



Hispanic, Latino, and Latin-America

Best practice guidelines

Definitions

'**Latin America**' describes the regions in the Americas colonised by countries whose language stem from Latin (i.e. Spanish, French, Portuguese and Italian). **Latin-Americans** are any individuals who were born in, or whose heritage derives from, these Latin American countries. (Note: Some Latin-American countries are in North America. Latin America is not a synonym for South America.)

Latino, **Latina**, and **Latinx** are all derived from the Spanish word *latinoamericano* and the Portuguese *latino-americano*, both of which translate to Latin-American. The alternative spellings are related to the 'gendered' spellings of Romance languages.

- Latino is a male-gendered word. It is considered an umbrella term for all genders, similar to other male-gendered Spanish words.
- Latina is a female-gendered word. It can only be used to refer to a woman or groups of women from Latin America.
- Latinx is a more recently developed umbrella term designed to be a gender neutral alternative to Latino.

'**Hispanic**' refers to countries where Spanish is spoken and/or to descendants from Spain. This means somebody from the Portuguese-speaking Brazil may be Latin-American but not Hispanic, while a **Spaniard** (from Spain) may be Hispanic but not Latin-American. To further clarify, Lusophone describes a Portuguese speaker, Francophone is a French Speaker, Italoophone is an Italian-speaker, Iberophone is a speaker of language stemming from the Iberian peninsula (Spain and Portugal), such as Spanish, Portuguese, Catalan, Galician, Vasque, etc.

Latinx controversy

Despite growing popularity of 'Latinx' in news outlets, corporate documents, academic papers, and government websites, the term is not widespread within the Latin-American community. Only 23% of adults from the US who self-identify as Hispanic or Latino have heard of 'Latinx', and only 3% use it to describe themselves (Noe-Bustamante, Mora, & Lopez 2020).



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Latinx is more largely used by younger generations and immigrants in English speaking countries—mainly the US. However, the term has also been rejected by older generations for a number of reasons. Primarily, there is the belief that the term is Americanised and the ‘x’ erases tradition, heritage, and the language that Latino/Latina are derived from.

Latinx is sometimes used by people who are explicitly seeking to include the queer community and people outside the gender binary. However, there is the belief in most Latinx countries that a need for ‘gender-neutral’ terms is unnecessary and a ‘fad’ not supported in Spanish. Politically correct older generations in Latin-American countries, such as Mexico, may address people by using both genders, even when this is grammatically unnecessary (e.g. “Mexicanos y mexicanas” as in “Mexican (males) and Mexican (females)”).

Latino vs. Hispanic

‘Latino’ refers to a person’s cultural heritage while ‘Hispanic’ groups countries based on the language they speak. Both terms were terms created in the US to group the immigrants and their descendents who come from Latin America, and as such people have varied relationships with the terms.

Many of the people who refer to themselves as Latino and/or Hispanic are immigrants, rather than people in their home countries. However, people in Latin America may refer to themselves as Latino and/or Hispanic, especially when they are talking about the commonalities between nationalities (such as a fiery temperament, touch-based communication, irreverent culture, codified social hierarchies, spicy foods, etc.).

Latin-Americans often prefer to refer to their country of origin rather than using Latino or Hispanic labels for themselves. For example, someone from Brazil would most likely identify as Brazilian, Venezuelan from Venezuela, and so on. Each country in Latin-America is distinctively different culturally, so referring to a country specifically can be more meaningful.

It is also worth noting that political discourse has demonised labels like Latino, Hispanic, and Mexican in the United States, leading to people from these regions steering away from using those labels to refer to themselves.

Interestingly, ‘Latino’ as a label has been adopted by some people in Spain, Portugal, France, and Italy. Due to the Latin root that unites these cultures and people from Latin-America, these Europeans consider themselves part of the Romance continuum and have no qualms relating as such with Latin-Americans.

v.1.0 | Updated June 2021

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It's for this reason that a distinction can be made between **Latinos** (people with Latin heritage), **Latin-Americans** (people with Latin-American heritage), and **Romance Cultures** (cultures stemming from European countries that speak Romance languages).

Other terms

There are many other terms used to describe people from Latin-America or specific Latin-American countries.

'**Chicano/a/x**' is a term used only for people descended from Mexico who live in the United States.

'**Pocho/a/x**' is a term that was historically used to describe Mexican-Americans who were disconnected from either culture and heritage. Although pocho has been reclaimed by some groups, it is still considered derogatory and should not be used by non-Mexican people.

'**Cholo/a/x**' is another term with a derogatory history, referring to people of indigenous or partly-indigenous Latin-American heritage. The term has been reclaimed by some groups, specifically referring to a subculture originating in Los Angeles. Older members of the same subculture are sometimes referred to as '**veterano/a/x**'.

'**Spic**' is a derogatory and racist word used against Latinx and Hispanic people. This term should not be used.

'**Dreamers**' are individuals protected under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which is a federal program in the United States that ran from 2012 to 2017. The DACA allowed people who were brought to the United States illegally as children the temporary right to live, study, and work in the US. To apply, a person had to be younger than 31 on 15 June 2012, 'undocumented', lacking legal immigration status, living in the US continuously since June 2007, and younger than 16 when they first arrived. Before the program was rescinded, 787,580 individuals had been granted approval under the DACA, meaning they became eligible to apply for basic federal privileges like driver's licence, college enrolment, or a work permit.

Latin-America and ethnicities

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As in all countries, there are a variety of ethnicities within Latin-American countries, as well as people whose heritage is a mix of these ethnicities. These ethnicities and heritages were divided into castes in post-colonial Latin America, with people of Spanish heritage considered to be of a higher social class than people who had indigenous or Black heritage.

Although the caste system no longer officially applies in any Latin-American countries, the social impacts of this system still impact the region. Studies have found an ongoing link between skin colour and markers of privilege like college education and professional careers (Villarreal 2010).

Although people of European heritage within Latin-America may be considered white, this is complicated by the United States' conception that Latino or Hispanic are ethnicities, with some government documentation listing one or both as racial options for respondents. This same documentation can sometimes restrict people from responding with multiple races, leaving people who identify as ethnically white and culturally Latino (for example) unsure how to classify themselves.

The concept of 'whiteness' is a social construct related more to social acceptance than ethnicity or heritage. In 1790, the United States was only accepting 'free white persons' as citizens, which led to debates regarding who was considered 'white' and who was not. For example, Italians were considered non-white at that time but are now generally viewed as white (Staples 2019). Although 'whiteness' is no longer an explicit prerequisite for citizenship in the United States, it is still used as a tool for denoting who should and should not be accepted in society.

Representation in media

The primary consideration that you should make when representing people from Latin America in media is that every Latin-American country is different. Although there are commonalities between regions, it is important not to conflate the cultures of multiple nationalities into one generic Latin-American character.

Media representation of Latino and Hispanic people is increasing, but is often defined by similar storylines and stereotypical depictions that should be treated mindfully or avoided entirely.

The easiest way to avoid generalisations or stereotypes is to consult with an individual from the specific nationality you are aiming to represent. It is also important to consider whether you are representing somebody who was born and lives in that region, who immigrated to another country, or who is an Nth generation immigrant, as these individuals have different experiences and relationships to their heritage.

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Stereotypes

Sexualisation

Latino and Hispanic characters are sometimes treated as exotic, mysterious, and sexy due solely to their heritage. It's not uncommon for all Latinas to be generalised as voluptuous and flawlessly beautiful.

Although these are stereotypes that should be treated mindfully, it's worth noting that some Latinos take pride (or guilty pleasure, depending on social class) in these attributes.

Drugs

While it is true that some Latin-American countries have issues with drugs, drug crime, and drug trafficking, not every Latin-American individual is connected to these issues. Drug-related crime doesn't define any entire country or their population, and is more complicated than the United States media typically presents.

However, drug crime is a serious and real problem in some Latin-American countries, with drug cartels infiltrating government and influencing policy. These issues are an important part of a larger cluster of real, blatant, transnational, and transhistoric problems.

If you are representing drugs in relation to Latin America in your work, ensure you represent the culture and issues in a realistic, authentic, and accurate manner. Do not lean on old stereotypes, but do not downplay reality either.

Illegal immigration

Stories about illegal immigration are important to share, but it is important to give Latino and Hispanic people the platform to share these stories rather than inadvertently perpetuate incorrect stereotypes. Sharing stories and conversations about immigration is vital to filter through the stigma perpetuated by some United States media sources, but this should be a dialogue that involves Latin-Americans rather than a story told on their behalf.

Writing and speaking in English

Being unable to write or speak in English is used in some media to portray a lack of intelligence, knowledge, or education, and this can perpetuate damaging stereotypes about Latin-Americans.



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It is important to consider the colonising narrative that suggests 'proper English' is a marker of intelligence and social class. English is a difficult language to learn, with varied etymologies, confusing spellings, and a multitude of phonemes.

To challenge this stereotype, represent intelligent people who have varying abilities in terms of writing or speaking English.

Mexico is only one Latin-American country

Latin-American representation often draws from Mexican culture specifically. This may be because Mexico is located in North America, along the southern border of the United States, so people in the US have greater exposure to Mexican culture than the rest of Latin America.

Although Mexican representation is important too, using Mexican heritage as a catch-all for all Latin-American representation creates misunderstandings and stereotypes. There are some commonalities between Latin-American countries, but there is also a diversity of dialects, music, food, ethics, religions, and history. Consider portraying the richness and diversity of Latin America and its many other countries from Cuba to Argentina, and everything in-between.

Resources

Britannica: What's the Difference Between Hispanic and Latino?

<https://www.britannica.com/story/whats-the-difference-between-hispanic-and-latino>

Explanation of the difference between 'Hispanic' and 'Latino' geographically and historically.

Genial: Is it Hispanic, Chicano/Chicana, Latino/Latina, or Latinx?

https://www.exploratorium.edu/sites/default/files/Genial_2017_Terms_of_Usage.pdf

Definitions of key terms such as Hispanic, Chicano/Chicana, Latino/Latina, and Latinx.

Oprah Daily: What Does "Latinx" Mean, Exactly?

<https://www.oprahmag.com/life/a28056593/latinx-meaning/>

'Latinx' definition and usage.

Splinter: Lo que queremos decir cuando usamos el término 'latinx'

<https://espanol.splinternews.com/lo-que-queremos-decir-cuando-usamos-el-termino-latinx-1794330182>

'Latinx' definition and usage.

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Time: Why 'Latinx' Is Succeeding While Other Gender-Neutral Terms Fail to Catch On

<https://time.com/5191804/latinx-definition-meaning-latino-hispanic-gender-neutral/>

'Latinx' definition and usage.

Univision: The true origin of the word 'spic', the racist insult aimed at Hispanics

<https://www.univision.com/univision-news/united-states/the-true-origin-of-the-word-spic-the-racist-insult-aimed-at-hispanics>

Origin of the insult 'spic' and how it is now being used.

References

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<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/10/12/opinion/columbus-day-italian-american-racism.html>

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