized (p. 27).

Meaning is dynamic and happens as a result of the interaction between the message and receiver. The idea of active reception now fuels much of the research on audience interpretation. The perceptions of the audience member includes his or her social and cultural surroundings, as well as what is occurring during the viewing of a certain television program. Everything about the context of the interaction between the viewer and the message can influence the interpretation of that message. Moores (1990) concurs that the key to any study regarding reception is the inclusion of the contextual framework of the audience.

Darcy Haag Granello (1997) conducted a reception study with adolescent girls focusing on their interpretation of Beverly Hills, 90210. She emphasizes that the interpretation of the text, while active is

not completely subjective. Discussing meaning she states:

Although not universal, neither is the meaning decoded from the text wholly individually subjective. It is intersubjective. The female viewers must decode and produce a relevant meaning from 90210, and they do not decode that meaning in a social vacuum. They are influenced by their social experiences, their life experiences, and their developmental stages (Granello, 1997, p. 27).

While these studies point to the audience's potential to assign multiple meaning to texts, Granello (1997) points out there are ideological barriers that keep the interpretations within the dominant ideology. Morley (1993) agrees that audience members are operating within a dominant ideology so the choices of their readings are still within an ideological framework. Further, Morley (1993) argues to be mindful of the "difference between having power over a text, and power over the agenda within which that text is constructed and presented" (p. 14). In the case of audience studies, the research needs to understand the relationship between how media content is produced and the ideological messages imbedded in the text and social formations surrounding audience interpretation to truly get at how people understand and use the mass media.

This study hopes to contribute to our understanding of American Latina teenagers as a unique interpretive community by analyzing the content of television programs they watch (telenovelas) and hearing, in their own words, their perceptions of that content. The undertaking of this project is not to uncover the direct effects of sexually explicit content on adolescent viewers, but rather to provide new insight into the relationship between television content and audiences by conducting a reception analysis that pays particular attention to the interpretive strategies used by Latina teenagers. It addresses the following research question: What interpretive strategies do Latina teenagers rely on to understand romantic relationships seen on telenovelas?

## **Method**

This project assesses the audience's interpretation of the messages imparted by telenovelas through a reception analysis that provides a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between adolescents and television viewing. A reception analysis will provide the opportunity to learn when and why these teens turn to the media for information.

It is clear that concern over the potential effects of mass media has spurred audience research since the first messages were disseminated to a mass audience. What has changed over time are the methods used to uncover the effects, and the assumptions underlying these studies. The tradition of audience research has moved from empirical data collection to include a more integrated approach that includes qualitative analysis of both the content and audience reception.

As with any research that is intercultural, careful consideration of ethnic differences needs to be taken before the initial communication. As a researcher, I have been fortunate to have been introduced to the Latin culture both in Spain and Mexico, as well as to Latinos living in Southern California. Nevertheless, special care was taken to ensure that I did not offend or hinder the data collection process by being unaware of cultural norms or standards. In addition to the differences between the culture of the participants and my own, I had to take into consideration that the participants were teenagers. Because they were younger, I had to make sure to use language that was not only culturally appropriate, but also appropriate for their age group.

Before the formal interviews and focus groups, I spent time with Latina girls talking about their likes and dislikes in regard to television and life in general. I discovered through these interactions how the teens interacted and was able to learn some specific slang words that I could use during future data collection. The time spent with the teens was invaluable, as I learned not only what they like to watch on television, but I also gained their trust during these informal interactions.

Although the teenagers in my study attend high school in the United States, and speak fluent English, I needed to be aware of specific cultural norms that might influence the data collection process. An aspect

of Hispanic culture that is important to this study is what Marín and Marín (1991) call *simpatía*;

*Simpatía* emphasizes the need for behaviors that promote smooth and pleasant social relationships. As a script, *simpatía* moves the individual to show a certain level of conformity and empathy for the feelings of other people (p. 12).

This became crucial when talking to the teenagers about a sensitive subject like intimate relationships.

Another cultural characteristic, *familialism* (Marín and Marín, 1990, p. 13), was particularly relevant during the data collection process. The authors describe this value as a way to understand the closeness and attachment that is common among Latino families. *Familialism* includes not only the nuclear family, but also a large extended family. In terms of this research project, *familialism* is important because many teenagers watch telenovelas with other family members. In addition, their strong family ties influence their interpretations of the characters' actions.

The sample of focus group/interview participants included twenty-four teenagers from middle-upper class families who attend private Catholic high schools. The homogeneity of the sample of teenagers limits the discussion about the role of television viewing to this specific sub-set of Latina teenagers. While the findings can not be used to discuss the larger population of teenagers, the goal of a reception analysis is to uncover in-depth information about a particular audience. Therefore, the homogeneity of the sample is not only an asset because it allows for an analysis of the interpretive elements that may be common across this group of teens, but also a main premise of reception analysis. Furthermore, their socio-economic status makes them similar to the characters on the television programs which may lead to interpretations based on their ability to identify with certain situations (McQuail, 1994).

While the focus group/interview questions do not directly ask the teenagers to describe their own personal sexual activity, many volunteered that they were sexually inexperienced and planned to save themselves until marriage. Their lack of experience may make them more susceptible to the potentially incorrect or fantasized version of romantic relationships depicted on telenovelas.

Two focus groups were conducted at the Academy of Our Lady of Peace High School in San Diego, California in October 1999. Permission to conduct the focus groups was granted by Dr. Melinda Blade, Social Studies Department Chairperson and Sister Dolores Anchondo. The form and line of questioning was approved by the Human Subjects Committee at the University of Washington. In addition, each teen who participated in the focus groups returned a consent/assent form signed by her parent.

The first focus group consisted of seven Latina teenagers who expressed interest and familiarity with telenovelas. The second group started with nine teenagers, but one teen needed to leave before the conclusion of the focus group. Both focus groups were conducted in a classroom at the high school and lasted approximately 50 minutes. The comfortable and familiar setting helped to relax the participants and allowed them to speak freely about their impressions of telenovelas.

A third focus group was conducted at University of San Diego High School in November 1999. The focus group was conducted after school in a classroom that was familiar to the students. There were eight participants. The focus group lasted approximately 60 minutes. Permission was granted by Melinda Berry, the student's math teacher and Timothy Berenthal, the assistant Principal. Again, each student was given a consent/assent form that was signed by her parent.

All of the participants were fluent in both Spanish and English and were frequent viewers of telenovelas. The ethnic background was dominantly Mexican although one teen made it clear she was Puerto Rican. All the teenagers were between the ages of 14 and 18 years old.

A total of eight in-depth interviews were also conducted. One interview was with a respondent who did not participate in the focus groups. The interview was conducted at a local restaurant and lasted approximately 90 minutes. The other seven interviews were conducted with Latinas who did participate in the focus groups and were follow-up interviews. The follow-up interviews were conducted at the

Academy of Our Lady of Peace and each lasted about 20 minutes.

Although we were discussing Spanish-language programming, the interviews and focus groups were conducted in English. The data were transcribed by myself or a professional transcriber. The names of the respondents has been changed.

## Results

The results gathered from the focus groups and interview data indeed reveal that Latina teenagers interpret television messages through their unique and complex web of perceptions. The interpretive strategies used by the teenagers were influenced by their families, religion, culture, peers and previous media experience. Throughout the data collection process it became clear that the teenagers actively engage with the messages to evaluate the characters' actions.

Respondents were chosen because of their expressed interest in telenovelas. The focus groups were conducted at private Catholic high schools. The teens that attend these schools are generally middle to upper class and have strong religious beliefs. The homogeneity of the sample must be noted when interpreting the results. Many of the students were from upper-class Mexican families.

Telenovelas are a popular form of entertainment for all Latin American family members especially teenage girls. Most respondents indicated that they watched telenovelas frequently and usually in the company of other family members. In addition, many teenagers stated that they preferred telenovelas to American programs (although many said they were fans of Dawson's Creek).

The viewing of telenovelas seems almost habitual. When I initially asked if the teenagers watched telenovelas, they answered me in a tone that implied "of course, what a silly question." Many of the teens explained that they grew up watching these programs, often in the company of other family members which in turned encouraged this activity. The participants explained that they do not usually talk about the stories with their friends indicating either that it is not worth mentioning because it is inconsequential or because it is such a part of daily life that it is redundant to discuss whether or not one saw the telenovela last night. I believe it is the latter.

The teens based much of their interpretation about the actions on the telenovelas by looking at what is "right" and "wrong" according to what had been taught to them by their families and by their religion -- Catholicism. Most agreed that they were going to wait until marriage to engage in sexual intercourse, but they also believed that many teenagers today are sexually active. It was clear through the discussion with the teenagers that all of them plan to marry and have a family. It was an assumption that was taken for granted.

The interpretative strategy based on the perceptions of right and wrong was frequently voiced by the participants. They were eager to judge a character's actions and did so from a dualistic perspective. Granello (1997) explains that as children develop, they move from dualistic to multiplistic to relativistic thinking. Teenagers who are still in the dualistic stage see things as black or white. As they develop, they learn that issues become more complex. Therefore, because of their developmental stage (most were fourteen), the teens tended to dichotomize issues and without considering possible extenuating circumstances for a character's action. For example, Barbara, a character on *Tres Mujeres*, had an adulterous affair; the teenagers judged this behavior as "wrong" based on their own value system. By acknowledging and judging some characters' actions as "wrong," the teens tended to reinforce their own idea of what is "right" and reinforced their desire to be "good." For these teens, viewing characters engaging in premarital sex or other sexual activity did not influence them to imitate the behavior, but rather to condemn it, reaffirming their own values. This interpretative strategy is consistent with Fingerson's (1999) findings that indicated that girls interpret televised messages from within a certain moral framework.

When first asked if they thought there was too much sex on telenovelas some nodded yes, but they viewed the portrayal of sexual interactions as relevant to the stories and somewhat realistic. Although,

not overtly stated, they agreed that many people in “real life” engage in the type of sexual activity depicted, emphasizing their own personal lack of experience with which to compare the representations.

The focus group and interview participants were asked with whom they usually watch telenovelas to establish the context of viewing. The respondents indicated that they usually watch telenovelas with other family members or it was other family members who first introduced them to the programs. The teens sometimes poked fun at older generations for getting “too into” the telenovelas because they consider themselves savvy media consumers.

Marta: My mom.... I started watching because of her.

Patricia: At first it was just my sister and my mom and when I got a little older, about 12, my [older] brother started watching and then my father started when I was about 16.

Sofía: My mom, my aunts, when my grandparents come over, they watch it...My grandmother is really involved with it, sometimes I don't understand it because it is so unrealistic.

Victoria: My mom and my sister and I watch them. It is funny how we can get hooked on something like that.

These responses are consistent with the concept of familialism discussed by Marín and Marín (1991). It is clear that the viewing experience includes family, which is central to the Latin American experience.

Throughout the discussions about the influences telenovelas have on the viewing audience, many respondents were eager to talk about the potential effects on other teenagers and especially younger audiences.

Sofía: I think it is bad for younger kids who don't see the difference about what the ladies in the novelas are portraying. They are very sophisticated but they tell lies to get their way and kids might think that they should lie to get their way.

Sylvia: They are very susceptible...Little kids shouldn't watch it because they get some bad ideas from it because they are always taking things in.

Alexa: Maybe if little kids watch them they may get the wrong idea.

In addition to the general negative influences on younger audiences, the respondents were concerned about specific character's actions. They expressed concern about showing characters engaging in activities that were not consistent with their values. One girl had this to say:

Alexa: For example, the one who got cheated on by the girl. His friends helped him out and bought him drink and brought him to a club and they found him a girl. And that is what a person might think after they have been cheated on -- they are going to go out with their friends to meet somebody new. They are going to get some kind of example from them.

Referring to showing a character drinking alcohol, she stated that some viewers might believe that alcohol is necessarily coupled with sexual activity.

Alexa: In a way it is a bad thing and in a way it is just normal because you are either going to get an example of it from commercials or real life but it is wrong because people are getting a bad example. His friends gave him something to drink and he found some girl in the club and now he was going to have an affair [one night stand] with her.

In reference to the same scene...

Alexa: Then people will think that it is normal to sleep with the person the first time and it is not right.

Well it depends on what kind of a person you are and your morals but I don't think it is right...the first time you see it you may think they are not a ladylike kind of girl, but after you see it, it becomes common.

Further, the participant continued to discuss other potential effects of viewing telenovelas. Here she discusses a positive outcome of including the negative consequences of unwanted pregnancy.

Alexa: It is good [to show] because it shows you how it will affect you...They [audience] might realize how much it really is -- It is not just having sex, there is a risk of ruining your life. They might adapt it [the example] to their own style of life. They learn from it. For example, some teenage girls might learn that is what happens [getting pregnant] and they might say well that character was dumb because she didn't use protection and they might realize they should.

Alexa's common sense is consistent with what social learning theory explains is likely to happen. Also, within the social learning perspective, another participant explains the benefit of positive portrayals of women.

Ana: At first they showed them [women] as inferior and scared of men and now they take revenge. It is good that they are not so inferior anymore.

Ana is cautious, however, of showing women using their sexuality rather than their mind to get what they want.

Ana: Sometimes the girl offers to sleep with guys and she said it openly, 'oh yeah I sleep around with rich men, that is how I got to where I am.' She just says it like normal...[it sends a bad message] because you shouldn't do that.

Many of the teens explained that because of their strong moral upbringing, they were not susceptible to the influences of televised messages. They also were sure they were personally at a place where they felt "grown up" and able to protect themselves from television.

Sylvia: No, because in Mexico we are more moral and we are really into religion. So we are watching telenovelas because we like to watch them, I don't get ideas from watching them. I am going to have sex on my honeymoon.

Marta: In Mexico, the family is very united, I am very close to my parents, I can tell them anything.

Elena: Once you have lived your teenage years and you have seen a lot of things so you are not as susceptible [to TV's influence].

The teenage respondents stated that they enjoyed watching telenovelas that feature main characters who are teens. This is consistent with Josephson (1995), whose research concludes that adolescents prefer to watch programs that feature their age group. They explained that they can relate to the problems the teens face in the programs. Again, looking to social learning theory, the teenagers responses related to the propositions that the theory makes. The teens identify with characters that are most like them.

Sofía: There is always a caring friend who gives advice and I think that most of us have done this in one way or another before...sometimes its hard [to identify with characters] because they start off good, but then they go off into the wrong direction.

Monica: I like [stories] with teenagers, I think it's better because you can relate to them more instead of adults. [I like it] when they deal with all sorts of problems like drugs and how to deal with it or family struggles.

Liza: There is a new one, it's all about teenagers... It's kind of cool because you can see all the different problems teenagers have...and how you can solve them....In the 1990s there are a lot of problems with drugs. A lot of teenagers are smoking, a lot of teenagers are drinking, a lot of teenagers are doing drugs,

they are doing the hard stuff. We are the future of this country...It is true [that teens learn from TV] because when you have a problem you don't want to accept that you are the only one having that problem and you don't want to accept that because you think people will look weird at you or something but it's true. In showing them in the telenovelas they can see that they are not the only ones having those problems that they can get help, that there is a solution for their problems...like getting pregnant or doing drugs.

The participants explained that they thought it was a good idea to show potential consequences of sexual interactions when dealing with this topic.

Patricia: They just talked about it [a character's abortion] and they showed how it was not really accepted at all, especially in Mexican cultures. The majority are Catholic and the culture teaches that kids are always human.

Liza: In a telenovela, this girl got pregnant because they had unprotected sex. She told her parents and then her dad was against her and her mom was with her the whole time but because her dad was neglecting her ran away. Then she had her baby in a place where they care for you while you're pregnant but then the day your child is born they give it up for adoption.

Many stories have to do with lover's infidelity and the result of cheating on the relationship. The teenagers noticed the frequency of these actions and discussed some of the potential problems with portraying adulterous affairs.

Sylvia: The oldest daughter, she was married and has two children and she cheated on her husband but he also had an affair, so now she is with the guy that she had an affair with and he is the husband's cousin.

Sofía: The way I see it is they cheat on each other, the way they [producers] put it, it is okay to have affairs and cheating on your wife is right and lying and hiding it makes it seem like it is right...

Isabel: It also shows that you can't trust people. All the guys are real jerks and they cheat on people and in real life it is not like that. Some people are like that but you can't look and say everyone is like that.

Alexa: Whenever they are cheating on somebody and they show that they are cheating on somebody and the viewer notices it then the other character won't notice it...[In real life] people are much smarter...[On the telenovelas] they broke up. [In real life] I think that girls don't break up with boys, but the boys do break up with the girls because it is more often that you see the boy cheating on the girls than the girl cheating on the boy.

One participant thought the stories about adultery were reflective of real life. This interpretation by Liza may be because of her own experiences, although I did not ask who she knew who had dealt with adultery.

Liza: It is a thing that happens every day because we know people are cheating on their wives or girlfriends or the women are cheating on their husbands or boyfriends. They are putting it into the novelas because first they cheat and then they get back together, [but] that is not the way it happens in real life...that is why you have to open your eyes.

Although, the participants revealed that they understood that the producers had to keep the viewers interested by having the characters constantly changing partners. They stated that indeed many married couples do have affairs and they see it as a common reason for divorce in real life.

The Latina teens agreed that they like the Mexican telenovelas better than American soap operas. Maybe this is because they do watch in a familial setting and the telenovela is preferred, especially for Mexican-Americans new to this country and for those who reside in Tijuana, but commute to San Diego schools.



Isabel: I think that I like the novelas better than the English ones because they are so long. I like how the novelas end, you get a new plot and story line.

Sofía: I think that the telenovelas show a better perspective on life. The English ones are more foul mouthed and unfair with marriages, it shows the wrong point of view. When I see English soap operas they are totally false, they make life seem so easy. They show that the best way to live life is to have money and with the telenovelas they show poverty and the poor who are fighting their way through to lead a successful life.

Mina: Better because it ends, American ones just go on and on.

María: American ones, I've noticed you can spend watching a week of a show and it can be a day. They are really long.

The teenagers are actively engaged in decoding the messages in the telenovelas. They use their own social lens to view these programs. Nevertheless, the potential negative effects of these programs cannot be dismissed or overlooked because the teens are "active." It is necessary to continue to think about the responses the teens have to the programs so that more realistic portrayals of teenagers on television can be created. The teenagers want realistic programming -- shows that deal with the issues they face in daily life. Although the teenagers did not specifically state when they turn to telenovelas for information, they expect other teenagers do receive information about life from television. It may be that television has answers to questions they may be too embarrassed to ask.

## **Conclusion**

The data from the focus groups and interviews indicate that the most significant role that television plays is the reinforcement of existing perceptions about romantic relationships. Their own cultural and social perspective informs the interpretive strategies used by the teenagers. Indeed, the Latina teenagers derived meaning about sexual information by using their own value system. The information they have stored about sexual activity comes from a variety of sources including their families, formal sexual education in schools, peers, and television. They project all this information every time they evaluate a character's behavior.

The stories on the telenovelas provide an opportunity for the teenagers to articulate their own beliefs about life since they are eager to judge the characters' actions as right vs. wrong or realistic vs. unrealistic. In this sense, television provides models of certain behaviors and situations that teenagers anticipate happening in their own lives or as "wrong" and something they will avoid. For example, when they discussed behaviors that were contrary to what they believed was right, their statements reinforced their values rather than changing them. This was evidenced by Ana's comment regarding "sleeping around." She explained that "you shouldn't do that."

The theme of marriage was something the teenagers did discuss. Since all of the teenagers saw themselves as getting married in the future and because of their own personal lack of experience, they viewed the representations of marriage as fairly realistic. They tended to believe that adultery was common in marriage -- a prevalent storyline on the telenovelas -- although they hoped it would not happen to them. They also agreed that a scene on *Sin Tí*, depicting a character's first time on her wedding night, was realistic. The teenagers in this sample, perhaps because of their family life as well as their religion, did have an idealized version of marriage and losing their virginity. The role of the telenovela in this instance reinforced this fantasy.

What is particularly important to note is that unlike previous studies that have assumed that the portrayal of explicit and frequent sexual activity will influence teenagers to act in this way, this sample of teenagers reaffirmed their own values and expressed desire not to engage in premarital sex. While they deemed some actions as inappropriate for themselves, they did believe that the representations of some romantic relationships were representative of other people's behavior.

The teens sampled were predominantly Catholic with strong ties to their families. Many of them stated that they did not plan to engage in sexual activity before marriage so that the information about birth control methods was not necessary for them, but they felt strongly that this type of information should be included for teenagers who choose to engage in premarital sexual intercourse. One participant, Alexa, made the point that the reality is that teenagers do have sex and therefore they should know how to protect themselves. She also stated that entertainment television was an appropriate venue for this information because teenagers do indeed view telenovelas and they can learn from what they see.

Although these findings do not support direct observational learning in line with social learning theory what is supported are disinhibitory effects (Baran and Davis, 2003). In many cases the teenagers saw the consequences of sexual behavior as undesirable. In other words, the characters were “punished” (at least from their point of view) in the storyline and therefore this lessened the likelihood of identification and imitation. Nevertheless, the teenagers in the sample believed that “other” teenagers may indeed be affected by these images of romantic relationships. In this instance, the teens may be exhibiting the third person effect – the idea that the media does not affect oneself, but it may affect others. It may be that the teenagers could not be self-reflexive in thinking about the role the images of romantic or intimate relationships play in creating their understandings. This should be investigated in a future study.

A limitation of the study is that it only looked at one particular socio-demographic of Latina teens. It is important to include other Latina teenagers who are not from the upper to middle class with strong family and religious ties to reveal if their viewing experiences are much different. Another limitation, which is common with focus groups and interviews, is the willingness for the participants to disclose, in this case, private and potentially embarrassing information. It is hard to say how much the teenagers were holding back because of the research setting, but they did seem eager to express their thoughts.

Each inquiry into understanding the relationship between television messages and their audiences provides another piece in a very complex puzzle. This study offers insight into how cultural context influences a particular interpretive community's interpretation of televised images. Teenagers are actively engaged in deconstructing what they see on television and whether they learn how to behave or how not to behave telenovelas provide much information about romantic relationships.

## Endnotes

[1] A portion of this paper was presented at International Communication Association, Acapulco, 2000

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