

Can they live up to the challenge? Open Letter to Latino Media: Stop Ignoring Dark-Skinned Latinos

My name is Jovanka Ciales. I am a Puerto Rican (born and raised), dark-skinned (black in fact), highly educated, fully bilingual (trilingual, I should say) young professional woman. My name doesn't necessarily tell you that I am Hispanic nor does my face. Why is that? It's because those responsible for presenting to the world a heterogeneous image of Latinos living in the United States are doing an awful job at it.

For as long as I can remember, U.S. advertising and marketing embraced an image of white (preferably blonde) blue eye, long legged, and extremely skinny women as the epitome of beauty. While many do not agree with it, I could understand, as the majority of the U.S. populations meet at least one or more of these criteria.

Plus, I was content with the idea that, as a member of the largest minority groups in the country my kind had a forum and an avenue of communication and expression. Slowly but steadily, this idea has been discouraged by the Hispanic media and their outlets.

Anyone who is trying to learn about Hispanics, their history and culture will be misled into thinking that all Hispanic women, for example, look like a mix between Jessica Rabbit and Salma Hayek. What happened to the huge numbers of dark-skinned people from anywhere from Patagonia to Mexico and the Caribbean or to those whose Native American or African heritage is more present in their skin color than the rest of the Hispanic population?

An example of this trend is Latina magazine. A monthly magazine founded in the 1990s, it targets the modern Latin American woman in areas of interest that range from fashion, beauty and entertainment to career, education and family. The magazine's signature style is the use of both English and Spanish in the same sentences and articles translated into both languages in order to reach Spanish-speaking as well as English-speaking Latinas.

The efforts of reaching all Latinas stop, however, when it comes to the types of women that appear in the cover of the magazine every month. In the first eight years of publication, not a single dark-skinned Latina graced the cover of the magazine. The first one to appear was Colombian actress Gina Rivera (November 1998). Do they really think that are targeting all of us Latinas when the women on the cover of these magazines or in the vast majority of their advertisements don't represent us all?

The examples are countless. The sad reality is crude. It can be seen on TV as well as in other print media. Hispanic media seems to have simply "erased" dark-skinned people from the public consciousness. And I wonder, what is the problem? Are we embarrassed about our skin color? Are light-skinned Hispanic

more appealing to Hispanic viewers than dark-skinned ones? I certainly don't think so, and I expect something to change very soon.

I accept (and can even understand) the need that marketers have to continue feeding to us the "epitome of beauty." But do they mean to tell me that Hispanic beauty comes in only one skin color? Please! Give me a break! What is more shameful here is that anybody in the United States, including minorities and Hispanics themselves, consider us a population of ethnic or "dark-skinned" people.

This is particularly important for corporate clients trying to reach the Hispanic market. Generalizations about the typical Hispanic "look" automatically excludes a great segment of consumers. Advertisers spend a huge amount of money on figuring out what a targeted market desires. What makes them think that Hispanics are any different? Let me tell you right now: You are not targeting us Hispanics effectively because most of us do not relate to the images that we see.

The biggest problem is that most of those who complain about issues like this one do it privately to their friends, family and colleagues. I may be one of the few courageous enough to speak out and say publicly that the misrepresentation of Hispanics in the media is unacceptable.

I challenge your publication to use dark-skinned Hispanics like me in the cover of your next magazine, as the principal actor in your next commercial, as a spokesperson for your next product campaign. Re-educate corporations (and some Hispanic marketers as well) about the different kinds of Hispanics. Or are you going to continue misleading Corporate American into thinking that they are reaching all of us with the existing marketing strategies?

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