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Portrayals of Men and Women in Latin Music

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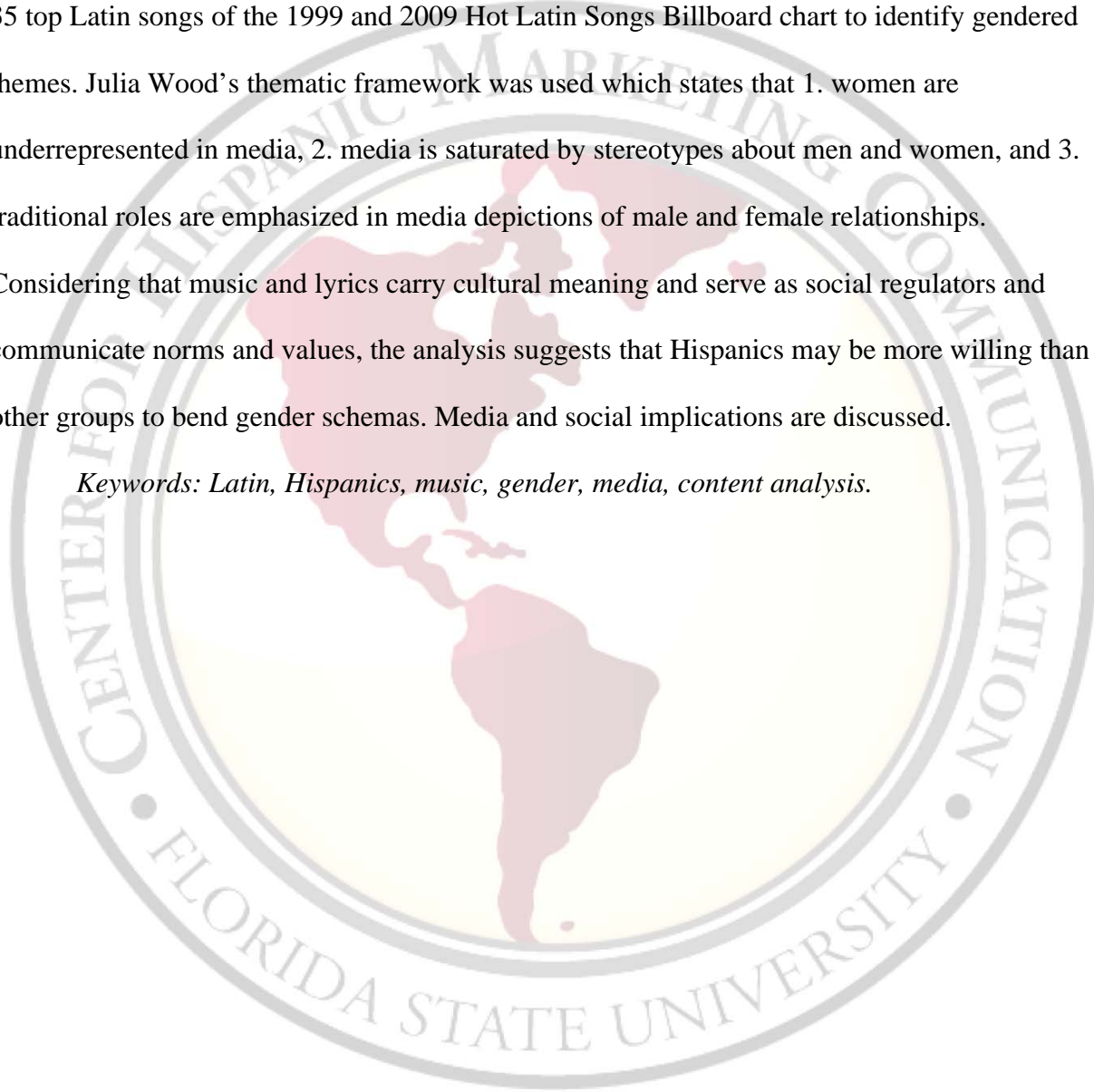
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### **Abstract**

The United States multicultural landscape motivates the need for research on minority groups and their effects on the global community. This paper explores a content analysis conducted on 35 top Latin songs of the 1999 and 2009 Hot Latin Songs Billboard chart to identify gendered themes. Julia Wood's thematic framework was used which states that 1. women are underrepresented in media, 2. media is saturated by stereotypes about men and women, and 3. traditional roles are emphasized in media depictions of male and female relationships. Considering that music and lyrics carry cultural meaning and serve as social regulators and communicate norms and values, the analysis suggests that Hispanics may be more willing than other groups to bend gender schemas. Media and social implications are discussed.

*Keywords: Latin, Hispanics, music, gender, media, content analysis.*



## Portrayals of Men and Women in Latin Music

Media portrays gender in both traditional and non-traditional ways (Wood, 2005). Music, and more importantly, lyrics, can function as social mirrors providing the listener with a description of the world they live in and an aide to the construction of their social identity (Seitz, Songs, identity, and women's liberation in Nicaragua, 1991). It is an important aspect of people's lives and its uses are multiple. Music influences our formative years and has an impact on our sexual development (Aparicio, 1994). It can be recreational, educational, social, emotional, therapeutic, and/or spiritual (Hays, Bright, & Minichiello, 2002).

Hispanics in the U.S. became the largest minority group in 2003 (de Vries, 2003). In 2011, according to the U.S. Census, Hispanics were responsible for over 50% of the country's growth over the past ten years (Reddy, 2011). This change in the demographic landscape of the United States precedes the need for research on minority groups since they will inadvertently affect global community. Therefore, exploring how gender is portrayed in Latin music is important not only to Hispanics but to the understanding gendered media and its global implications.

### Music, the Influencer

Music carries meaning in its storylines. As listeners, consumers cannot help to pick up life lessons on gender representation, gendered relationships, and gender stereotypes. Much research has been dedicated to understanding how music influences consumers. Early on, research found that music provided means of self-expression and that the vocabulary or images learned fed gender stereotypes (Reisman, 1950). Most recently studies have concentrated on the effect of sexual messages in music across various genres and have found a positive correlation between degrading sexual messages and early sexual experiences (Martino et al., 2006; Primack

et al., 2009). Other studies have found that people use music psychologically in both rational and emotional ways to regulate moods or enhance learning (Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2007; Saarikallio & Erkkilä, 2007). Music has also been found to affect us physically (Grewe et al., 2007). In addition, teens have been found to use music to create their identity, acquire skills, and interact with others (Campbell, Connell, & Beegle, 2007). Several researchers have found that although consumers tend to believe that media does not affect them, media affects our upbringing, identity, and relationships with others (Wood, 2005).

### Analysing Music

Freudiger & Almgvist (1978) proposed that lyrics can serve as socializing agents and propagate gender stereotypes and therefore lyrics are of interest in the study of gender issues. Since the late 50s research involving lyrical analysis has been very prolific. Early efforts to study lyrics are credited to researchers finding the meaning of love (Peatman, 1942-43) and exploring gender relationships (Horton, 1957). Carey (1969) found that differences in the orientation towards courtship in lyrics from 1955 and 1966 and Scodel (1961) found an increase in love imagery in lyrics from 1925-1931 compared to 1949-1955. Cole (1971) discovered that love-sex was the predominant theme in lyrics between 1965-1969, which translated into a 12% increase since 1960-1964. Lyrics of popular songs in 1946, 1956, 1966, and 1976 showed that stereotypical images of gender can change overtime (Cooper V. , 1985). Wilkinson (1976) found that lyrics most commonly confirmed gender stereotypes although some contradicted them. He argued that challenging gender stereotypes give men an excuse to be emotional and allow women to release repressed needs and desires (Wilkinson, 1976).

On analysing music, some researchers caution about relying too much on the lyrics alone to assess their impact (Denzin, 1970) and that the selection of songs must also be considered when embarking in this kind of study (Cooper B. , 1999).

Contemporary studies have found that lyrics continue to propagate gender stereotypes. In rap music, Suazo (1995) found that songs shared misogynist, drug-related, and violent themes. However, Suazo (1995) suggest that although negative messages may permeate lyrics, they may be in response to the need for social change and to challenge the status quo. An analysis of the 100 most popular songs between 1958 and 1998 found an increase in female and African American artists during the 1990s and a decrease in references to love in songs during the same time period (Dukes et al., 2003). Moreover, Dukes and colleagues (2003) found female artists singing about finding a spouse at a young age; and both male and female artists sang about starting careers and families later. Dukes and colleagues (2003) also found that the highest number of sexual references appeared between the 60s and 70s, at the height of the sexual revolution. This supports the idea that media messages are influenced by the cultural landscape as much as they act as influencers which supports our efforts to study not only lyrics as carriers of gender meaning but cultural meaning as well.

#### US Hispanics and Music

For Hispanics, music is central to their well being; “given the opportunity, Hispanics will play music or listen to the radio nonstop,” (Soto, 2006, p. 17). Although there is a good amount of research approaching the content analysis of lyrics, there is lack in the examination of lyrics in relation to gender issues of inequality, gender roles, and gendered relationships (Bretthauer, Zimmerman, & Banning, 2006). Furthermore, very little research was found on the study of Latin songs. This is surprising considering that almost a decade ago Hispanics surpassed African



Americans and became the largest minority group in the US (de Vries, 2003). Moreover, Hispanics in the United States, like other minority groups, are in constant interaction with mainstream culture influencing and being influenced by different cultural worldviews. One such influence can be seen in the number of Latin American artists that have successfully crossed over into mainstream such as Puerto Rican artist Ricky Martin and Colombian musician Shakira. Additionally, mainstream artists have also ventured into Spanish-language media such as Beyonce, Alicia Keys, Christina Aguilera, and Nelly Furtado to name a few. Perhaps the best example of English-Spanish crossover is Pitbull, Cuban-American rapper who has successfully maintained his music career in both sides of the cultural lines.

Hispanics' love for music is such that in 2004 there were over 650 Spanish-language radio stations in the United States (Soto, 2006). Music, as other forms of media, propagates images of beauty, and can dramatically affect young Latinas in the US (Molinary, 2007). Research on understanding the roles of music in Hispanics' upbringing suggests that through music and songs consumers learn values and norms (Seitz, 1991) and that "popular music is an important cultural vehicle for defining gender" (Aparicio, 1994, p. 660).

The term *machismo* commonly comes to mind when thinking about gender and Hispanics. The traditional view states that the Hispanic man does not cry, is not bothered by female issues, and is emotionally 'checked-out' (Korzenny & Korzenny, 2011). However, opposite to the idea of machismo is the concept of *marianismo*, which is much less known. Marianismo, a term coined by Evelyn Stevens (1973) promotes the historical development of the view of women as a spiritual being, teaching that women "are semi-divine, morally superior to and spiritually stronger than men (p. 315). It is important to keep in mind these concepts as lyrics are analyzed. In any case, it is important to note that contrary to popular belief, Hispanics may be

more androgynous than their non-Hispanic counterparts. That is, that Hispanics tend to show both feminine and masculine traits (Korzenny & Korzenny, 2011).

Other variable to take into account is genre. Research suggest that different genres portray gender differently (Freudiger & Almgvist, 1978). In the current study, gender representation, portrayals of men and women, and potrayals of gendered relationships in Latin songs of different genres are examined over time. It is therefore important to understand the different genres in Latin music that are present in this study and the common themes that each genre conveys.

#### *Latin Music Genres*

Latin Pop has been the most popular form of Latin music in the United States since the 80s, but it received most recognition during the 90s with artists like Ricky Martin, Gloria Estefan, and Jennifer Lopez leading the way to bicultural stardom (Allmusic.com, 2010). Among the 35 songs analyzed in this study, 20 (57%) were Latin pop songs. Most Latin pop songs may cover many themes but it is predominantly romantic in nature as it usually expresses personal needs and wants. The three songs dropped in this analysis all fell under the Latin pop genre and took on the topics of love, music, and dance with no reference to gender or gender relationships.

The remaining 15 songs were equally distributed among the remaining genres. However, one must note, that all reggaeton songs made the chart in 2009 since the genre did not gain notoriety until 2004. Reggaeton is a hybrid genre commonly mixing Caribbean and African beats with Hip Hop and Electronica; it also incorporates rapping in Spanish or English (Salsacentral.co.uk). Reggaeton can be perceived as Hip Hop's cousin and as Hip Hop it has also been criticized for using crude language, being sexist and promoting violence (Rivera, Marshall, & Hernandez, 2009). Tropical music is an all-encompassing term referring to salsa, merengue,

bachata, vallenato, and cumbia. These subgenres fall into the category of dance music typical in Latin America (Cobo, 2002). Finally, ranchera refers to a specific type of song native of Mexico traditionally about love, patriotism and nature (Ilich).

## Methods

The 1999 and 2009 Hot Latin Songs charts by Billboard were used to select the top nationally ranked Latin songs. Nielsen electronically monitors radio stations to provide data for the Billboard charts (Nielsen, 2009). Some charts are based on the airtime each song received in a given week. The Hot Latin Songs chart, however, is based on audience impressions (Billboard, 2010) which is a measure of how large an audience a song may reach. However, the potential reach is monitored by information recorded by Arbitron to determine an estimated number of audience impressions (Billboard, 2010). Therefore, the time the song was played as well as the size of the station's audience will influence the chart. Billboard has a long standing reputation about providing the public with information on the popularity of music and therefore was selected as an adequate source for this study.

A total of 19 Latin songs made the chart in 1999 and again in 2009. Out of the thirty-eight songs, three made no reference to gender and therefore were dropped. Overall, 18 songs from 1999 and 17 songs from 2009 were analyzed (see Table A1). The author, a Venezuelan native proficient in both English and Spanish, listened to each song, examined the lyrics line by line, and identified all references to male and female behavior as well as images of relationships between men and women as defined by Julia Wood in *Gendered Lives* (2005). Lyrics were downloaded from eLyrics.net, a site committed to providing consumer edited lyrics for non-commercial and educational use (eLyrics.net).



Wood (2005) states that three gender themes dominate media: women are underrepresented, men and women portrayals support gender stereotypes, and relationships between men and women underline traditional gender roles and gender inequality. Following Wood's expertise, each song was analyzed and assessed to determine if any of the themes were supported. The influence of demographics was also examined, including genre (Latin pop, tropical, ranchera, and reggaeton) and the artist/group gender. Finally, 1999 and 2009 songs were compared in search of changes in themes and gender representation.

## Findings

### *Underrepresentation of Women*

Julia Wood (2005) states that "media consistently underrepresent women" (p. 234). That is also true in Latin music; male artists dominate the airwaves. Descriptive statistics showed male dominance with no difference between 1999 and 2009 (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Gender Composition**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1999	One Male	13	72.2	72.2	72.2
	Two + Males	1	5.6	5.6	77.8
	One Female	3	16.7	16.7	94.4
	Mixed	1	5.6	5.6	100.0
	Total	18	100.0	100.0	
2009	One Male	6	35.3	35.3	35.3
	Two + Males	7	41.2	41.2	76.5
	One Female	4	23.5	23.5	100.0
	Total	17	100.0	100.0	

### *Portrayals of Men and Women*

Wood (2005) states that media usually portrays men as active, powerful, sexually aggressive, and emotionally unattached. Although some of those images were identified in Latin songs, most did not conform.

Although the typical image of a male Hispanic is tough and unemotional, their music is found to be filled with emotional outcries about lost loves (Korzenny & Korzenny, 2011). Similarly, the female Hispanic is considered overly emotional while at the same time she is seen as ruling the house and ordering her spouse around (Korzenny & Korzenny, 2011). Most songs portrayed men having strong perseverance for what they wanted. In most cases, men spoke about finding the right woman and never letting her go and needing women to make sense of the world. There were also references to men's power coming from women. Counterintuitively, images of women as submissive were more common among female artists while men were more likely to empower women in their lyrics.

*...Without you my conscious is left cold and empty.*

*...without you I've realized my love that I will not be reborn.*

*Although you are also dying, you will not forgive me.*

- Dejaría Todo (I would leave everything) by Chayanne (Male; Latin Pop; 1999)

*I want you to know that you're not for me, that you're not for me*

*I always knew but did not pay attention*

- Tu no eres para mí (You're not for me) by Fanny Lu (Female, Latin Pop, 2009)

*It is you, my love, my desire to laugh*

*the goodbye, which I will not know how to say because I could never live without you*

- Tu (You) by Shakira (Female, Latin Pop, 1999)

*I court you because you really look like a small doll despite of what you are wearing and no one can deny it, and I feel powerful like no other human every time I take you by the hand.*

- Te Presumo (I court you) by Banda el Recodo (Male group; Ranchera; 2009)

The ideals present in the lyrics are mostly in agreement with Stevens (1973) ideas of machismo and marianismo and were found throughout the different genres with the exception of reggaeton. Reggaeton songs portrayed men as sexual predators or as honest providers being used by women. Women, on the other hand, were portrayed as taunting or tormenting men or as sexual conquests.

Wood (2005) notes that media tends to portray men as lazy who do not care about the home while women are portrayed as a housekeeper and caretaker. She also suggests that media is commonly presenting women as a dichotomous being: good or bad. These themes were also present in Latin songs.

*.. find a woman who loves me ... and teaches me what I have not learned from life.*

- No me doy por vencido (I will not give up) by Luis Fonsi (Male; Latin Pop; 2009)

*I will not stay by your side watching TV and listening to apologies.*

- Loba (Wolf) by Shakira (Female; Latin Pop; 2009)

*She left to New York City... she has stolen your wallet, she has taken up your skin.*

- Livin' La Vida Loca (Living the crazy life) by Ricky Martin (Male; Latin Pop; 1999)

### *Relationships between Men and Women*

Wood (2005) proposes four themes present in media in reference to gendered relationships:

- ***Women is dependent, Men is independent.***

This theme suggests that media often propagates a message of male dominance over females. This idea is present in lyrics in making woman seem like possessions that men can own. Although this theme of ownership was present in the songs, it is important to note that sexual abuse or mistreatment of women was rarely present or paired with ownership.

*I court you so that people know you're mine.*

- Te Presumo (I court you) by Banda el Recodo (Male group; Ranchera; 2009)

*And of course I feel the cold, neither your soul nor your body are mine*

*I pause the desires and the hope because you have a new owner*

- Por un Segundo (For a second) by Aventura (Male Group; Tropical; 2009)

*Princess smile please priestess, you are my queen, my everything, my submissive princess*

*She irons my shirt so I can accompany her to Mass*

- Gracias a Ti (Thanks to you) by Winsin & Yandel Ft. Enrique Iglesias (Male Group; Reggaeton; 2009)

- ***Women as powerless, Men as powerful.***

Wood (2005) proposes that media usually portrays men as having all the authority while women obey because they could not do on their own. This idea of power gives men the right to control others since they are presented as sole providers. Bretthauer, Zimmerman, & Banning (2006) in their analysis of 120 songs found four subthemes regarding power: boss/subordinate, power through possessions, men owning women, and women as conquests. The idea of ownership has been discussed previously, however the remaining themes were also found in Latin music, mostly in reggaeton lyrics.

*You are tempting me, I've been watching for a while*

*... The shark that is going to eat the mermaid has arrived (pum pum)*

- Me Estas Tentando (You're tempting me) by DJ Nesty feat. Winsin & Yandel  
(Male group; Reggaeton; 2009)

*People in the neighborhood are saying that you're using me*

*You never needed anything when you were here but now you want to go*

- Dime si e vas con el (Tell me if you're leaving with him) by Flex (Male; Reggaeton; 2009)

*You want to rule my heart, my silence, and my breath*

*You think that I won't be able to live without you, not even in my dreams*

- Causa y Efecto (Cause and Effect) by Paulina Rubio (Female; Latin Pop; 2009)

*I have no weapons to confront you; I put my hands, hands in the air*

*And you tell me to shut up, telling me that you have to control*

- Manos al Aire (Hands in the Air) by Nelly Furtado (Female; Latin Pop; 2009)

- ***Women as caretakers, Men as breadwinners.***

Traditional gender roles dictate that in a family, mom takes care of the kids and dad brings home the bacon. Wood (2005) argues that this gender arrangement has been fed to the masses non-stop. This theme is present in lyrics communicating the idea that men complete women and that it is the role of women to care of others.

*I felt cold and you gave me cover; I have fallen and you lifted me up*

- Gracias a Ti (Thanks to you) by Winsin & Yandel Ft. Enrique Iglesias  
(Male Group; Reggaeton; 2009)



This traditional gender roles was mostly challenged in the 35 songs analyzed. There were many mentions about men needing women more so than women needing men as well as an effort to spread the idea of monogamy (mostly among the 1999 lyrics).

*I like you from head to toe; it's clear as water that I need you*

- Me Gusta Todo de Ti (I like everything about you) by Banda el Recodo  
(Male Group; Ranchera; 2009)

*Girl, I want to tell you I am only interested in you*

- Mi PC (My PC) by Juan Luis Guerra (Male; Tropical; 1999)

*There is only one, there is only one; or you, or no one*

- O tu o ninguna (Or You, Or No-one) by Luis Miguel (Male; Latin Pop; 1999)

*I would like to know why can't believe me if I am a one woman man*

- Te Amo (I Love You) by Makano (Male; Reggaeton; 2009)

▪ ***Women as victims and sex objects, Men as aggressors.***

Finally, Wood (2005) proposes that media continue disseminating the objectification of women and aggression as a normal male attribute. The idea of women as objects is stressed with reducing women to their physical attributes while men are reduced to their sexual needs and exaggerated use of force. Images of women as victims were not found in the songs analyzed. Men as aggressors were only found in reggaeton lyrics or were mild. Women reduced to their physical attributes were present but were also mild compared to what researchers have found in other genres like hip hop, rap, or country music (Suazo, 1995; Bretthauer, Zimmerman, & Banning, 2006)

*She's got mileage, she is looking that I give it to her (sexual innuendo)*

- Abusadora (Abusive) by Winsin & Yandel (Male Group; Reggaeton; 2009)

*Crazy because... in the evenings when your skirt drops I divest you of everything else*

- Loco (Crazy) by Alejandro Fernandez (Male; Latin Pop; 1999)



*From now on I will stop loving you I will be as I was before you used my body*  
- De Hoy en Adelante (From now on) by Millie (Female; Latin Pop; 1999)

*If I could caress your skin, your whole body I want to know*  
- Dimelo (Tell me) by Marc Anthony (Male; Tropical; 1999)

Overall, Latin songs were found to support more than to challenge gender stereotypes. Anecdotal information supports that there are many female and male artists creating music that challenges the status quo. However, female artists still find it hard to be ranked at the Billboard level. This does not mean that music from other artists is not popular or that their messages are not getting through. In the meantime, identifying the messages that are highly ranked is a step in the right direction.

### **Discussion & Implications**

This study sets off to identify gender themes in popular Latin music. Although many of the stereotypes and messages of gender inequality are present, messages that challenge stereotypes and traditional gender schemas were also found. Korzenny & Korzenny (2011) argue that listening to music provides a rich source of cultural information and can help scholars identify social norms and values. Knowing which messages will resonate with people can aid in a variety of fields from marketing (Korzenny & Korzenny, 2011), to cognitive therapy (Bretthauer, Zimmerman, & Banning, 2006). In sum, lyrics is a non-invasive way to learn about people and to identify trends in society.

Young Hispanic girls need good role models to inspire them and from whom to learn (Molinary, 2007). Female artists need more support in order to break the cultural barriers. The underrepresentation of women in media affects the girls [and boys] that are growing up consuming it. Molinary (2007) suggests, in *Hijas Americanas* that the concept of being Latina in

America needs to be better understood, more complex, and expanded. A bit beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note the need for more women in media.

The change in women empowerment in Latin lyrics is important to mention. In 1999, there was only one song that openly empowered women while in 2009 four songs empowered women, three by female artists. Although one would expect more a decade into the turn of the century, it is proof of progress and we can feel hopeful that other media outlets are also choosing to challenge gender schemas. Wood (2005) suggests “the future is open. You and others in your generation will decide what it is,” (p. 293). It seems that this generation is choosing to call for change. At least this data provides some support to that direction.

#### *In reggaeton's defense*

From this study, reggaeton seems to be positioned as the black sheep in the family of Latin music. It is important to point out that of the five reggaeton songs that made it to this study, three were by the same artists (Winsin & Yandel) and we must be very cautious of any generalizations. Moreover, although there are a number of female reggaeton artists, they have not received the necessary support to make their way to the Billboard chart so we cannot assume that all reggaeton artists are the same or sing about the same topics.

#### **Conclusions & Future Research**

Whether or not songwriters are aware of their writing or listeners aware of the messages in media, music serves as a tool that can aid self-concept, teach norms and behaviors, and make us question what we think we know. With so much power, it is important to continue to monitor media trends and media gender representations.

Further research could expand on analyzing songs from each genre and expanding the sample pool. For instance, no female artists in ranchera or reggaeton music made the chart and

therefore we cannot assess if difference in gender means difference in treatment. Moreover, only one tropical song was by a female artist; however she featured a male artist (Jennifer Lopez and Marc Anthony's *No me Ames*). In addition, as stated by Denzin (1970), Aparicio (1994) and Cooper (1999), more interesting than researchers interpreting lyrics is having consumers talk about how they experience music, understand and share meaning, and internalize new content. Studying lyrics within the context of culture by bringing the listener into the study may provide invaluable insights into the role of music in gender construction.

Considering that Hispanics are the largest minority in the U.S. and that they are responsible for a large proportion of U.S. population growth (Reddy, 2011) researchers should turn to exploring the effects Hispanic culture has on the mainstream. American culture has always been seen as the top influencer of minority groups. The shift in demographic trends should be a focus of research in understanding changes in today's global community.

### **Limitations**

There are a series of limitations that must be addressed. The first limitation is the inability of one researcher to avoid bias and misunderstanding of content. Although the author's proficiency in both languages is high, it is possible for other researcher to find different messages than the ones presented in this study.

As reliable as one would like the Billboard to be, it is important to note that other songs may be listened to more or have larger impact on the consumer. Limitations inherent to the sample should be noted.

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## Appendix

***Table A1. Song List***

Year	Song Title	Genre	Artist/Group Gender
2009	No me doy por vencido	Latin Pop	One Male Artist
	Por un Segundo	Tropical	Two/More Male Artists
	El Ultimo Beso	Ranchera	One Male Artist
	Te Presumo	Ranchera	Two/More Male Artists
	Me Estas Tentando	Reggaeton	Two/More Male Artists
	Dime si te vas con el	Reggaeton	One Male Artist
	Tu no eres para mi	Latin Pop	One Female Artist
	Te Amo	Reggaeton	One Male Artist
	Aqui estoy Yo	Latin Pop	Two/More Male Artists
	Causa y Efecto	Latin Pop	One Female Artist <sup>0</sup>
	Abusadora	Reggaeton	Two/More Male Artists
	Lo Intentamos	Ranchera	One Male Artist
	Loba	Latin Pop	One Female Artist
	Manos al Aire	Latin Pop	One Female Artist
	Esclavo de Sus Besos	Latin Pop	One Male Artist
	Gracias a Ti	Reggaeton	Two/More Male Artists
	Me Gusta Todo de Ti	Ranchera	Two/More Male Artists
1999	Dejaria Todo	Latin Pop	One Male Artist
	Mi PC	Tropical	One Male Artist
	Ese	Tropical	One Male Artist
	Tu	Latin Pop	One Female Artist
	Nunca te olvidare	Latin Pop	One Male Artist
	Si Te Pudiera Mentir	Latin Pop	One Male Artist
	Palomita Blanca	Tropical	One Male Artist
	No Puedo Olvidar	Latin Pop	Two/More Male Artists
	Livin la Vida Loca	Latin Pop	One Male Artist
	No Me Ames	Latin Pop	Female as primary with Male feat.
	Loco	Ranchera	One Male Artist
	De Hoy and Adelante	Latin Pop	One Female Artist
	Bella	Latin Pop	One Male Artist
	Dimelo	Latin Pop	One Male Artist
	O Tu o Ninguna	Latin Pop	One Male Artist
	Llegar a Ti	Latin Pop	One Female Artist
	Escuchame	Latin Pop	One Male Artist
	Ritmo Total	Latin Pop	One Male Artist
	Dejaria Todo	Latin Pop	One Male Artist

