

**The representation of ethnic  
minorities in  
American television**

A textual analysis of the television series  
JANE THE VIRGIN

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## Abstract

Representation of ethnic minorities in American television has greatly improved over time, however, misrepresentations are likely to arise. The CW series *JANE THE VIRGIN* sets an example of a show that adequately represents three generations of Latinx women. First, Alba who arrived in the United States in an attempt to follow the American dream. Subsequently bringing up her daughter Xiomara who later brings up her daughter Jane.

This thesis will answer how *Latinidad* has been represented in *JANE THE VIRGIN*. This paper will center upon the argument that *Latinidad* is evident and has been adapted realistically to the series characters and general storyline. This will be evident through the textual analysis of the series where attention has been paid towards the use of traditions, magical realism and telenovela references. The series has been an inspiration for some and led to a positive cultural representation regarding the Latin American diaspora residing in the United States.

First, through a theoretical framework, I will introduce by defining the principal concepts of representation, *Latinidad*, and cultural identification concerning their authors. These scholars will serve as a guiding point for the rest of my research, especially Guillermo Ávila Saavedra. The methodology will demonstrate how I will undertake my textual research analysis through the first ten episodes of *JANE THE VIRGIN*. Secondly, I will answer my sub-questions through a textual analysis that will later answer my general research question. Finally, my conclusion will prove evident that through the accurate representation of Latinx characters, the series brings together an international audience that is made aware of traditions and characteristics of *Latinidad*.

**Keywords:** American television, adaptations, representation, Latin American identity cultural identification, *Latinidad*.

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## Introduction

American television series now showcase the lives of ethnic minorities more than before.<sup>1</sup> In 2003, people of Latin American descent made up 13.5 percent of the American population but only accounted for 3 percent of the characters on television.<sup>2</sup> These characters were, at times, misrepresented by stereotypical traits. However, in recent years, such representations have improved, from 2010 to 2013 Latinx<sup>3</sup> characters constituted 11 percent of female supporting roles and 4.9 percent for male roles.<sup>4</sup> This improvement allowed for the Latinx audience to see themselves represented on screen. This is evident in the television series *JANE THE VIRGIN* with its complex storytelling narrative and predominantly Latinx cast of characters. This series serves as a noteworthy case study due to its uniqueness that comes from its adaptation in structure from the telenovela genre. According to one New York Times article, the series success is due to its balance between something “specific but also universal” which is “authentic without being condescending.”<sup>5</sup> Its uniqueness comes from inclusive representations and convincing portrayals rather than stereotypical.

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<sup>1</sup> “Television’s Impact on American Society and Culture,” Television in American Society Reference Library, Encyclopedia, October 13, 2020, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/news-wires-white-papers-and-books/televisions-impact-american-society-and-culture>.

<sup>2</sup> “Television’s Impact on American Society and Culture,” Television in American Society Reference Library, Encyclopedia, October 13, 2020, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/news-wires-white-papers-and-books/televisions-impact-american-society-and-culture>.

<sup>3</sup> “Latinx” is the gender-neutral term for people of Latin American descent and will be used throughout this paper.

<sup>4</sup> Frances Negrón-Muntaner, “The Latino Media Gap. A Report on the State of Latinos in U.S. Media,” *Columbia University*, (2014):11. <https://ecfsapi.fcc.gov/file/7522909797.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Dave Itzkoff, “‘Jane the Virgin’ Aims Beyond Its Latin Ethnicity,” *The New York Times*, September 19, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/21/arts/television/jane-the-virgin-aims-beyond-its-latin-ethnicity.html>.

This paper will focus on the academic article “A Fish Out of Water: New Articulation of US Latino Identity on Ugly Betty” written by Guillermo Ávila Saavedra which points out the Latinx tension in television media between assimilation and othering. Moreover, this paper will add on to the current academic debate regarding Latin American identity as it is proposed by Saavedra and Jillian Báez in “Towards a *Latinidad Feminista*: The Multiplicities of Latinidad and Feminism in Contemporary Cinema”. Báez translates Latin American identity into what she calls *Latinidad*. This being something that “allows us to explore moments of convergences and divergences in the formation of Latinx (post)colonial subjectivities and hybrid cultural expressions among various Latinx national groups.”<sup>6</sup> Generally, this paper will demonstrate the types of identification that *JANE THE VIRGIN* offers to its Latinx audience to understand to what extent character representation remains stereotypical.

Additionally, Arlene Dávila, Elana Levine and Clara Rodriguez are scholars who introduce *Latinidad* in relation to commodification. Furthermore, it will also relate to other existing cultural discussions on media representation concerning other scholars such as Stuart Hall, Dana Mastro and Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz. Ultimately it will explore the reasons behind the American adaptations of telenovelas through the works of Daniel Mato, Miguel Ángel Aguilar Díaz, Andrew Horton and Stuart McDougal.

To gain insight into the cultural representation of Latin American stories in American television, the following research question has been formulated: *How does the American television series ‘Jane the Virgin’ represent Latinidad?*

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<sup>6</sup> Frances Aparicio, “Jennifer as Selena: Rethinking Latinidad in media and popular culture,” *Latino studies* (2003):93.

To answer this research question, other questions should be also be taken into account:

- How do the characters of the series present their Latin American identities?
- How is Latin American culture addressed in the series through customs and traditions?
- How do narrative and generic conventions present *Latinidad*?
- How does the show present *Latinidad* to a global audience?

## Theoretical Framework

To identify how JANE THE VIRGIN represents Latin American culture and identity, this paper will look into the television series through several concepts. The first concept to understand is representation. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall defines the concept of representation as “a process where meaning is produced and exchanged within members of a culture”.<sup>7</sup> In this case, the members of the culture refer to the general audience of the series. Jane, the main character, and her family identify as Venezuelan-American and are always following traditions common to the Latin American culture. The series representation of Latinx culture will be further explained throughout the research textual analysis.

Moreover, understanding the term of representation will be beneficial as it forms part of the research question. What we need to understand about representation is how it works in relation to the television series and how it functions together with the understanding of Latinx culture. Hall states that

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<sup>7</sup> Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1977), 15.

representation works through the use of signs and symbols in the media which represent a variety of ideas.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to consider that the type of representations that take place in a television series refer to character display and how they are presented to the audience. The series *JANE THE VIRGIN* revolves around a family where the meaning of Latinx identity is regularly produced through their typical Latin American customs and traditions. Showcasing these traditions help to acknowledge Latin American culture. Dana Mastro and Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz both state that we make our understanding of the world that surrounds us through interpretations.<sup>9</sup> They add to Hall's definition of representation by implying that one will learn behaviors from what they see on screen. In their study from 2002, they analyzed the frequency and quality of Latinx depiction on primetime American television. They indicated that representations of ethnic minorities in television may influence the audience's real-world perceptions regarding Latinx communities.<sup>10</sup> According to them, American television may provide hegemonic messages about Latinos in the United States.<sup>11</sup> In their study, sixty-seven different programs with 1,488 characters were researched. They noted that Latinx television characters would often be discussing crime activities,<sup>12</sup> and were likely to carry an accent.<sup>13</sup> Also, these characters had appealing body types but were less appropriately dressed.<sup>14</sup> This led Mastro and Behm-Morawitz to the conclusion that accurate media representation helps real-life perceptions. Their study gives an overview of how the audience creates interpretations from what they see on screen. It suggests how

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<sup>8</sup> Hall, *Representation*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Dana Mastro and Elizabeth Behm Morawitz, "Latino Representation on Primetime Television," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 82, no.1 (Spring 2005): 112.

<sup>10</sup> Mastro and Behm Morawitz, "Latino Representation on Primetime Television," 110.

<sup>11</sup> Mastro and Behm Morawitz, "Latino Representation on Primetime Television," 124.

<sup>12</sup> Mastro and Behm Morawitz, "Latino Representation on Primetime Television," 118.

<sup>13</sup> Mastro and Behm Morawitz, "Latino Representation on Primetime Television," 120.

<sup>14</sup> Mastro and Behm Morawitz, "Latino Representation on Primetime Television," 118.

an international audience will perceive Latinx culture if they are not yet familiarized. Media must be able to represent adequately subjects that are unfamiliar to its audience. Mastro and Behm-Morawitz results suggest that the interpretations which are made about Latinx culture will address both, the Latinx audience and a more international audience.

The concept of representation along with the term of cultural identification is discussed in Guillermo Ávila Saavedra's analysis of *UGLY BETTY*. This article looks into the meaning of the text and how television series are able to represent a culture.<sup>15</sup> Saavedra and Hall both agree that meaning travels through social discourse. Television, like any medium, leads to discourse from the audience. Subsequently, the discourse may lead to the audience voicing their opinions on how well represented the characters on a series were. Saavedra states that television can construct the identities of U.S. Latinos through the use of language, culture and representation.<sup>16</sup> His analysis adds to the overall theme of ethnic otherness and cultural assimilation. He observes that one must fully understand the traits that come within a culture to gather an accurate representation. Series such as *UGLY BETTY* and *JANE THE VIRGIN*, may aid towards this understanding in an attempt to avoid 'Othering' ethnic minorities. Saavedra's textual analysis of the series *UGLY BETTY* aims to find how the show expresses the relationship between media representation and identity.<sup>17</sup> He states that media can create a cultural process by showing an intersection of Latinos and non-Latinos. This process has become compelling for mainstream Anglo media. Therefore, shows similar to the aforementioned ones not only reinforce identity construction through the representation of

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<sup>15</sup> Guillermo Ávila Saavedra, "A Fish Out of Water: New Articulation of US Latino Identity on Ugly Betty," *Communication Quarterly* 58, no.2 (May 2010): 138.

<sup>16</sup> Ávila Saavedra, "A Fish Out of Water," 136.

<sup>17</sup> Ávila Saavedra, "A Fish Out of Water," 133.

U.S Latinos but also are able to reach a wider Anglo audience.<sup>18</sup> Saavedra approaches the television text as a symbol of “social, political, and cultural ideological discourses.”<sup>19</sup> In his analysis, he interprets these discourses as the understanding one has on Latinx identity. In his example of UGLY BETTY, this is evident through the use of common cultural stereotypes which act simultaneously with realistic interpretations of the Latinx diaspora in the United States.

Saavedra reflects on the importance of shows like UGLY BETTY since issues on cultural diversity will always be relevant.<sup>20</sup> This article will be useful as it describes the research through a textual analysis to illustrate how the series represent customs common to Latin American culture. Other than using the same method of analysis that Saavedra used in his research, this paper will also refer to the forms of Latinx representation that he references. UGLY BETTY shares some similarities with JANE THE VIRGIN; they are both telenovela adaptations, they follow the same dramatic storytelling, and they also refer to specific stereotypical and common traditions. Also, both series avoid stereotypes and rather use a more traditional outtake on their Latinx culture narratives. These representations are evident through the portrayal of the characters. Even though the series may illustrate a somewhat imaginative plot through magical realism, the characters always keep a balanced personality. Their daily routines appear like any other and Latinx characters are never seen as outsiders from the rest. Arlene Dávila adds to the views of representation by focusing on the increasing Latinx portrayal in contemporary media. She writes that in real-life situations, Latinos are often seen as model minorities as they seem to be more family-centered and

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<sup>18</sup> Ávila Saavedra, “A Fish Out of Water,” 146.

<sup>19</sup> Ávila Saavedra, “A Fish Out of Water,” 138.

<sup>20</sup> Ávila Saavedra, “A Fish Out of Water,” 146.

tend to stick to traditional norms.<sup>21</sup> However, this tends to oppose the representations seen in the media, where Latinos are shown in a more stereotypical manner, different from what is seen in real life. Mastro and Behm-Morawitz stated through their research that Latinx characters would often take on stereotypical traits such as getting involved in illegal activities or carrying a strong Spanish accent during conversations.<sup>22</sup> However in *JANE THE VIRGIN*, they show more convincing narrative in terms of Latinx representation. The way the series has been constructed has the capacity to create unification between the characters and the audience. By representing Latinx characters with a more convincing narrative, the series brings together the cultural identities of each audience member. Accurate representations of Latin American traditions will create a sense of belonging to Latinx audiences. Cultural traditions which are commonly part of Latinx culture create *Latinidad*. This can be evident in *JANE THE VIRGIN* through the representation of the character's norms and lifestyles.

What makes *JANE THE VIRGIN* a good area of research is its unique presentation of the characters and plot. In the case of other television series which are centered on Latinx characters, many unnecessary stereotypes may be present. This is evident in scenes where characters only communicate through the Spanish language. However, it is important to consider that Latinx identity goes further than just a common language, which is what *Latinidad* aims to demonstrate.

The concept of *Latinidad* explains how media can bring together cultural identities, specifically those in Latin American contexts. It is a type of collective identity within those who

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<sup>21</sup> Dávila Arlene. *Latinos Inc. The Marketing and Making of a People*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

<sup>22</sup> Mastro and Behm Morawitz, "Latino Representation on Primetime Television," 120.

share different Latin American roots. Jillian Báez explains this term in her analysis of how media demonstrates the intersectionality between ethnicity and gender.<sup>23</sup> This concept serves as a framework to understand Latinx subjectivities and collective cultural expressions.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, within *Latinidad*, there is also *Latinidad Feminista*; a critical perspective towards the use of social hierarchies in Latinx culture and the tensions that come with it.<sup>25</sup> This term emphasizes moments of an agency that occur between female Latinas, which is evident in *JANE THE VIRGIN* where its principal characters are three women of Latin American descent.<sup>26</sup> *Latinidad* builds on this type of agency through their characterization. Alba, Xiomara and Jane tend to be romantic while simultaneously fighting for their personal success. The independence and perseverance that these three characters have, put them in a more dominant role than the ones around them.

To identify specific representations of Latin American culture in *JANE THE VIRGIN*, using the concept of *Latinidad* becomes advantageous. The term highlights the positive identifications of Latinx people, making them feel more appreciated. Moreover, other scholars state that this term can also emphasize a cultural collective. This concept has been adapted differently by each author. Elana Levine points out that *Latinidad* is constructed as a panethnicity, which is evident when a television show uses the Spanish language.<sup>27</sup> Since most Latinos speak Spanish, it is inevitable to generalize. However, it comes with a reward to those who understand and relate with the language. Evidence of cultural collectiveness

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<sup>23</sup> Jillian Báez, "Towards a *Latinidad Feminista*: The Multiplicities of Latinidad and Feminism in Contemporary Cinema," *Popular Communication* 5, no. 2 (December 2007): 109.

<sup>24</sup> Báez, "Towards a *Latinidad Feminista*," 111.

<sup>25</sup> Báez, "Towards a *Latinidad Feminista*," 120.

<sup>26</sup> Báez, "Towards a *Latinidad Feminista*," 112.

<sup>27</sup> Báez, "Towards a *Latinidad Feminista*," 113.

can be clearly seen in Saavedra's argument on ethnic otherness. He states that when Spanish dialogue is present in television, a collective identity is formed between "we" who understand Spanish and "them" who do not. When cultural expressions like these are used, a collective identity is thus formed. Saavedra later states that *Latinidad* is an interpretation which seeks to find cultural assimilation within Latin American culture.<sup>28</sup> Such assimilation can be reached through the recognition of traditions which are common to the culture. Furthermore, the show's focus on specific cultural practices and traditions may bring the audience to identify with the storyline and characters.

It is important to consider that for some, the concept of *Latinidad* may carry some disadvantages. In the book, *Latinos Inc.* Arlene Dávila's focus is on the Hispanic marketing industry and how they use generic and mostly stereotypical representations in media. She uses the term *Commodified Latinidad* to explain how media industries construct the conceptualization of *Latinidad* in order to sell to a Hispanic market.<sup>29</sup> This could be the case for other series and films however, it is not the case in *JANE THE VIRGIN* since this series aims to bring together cultural identities within its global audience through *Latinidad*.

From another insight, Rodríguez argues that the purposes of showing Latinos in media are mainly commercial and political. This research will take into consideration that Latinx representation has not only been done for commercial purposes, but also for bringing together its Latinx audience. Such modes of identification are offered by the series through the use of cultural traditions and norms commonly seen in Latinx households. This paper will explore that contemporary

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<sup>28</sup> Ávila Saavedra, "A Fish Out of Water," 138.

<sup>29</sup> Arlene Dávila, *Latinos Inc. The Marketing and Making of a People* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 3.

media industries other than focusing on commerce, may also turn their focus on the unification of its audiences, as it is the case in *JANE THE VIRGIN*.

In an article from *Diggit Magazine*, author Emma Wieringa states that *JANE THE VIRGIN* comes in a westernized telenovela format to attract audiences from multiple ethnicities.<sup>30</sup> The executive producer of the series Jennie Snyder Urman has chosen to incorporate symbolic themes common to telenovelas to remind the audience they are watching “a telenovela of some sort”.<sup>31</sup> *JANE THE VIRGIN* is an American adaptation of the Venezuelan telenovela *JUANA LA VIRGEN*. The overall plot remains the same however, each episode is different, and the storyline unfolds in their individual ways. For example, American adaptations will move at a faster pace to reach an earlier conclusion. This is also the case with *UGLY BETTY* an adaptation of the Colombian telenovela *YO SOY BETTY, LA FEA*, where the genre has changed but manages to bring telenovela aesthetics, nonetheless. To understand how such adaptations take place, this paper will take into consideration aspects belonging to the telenovela genre which have been applied to a growing trend in American television. Daniel Mato states that telenovelas have captured the attention for contemporary television due to new narratives. Mato’s cultural analysis on the transnationalization of the telenovela industry suggests that media industries which adopt such formats tend to overrepresent the “Hispanic identity”.<sup>32</sup> This overrepresentation can be seen in an exaggeration of stereotypes. As a concept, it assists in understanding the various constructions of

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<sup>30</sup> Emma Wieringa, “Jane the Virgin: a westernized telenovela,” *diggit magazine*, April 27, 2020, <https://www.diggitmagazine.com/articles/jane-virgin-westernized-telenovela>.

<sup>31</sup> Wieringa, “Jane the Virgin: a westernized telenovela.”

<sup>32</sup> Daniel Mato, “The Transnationalization of the *Telenovela Industry*, Territorial References and the Production of Markets and Representations of Transnational Identities,” *Television & New Media* 6, no.4 (November 2005): 424.

transnational social identities. Nonetheless, this paper will argue that this is not the case for *JANE THE VIRGIN*, Hispanic identity has not been overrepresented but rather represented more accurately.

Latinx public who are aware of telenovela adaptations in American television will find interest in becoming part of its audience.<sup>33</sup> According to communication sciences professor Diana Rios, telenovelas have a great impact on the Latinx community as it unites them with their friends and family.<sup>34</sup> One reason for this being that the series will have themes the Latinx audience may relate to. These themes are accurately represented and try not to reach a stage of overrepresentation. The tendency to produce American adaptations of telenovelas is to reach a more international audience, beyond its Latinx viewers. The capacity to attract a wider audience is due to the production of identity representations within the characters.<sup>35</sup> Miguel Ángel Aguilar et al. state that watching television, specifically with telenovela-like storylines, has become a social act of contemporary society to build relationships through discourse.<sup>36</sup> As discussions emerge in the audience community, they will each express their own opinions and views on the matter. According to Aguilar et al, in a family setting discourses revolve around what they find acquainted with.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to the dramatic turn of events, Aguilar suggests that telenovelas are most likely to accurately recreate daily lives, something that many viewers strive for.<sup>38</sup> Andrew Horton and Stuart McDougal follow a discussion regarding

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<sup>33</sup> PBS, "The Power of the Telenovela," *PBS*, January 25, 2012, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/the-power-of-the-telenovela>.

<sup>34</sup> PBS, "The Power of the Telenovela," *PBS*, January 25, 2012, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/the-power-of-the-telenovela>.

<sup>35</sup> Mato, "The Transnationalization of the *Telenovela Industry*," 426.

<sup>36</sup> Miguel Ángel Aguilar Díaz, Ana Rosas Mantecón, and Verónica Vásquez Mantecón "Telenovelas: la ficción que se llama realidad," *Política y Cultura* 3, no.4 (Spring 1995): 175.

<sup>37</sup> Aguilar Díaz, "Telenovelas: la ficción que se llama realidad," 183.

<sup>38</sup> Aguilar Díaz, "Telenovelas: la ficción que se llama realidad," 179.

adaptations such as this one. They look into Hall's view on cultural identity and apply it to remakes in the media. Their discussion revolves around the distinct interpretations of original works, and if this could adopt a fixed cultural identity.<sup>39</sup> Their article concludes that adaptations differ from the original to bring attention to other types of viewers. In this case, the Venezuelan telenovela *JUANA LA VIRGEN* was able to be adapted for a wider global audience through the production of *JANE THE VIRGIN*.

## Methodology

To answer how the series *JANE THE VIRGIN* represents Latinx identities, a textual analysis will be made. This analysis will specifically look at how the characters embrace and reflect Latinx culture in their everyday life through both stereotypical and traditional ways. Issues that define *Latinidad* and cultural identification according to Báez and Saavedra will be taken into consideration to answer the research question accordingly. Understanding these terms will be useful to Saavedra's theory on othering and assimilation. Characteristics of *latinidad* may be built to the extent that it becomes too stereotypical which does not accurately represent the culture. However, in *JANE THE VIRGIN*, there is a balance between assimilating Latinx culture and the use of stereotypes which gives the series a more accurate representation of its characters. Saavedra's research will be useful to grasp a better understanding of the case's cultural value within media, specifically, what he considers relevant in his section of "the generic dimensions of the telenovela"<sup>40</sup>. His analysis includes textual examples of specific

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<sup>39</sup> Andrew Horton and Stuart Y. McDougal, *Play It Again, Sam: Retakes on Remakes*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, 16.

<sup>40</sup> Ávila Saavedra, "A Fish Out of Water," 134.

scenes in the series UGLY BETTY which convey Latinx identity through language, traditions and stereotypes. Similarly, this analysis will also look into the representation of characteristics that come with Latinx identity. By doing so, this paper will also reference aspects which are influenced by the telenovela genre, narrative and generic conventions.

First, an introduction of the characters relevant to the case study will be given. Like Saavedra, this analysis will give an observation of these characters by listing their distinctive traits. A textual analysis describes what is seen on screen, specifically scenes relevant to the argument on the representation of Latin American identities. The main focus is on the concepts of *Latinidad* and cultural identification which are present across traditions common to Latin American culture. This analysis will pay close attention to the characters of Alba and the Narrator. They both assimilate Latinx culture in their own way. The scenes with Alba will be explored chronologically from Chapter One until Chapter Ten, from the religious Catholic path she chooses to take, to her *arepas*, Alba's actions display many characteristics that define *Latinidad*. Also, the positioning that the narrator takes throughout the series will be important to include in the analysis. At times, the narrator is present as a character and other times as a spectator. This character highlights the uniqueness of JANE THE VIRGIN. Moreover, other relevant scenes with a focus on other characters that demonstrate the exploration of *Latinidad* will be addressed. This includes family traditions such as Jane's *quinceañera*, and the inclusion of famous Latin American artists. These short scenes which refer to specific aspects that some viewers may relate to from personal experience will be carefully chosen and explained as an effort to understand the way in which the series has become a great success.

The episode “Chapter Ten” of *JANE THE VIRGIN*’s first season will be analyzed in more detail for a clear overview of the concepts of representation, cultural identity, and *Latinidad*. To understand cultural representations, one must observe how characters have been portrayed throughout the series until this point. It is in Chapter Ten where the plot thickens. In this episode, the audience becomes aware that Alba has been residing in the United States illegally and is at risk of being deported by the authorities. This episode was chosen since it focuses on a common theme that remains relevant nowadays. This show addresses many topics relevant to the Latinx community who reside in the United States, which has been evident throughout the previous chapters. *JANE THE VIRGIN* displays this widespread dilemma on deportation through a more personal and realistic perspective. This is because we get to know the characters at a more personal level and consider their individual perspective on the issue. The episode exhibits multiple issues of cultural representation in Latinx identities, this scene being one of them as it represents a hopeful frame of reference.

Other than the representation of characters, this analysis will also take into consideration the atmosphere which surrounds these characters in scenes of the episode. This can be illustrated briefly by noting how aspects of the telenovela genre have been adapted such as dramatization and language which comes from the narrator of each episode. Through these different approaches, in terms of characters and their atmospheric surroundings, this textual analysis will identify how *JANE THE VIRGIN* achieves to represent aspects of Latin American culture.

## Research Analysis

### Latin American identification in Jane the Virgin

Traditions common to Latin American culture are depicted in the daily routines of the characters. In the case of JANE THE VIRGIN, they include feasts, Alba's devout Catholicism, and their choice of entertainment through telenovelas. Due to the series perspective on life, viewers may relate to some aspects of the characters.

### *The Narrator*

The Narrator in JANE THE VIRGIN introduces at the start of every episode the plot to the series.

The Narrator opens most episodes with an anecdote from Jane's childhood. This first scene gives us an introduction to the rest of the episode. He is well aware of the characters feelings and makes sure to communicate them with the audience. For example, in Chapter Two he informs the viewers of Jane's feelings. The narration below shows how he interrupts moments of emotional identification after a point of drama.

"It is important to know that right now Jane is panicking"<sup>41</sup>

"It should be noted that at this very moment all Jane wanted to do was scream NO!"<sup>42</sup>

Described under the series subtitles as "The Latin Lover Narrator", this character intervenes in any scene where the plot gains importance. With his thick Spanish accent, he is present at all times, which is evident when he makes small comments during a scene. For example, exclaiming "Ouch" when a

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<sup>41</sup> JANE THE VIRGIN, Chapter Two 10:20 NETFLIX

<sup>42</sup> JANE THE VIRGIN, Chapter Two 16:09 NETFLIX

character gets hurt.<sup>43</sup> The timing in which he comes into each episode is always convenient and takes place at the point of drama. Dramatic moments in the series are also moments of emotional identification with the characters. This is because the audience feels a greater connection to the characters and what they are going through at that moment in time. The narrator is of prime importance for the series as he explains parts of the storyline which only make sense with his help. The narrator's intervention gives us context on the character's storyline as seen in the quotation below.

“Okay, here is the story: Jane has never met her father. In fact, Xiomara herself hadn't seen Jane's father since the day she told him she was pregnant. The same day he told her to get rid of it. Until sixteen months ago...”<sup>44</sup>

Not only does the narrator translate parts of the scene to the Anglo community but also becomes part of the Latinx community through his accent and comical personality. His comments at different times of the episode relate to what is presented on-screen and appear to be sharing the feelings of the audience in relation to the characters in the scene. As he speaks, there are also labels placed on screen, this is evident in the scene of Chapter Four where Jane and Michael are planning their wedding. This can be seen in the picture below.

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<sup>43</sup> JANE THE VIRGIN, Chapter Six 10:27 NETFLIX

<sup>44</sup> JANE THE VIRGIN, Chapter One 23:45 NETFLIX



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### *Alba*

Alba Gloriana Villanueva is Jane's grandmother. She communicates only in Spanish as she moved to the United States when she was at an older age. When she is introduced, the narrator states that her passions include "God and Jane in that particular order"<sup>46</sup> The first time we see Alba, she is sitting down with her daughter and granddaughter watching the telenovela titled "The Passion of Santos". This telenovela is presented in Spanish; however, subtitles have been placed, and it revolves around a dramatic and tragic romance story. Saavedra, in his description of cultural collectiveness, refers to the use of Spanish language which also occurs in his analysis of *Ugly Betty*. He states that even though the series is also directed to an Anglo audience, there is also a reward to those who understand and relate with the Spanish language.<sup>47</sup> This is the case for when Alba communicates in Spanish to the audience.

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<sup>45</sup> JANE THE VIRGIN, Chapter Four 28:03 NETFLIX

<sup>46</sup> JANE THE VIRGIN, Chapter One 0:35 NETFLIX

<sup>47</sup> Ávila Saavedra, "A Fish Out of Water," 138.

Alba's caring personality helps her take care of her family. She cooks spicy arepas as a portion of comfort food in Chapter Three, which is a traditional Venezuelan dish common in Latinx culture. It is common for Alba's dialogue to have an affectionate tone such as "mija" and "miamor" when addressing the other women. This relates to *Latinidad* since these are two common terms of endearment which are widely used in Latin American household. Also, she references several people who have become famous for appearing in Latin American media or telenovelas. For example, when referring to Petra- who is considered to be the 'villain' of JANE THE VIRGIN, she mentions: "She should be a Catalina Creel!"; referring to the villain of the Mexican Telenovela CUNA DE LOBOS. People in the Anglo audience will miss this joke, meaning that it has been put for the Latinx audience to enjoy. However, not understanding this reference does not limit the understanding of the plot.

Moreover, it is common for Alba to follow a religious path in her everyday life. When nervous, usually from the fear of being deported, she prays the Rosary. This can be seen in Chapter Eight of the series.<sup>48</sup> The Catholic religion is very big in Latin American culture, specifically in older people. Alba's faith in God plays an important part in the series as the main plot revolves around Jane, who abstains from premarital sexual relations due to her grandmother's beliefs and promises she has taken.

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<sup>48</sup> JANE THE VIRGIN, Chapter Eight 34:15 NETFLIX



## Practices and traditions

### *Scenes of Chapter Ten*

The characters of *JANE THE VIRGIN* speak entirely in English except for Alba. When the series broadcasts on American broadcast television, subtitles are present for when her character speaks. The use of Spanish language emphasizes a significant part of Latin American identity. This could be seen in the case of Alba since her character only communicates in Spanish throughout the series. “Chapter Ten” follows a storyline where Alba risks deportation, and there is worry being shared between her daughter Xiomara and granddaughter Jane. Cultural identity becomes relevant to this storyline as the two Latinx women come together to fight for their grandmother’s reputation. *Latinidad* is evident through the use of the Spanish language by Xiomara and Jane who are, for the first time, communicating with each other in this way. Both characters have done this in the aftermath of the drama to bring emotional identification. When this episode broadcasted on American television, subtitles were placed for the audience to understand.

This is something the audience is already familiar with since subtitles are always present for Alba's character. The use of subtitles in this scene are very accurate, however, if the audience is reading instead of watching the characters expressions, it takes away the entire emotional effect that it aims to have on the audience. The use of Spanish language when trying to find a solution to Alba's situation denotes the urgency of this personal issue. Hall is one of the scholars who state that language constructs meaning and represents culture.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, the use of Spanish language is a way of representing Latinx culture and giving more personal meaning to the situation.

Catholic religion also plays a big part in the representation of Latinx culture. Alba's religious path is made known again in Chapter Ten and it is seen as Jane feels the need to pray through her grandmother's rosary in hope of her being well.<sup>50</sup> This demonstrates that this unfortunate event has turned her family into displaying more of their Venezuelan side. Characteristics of *Latinidad* can be seen in Xiomara and Jane such as the change of language and well-kept faith on God. This scene of the episode remains relevant since the way in which representations function within a culture will depend on the language and traditions that surround it. Moreover, representation can be seen in this storyline as it stays relevant for many Latin Americans who reside in the U.S. Dramatic fallacy is present throughout this episode as there is a heavy thunderstorm occurring throughout the displayed events. This has been done to create tension between the audience as the storyline unfolds. In the end, where all the problems are resolved, the storm end and everyone goes back to their normal daily routines.

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<sup>49</sup> Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage), 1.

<sup>50</sup> JANE THE VIRGIN, Chapter Ten 27:22 NETFLIX

### *Latinidad* through generic conventions

Media is able to bring cultural identities together through *Latinidad*, a framework that according to Jillian Baez is used to recognise Latinx culture through its traditions. Understanding Latinx culture comes effortlessly through the sense of *Latinidad* that media represents. This understanding has helped form a cultural collective amongst the audience.

### Common cultural traditions

Through Chapters One through Nine, there are other scenes where the exploration of *Latinidad* is evident. This can be seen in Jane's *quinceañera* that takes place in Chapter Two. This is a celebration common to Latinx culture denoting a girl's progress to womanhood. Jane wears her puffy pink dress as tradition and is accompanied by a *chambelán*. In the occasion of a *quinceañera*, a partner of the opposite sex has to be invited as it is part of the tradition. Reason for this being that from the age of fifteen, a girl first steps into adulthood. Latinx people in the audience will be able to recognise what a *quinceañera* looks like and it is evident from the way it has been presented in the series. By drawing on the concept of representation, Stuart Hall has been able to examine to what extent meaning can be produced and exchanged. In this case, meaning refers to the Latinx tradition of the *quinceañera* which is known to represent a Latin American tradition for celebratory purposes. For the Anglo audience, this is something that poses no threat to their understanding of the series. Some belonging to the Anglo audience may be aware of such celebratory traditions and may compare them to their own. For example, a *quinceañera* resembles the "sweet sixteen" parties that are celebrated in the United States and Canada for the similar coming of age purpose.

*Latinidad* is also present through the use of well-known secondary characters in the Latin American community. These small details make the Latino viewers recognize and appreciate their culture altogether. People who have lived through similar experiences may enter this closed community and form imaginary alliances.<sup>51</sup> In Chapter Nine, Mexican singer Paulina Rubio made an appearance where she tells Xiomara to not give up on her dreams of being a singer.<sup>52</sup> Most people from the Latinx audience would be able to recognize this her, however, it wouldn't make any difference in terms of understanding the plot of the scene. In the image below we can see that she introduces herself and is later made clear that she is a famous singer and songwriter in the community.



### Magical Realism

During the Narrator's interceptions on-screen, objects tend to come to life to create an emphasis on what the characters are

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<sup>51</sup> Báez, "Towards a *Latinidad Feminista*," 110.

<sup>52</sup> JANE THE VIRGIN, Chapter Nine 36:56 NETFLIX

feeling. *JANE THE VIRGIN* alludes to known Latinx traditions such as the use of *Realismo mágico*, a literary genre famous in Latin American literature and poetry. In English language literature studies this is known as magical realism. This is not a theme common in telenovelas, however, it does give the same hyperbolic effect on the series. It is clear that the series has placed such effect on the series to transform it into a more unique form of storytelling. We first see an example of magical realism in Chapter Three to reflect Jane's feelings:

Latin Lover Narrator: "and maybe it was the look in his eyes, but Jane felt compelled to touch Rafael's arm."<sup>53</sup>



After this is said, Jane's heart glows expressing Jane's inner feelings. Her heart glowing is another interpretation of her falling in love. Most of the times, these elements occur as the narrator is speaking. Therefore, the narrator is also in control of the story, as he wishes to visually demonstrate to the

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<sup>53</sup> *JANE THE VIRGIN*, Chapter Three 8:27 NETFLIX

audience. This series succeeds in clearly highlighting the character's feelings in a visually creative way.

Chapter Four shows a scene in which Rafael's character is surrounded by a halo. The halo has been placed in his head in order to highlight his angelic path as Jane previously mentioned. The use of fantasy is clear, but it demonstrates what Jane sees and makes the audience feel like a part of her. However, once Rafael tells Jane he only sees her as a friend, this angelic fantasy disappears and so does the halo from Rafael's head.

Latin Lover Narrator: "See, that's the thing about fantasies they can vanish as quickly as they appear"<sup>54</sup>



The final scene of "Chapter Six" is a good illustration of *realismo mágico*. Jane kisses Rafael for the first time and flower petals fall from the sky. The white petals belong to the

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<sup>54</sup> JANE THE VIRGIN, Chapter Four 28:44 NETFLIX

flower that was introduced in the first episode, and this scene makes reference to this symbol by slowly tearing it apart. While the romantic music plays at the end of the episode as the petals are falling, the narrator intercepts the moment.

Latin Lover Narrator: Jane knew in her heart that this was absolutely the last thing she should be doing.<sup>55</sup>



This interception not only adds to the dramatization of the series but also suggests that the Narrator is also part of the audience and the characters simultaneously. It also shares the same thoughts that are carried within members of the audience but through a more dramatic approach. Such dramatizations in *JANE THE VIRGIN* have been done for the purpose of referencing the equally dramatic telenovela *Yo Soy JUANA LA VIRGEN*.

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<sup>55</sup> *JANE THE VIRGIN*, Chapter Six 41:20 NETFLIX

## *Latinidad* through narrative conventions

### Telenovela structure adaptation

Daniel Mato states that telenovelas capture the attention to the Anglo audience due to new types of narratives and storylines. *JANE THE VIRGIN* follows specific techniques commonly seen in the telenovela genre: the highly dramatic situations that occur, the sudden revelations and the use of symbols. The use of these techniques brings the attention of the Anglo and Latinx audience. One example is at the end of “Chapter Nine” where Magda, who has also been labelled as the villain of the story, throws Alba down the hotel’s staircase. Alba’s long fall down the stairs is portrayed dramatically with the use of tension music and slow-motion capture. The episode ends with Magda smiling at the camera, reminding us she is the villain of the story.

Latin Lover Narrator: I told you that drama was just getting started.

The narrator’s reference to this scene presents irony. The audience, rather than fully encapsulating the drama, distance themselves from it. The sarcastic tone of the narrator creates a comical reaction towards the events on screen. This is what makes *JANE THE VIRGIN* differ from the highly grammatic drama that takes place in telenovelas. The image below shows the final scene of “Chapter Nine”.



The next episode, “Chapter Ten”, takes place in the midst of a hurricane, Michael and Jane, after recently ending their engagement, are stuck in an elevator. There is tension present, not only between both characters but also in the climate surrounding them. The natural disaster of the hurricane reflects the human disaster that is about to come. However, the narrator speaks in his comical tone to cut the tension of the scene.

Narrator: That my dear, is the classic telenovela trope known as ‘stuck in the elevator’ scenario. In which two characters at odds are... stuck in an elevator.<sup>56</sup>

This chapter ends with the revelation that Rafael’s father is a serial killer, and we see Rafael’s scared face at the point of realization. This is common in telenovelas, where the most dramatic point of the episode is given at the end in an attempt to keep the audience invested into watching the next episode.

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<sup>56</sup> JANE THE VIRGIN, Chapter Ten 20:39 NETFLIX

## Conclusion

The main goal of this textual analysis was to determine how the series *JANE THE VIRGIN* represented Latin American culture and identification through its generic and narrative conventions. These conventions are all characteristics of *Latinidad* as defined by Jillian Baez. Before, characters of Latinx background were likely to carry negative connotations through media, holding some implications within the audience as they made generalizations regarding their looks, traditions and social class.<sup>57</sup> Such was concluded in the research analysis by Mastro and Behm-Morawitz in 2002. However, *JANE THE VIRGIN* is a more contemporary series first airing in 2014 and portrays its characters realistically and optimistically. The reason for this being that the audience is able to relate their personal experiences with the characters on screen. For example, all characters may struggle from time to time, but they never give up on their dreams. In the end, everyone achieves what they have long awaited and the journey becomes worth exploring. In comparison to the past years, contemporary media are able to bring together audiences of different backgrounds. *JANE THE VIRGIN* through its representation of *Latinidad*, customs and traditions is able to bring a cultural collective. Furthermore, due to its Americanized adaptation, it is also able to unite people from other parts of the world.

Mastro and Behm Morawitz argue that one's understanding of the world comes from the interpretations they make throughout their lifetime. Latinx audience will be able to recognise the traditions that media presents of them. However, this may not be the case with an international audience as they may not have had the chance to explore Latin American

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<sup>57</sup> Mastro and Behm Morawitz, "Latino Representation on Primetime Television," 110.

traditions through their lifetime. *JANE THE VIRGIN* gives the chance for everyone to explore *Latinidad* as the series presents an assimilation of the culture. The series also creates social discourse within the audience, as it has been suggested by Hall, Saavedra, and Aguilar.<sup>58</sup> Discourse can bring together Latinx identity within the Latinx audience, and a cultural collective to the international audience. *JANE THE VIRGIN* demonstrates how Latinx representation can be done for the purpose of bringing together its audiences regardless of their backgrounds. The series has managed to capture the attention of many due to its unique dramatic storyline and close ties with its telenovela adaptation. Its main focus is not on commercial profit as it had been argued by Arlene Davila and Daniel Mato, but rather on bringing together an audience.<sup>59</sup>

Generalizing these results may carry some limitations as it is unknown if the creators of *JANE THE VIRGIN* created the series with a specific purpose. Unfortunately, this analysis did not include the audience's opinion or any quantitative result demonstrating the feelings of the audience towards Latinx representation on the series. Whilst this analysis did not include opinions from a third party, it offers some insight into the production of a series like *JANE THE VIRGIN*. As aforementioned, its uniqueness comes from the creative use of symbols, accurate representations, telenovela aspects and entertaining use of the magical realism.

Overall, Saavedra's analysis is proof of how a television series has the capacity to represent a culture. *JANE THE VIRGIN*, like *UGLY BETTY* display an intersection of Latinx with non-Latinx characters for the purpose to reach a wider Anglo audience. Representations are not stereotypical but rather

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<sup>58</sup> Aguilar Díaz, "Telenovelas: la ficción que se llama realidad," 175.

<sup>59</sup> Mato, "The Transnationalization of the *Telenovela Industry*," 424.

realistic and characters are not Othered at any point of the series, as other authors may argue. Because of this, the series has gained great success on American broadcast television.

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