



Powered by Clickability

Painting the Face of Hispanic Market

Black Latinos in media are a rarity, as clients and agencies opt for generic 'Latino look'

June 01, 2006

By Derek Reveron

THE MAY issue of Latina magazine features something that one does not often see in Hispanic media: a black Latina on the cover. In this case, it's up-and-coming Dominican actress Zoë Saldana.

Latina makes it a point to seek out black Latinas as part of its editorial philosophy of representing all Latino colors in photos and advertisements. "We want black and white models, the Aztec-looking and indigenous, different skin tones and hair textures to represent all of our readers," says Victoria Sánchez-Lincoln, Latina's fashion director.

The strategy is a rarity in Hispanic-targeted marketing and media, where black Latinos are all but invisible. Among the reasons? The lingering effects of centuries of racism in Latin America still subtly influence skin-color preferences among Hispanics.

Marketers often prefer olive-skinned or light brown Latinos with black straight hair and Caucasian-like features because they are perceived to have the broadest appeal among Hispanics of all colors. In addition, Latinos arrive in the United States from countries where white models and actors dominate marketing and media images, and blacks traditionally have appeared as stereotyped characters.

The Center for Hispanic Marketing Communications at Florida State University in Tallahassee recently completed a study titled "Skin Color in Television Commercials Directed to Hispanics," which examined 367 television spots that AHA member agencies posted on their Web sites. The study concluded: "Individuals of black and Asian complexion are notably absent."

However, the study reported, the number of whites and Latino "browns" were about evenly represented. The study provided celebrity examples of its definitions of skin color. Whites were Caucasians, such as talk-show host Cristina Saralegui. Blacks were Latinos about the same color as baseball player Sammy Sosa. Browns resembled boxer Oscar de la Hoya. Professor Felipe Korzenny, founding director of the center, says that Eva Longoria, the Latina star of ABC's hit *Desperate Housewives*, also falls under the study's definition of brown.

Overall, 49 percent of ads in the study featured white males, 5 percent had black males, and 52 percent had brown males. Thirty-four percent had white females, 5 percent had black females, and 45 percent had brown females. Korzenny knows of no similar study for Hispanic magazines, but the percentages would likely be roughly similar, he says.

Advertising and marketing executives cite several reasons for such results.

Some marketers don't associate black skin with being Latino. "Clients think of what I call Afro-Caribbean Latinos as more African American than Latino," says Joe Zubizarreta, COO of Coral Gables, Fla.-based Zubi Advertising. He has heard stories about U.S. Latino ad shops that pitched dark-skinned Latinos for ads, with confused clients responding, "Wait a minute, that's an African American-looking person. Why would you put them in a commercial for Hispanics?"

The color caste system that the Spanish conquerors developed in Latin America centuries ago included several skin-tone categories, with black at the bottom. The informal classifications still influence Latinos worldwide today. "I know many Latinos who don't want their kids to marry black Latinos because they will have dark-skinned children who will lack economic opportunities in the future," says Suzanne Irizarry de Lopez, director of business development for Eastern Research Services in Dallas. Adds Korzenny, "It is the Latino tradition of believing that light skin and being blonde are the standards of beauty and sophistication." Latinos, including some in advertising and marketing, also may unconsciously associate white skin with higher credibility and status, he says.

But advertising executives say they choose the best talent for the job, and that entails selecting the Latino "look" that best represents the targeted market. Jaime Gonzalez Mir, general manager of Dieste Harmel & Partners' New York office, says the brown look, which he calls "Mediterranean," works best with the overall U.S. Hispanic market. "When you talk about a mass appeal brand on national television, you need to pick the most multicultural look, especially for Spanish-language television, because you don't want to alienate one Latino nationality and speak to as many as possible," says Gonzalez Mir.

Zubizarreta agrees. "A Mexican mestizo look might not work in Miami, and a dark-skinned Dominican might look out of place in

a Los Angeles spot," he says. "It's a matter of staying as generic as possible so that skin color does not become the focal point of the message you're trying to give."

Latinos who come to the U.S. are accustomed to seeing whites dominate advertisements in their home countries. "Latin American cultures are racist cultures where European types are seen as superior. Those images are perpetrated in the Spanish media by those who come to this country," says Hombro magazine publisher Francisco Romeo. Korzenny cites Mexico as an example. "Ads look practically like those in Scandinavia. It's common to have European-looking models that don't represent the predominately mestizo population."

Edward Rincón, president of Dallas research firm Rincón & Associates, once asked a creative executive for an agency in Mexico why ads in the country feature so many blonde actors. The executive explained that the ads appeal to many Mexicans who aspire to live a middle-class lifestyle that they associate with being white, Rincón says.

Latin Americans in the U.S. come from cultures that have a tradition of portraying blacks as stereotyped caricatures. Exaggerated portrayals of blacks have appeared on Latin American product labels for decades. For example, the Negrita brand of purple corn pudding, known in Peru as mazamorra, features a rendering of a black woman with big red lips and a red rag tied on her head. The Copacabana brand of instant chocolate sold in Santiago, Chile, also depicts a black woman with huge red lips and bulging eyes carrying a basket of cocoa leaves on her head.

So how should U.S. marketers handle the color issue? "Realize that the color bias is still with us, and as marketers recognize it in our decision making," Korzenny says. "We need for the people we serve to feel good about themselves by representing them."

Links referenced within this article

Find this article at:

http://www.marketingymedios.com/marketingymedios/magazine/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1002576754

Uncheck the box to remove the list of links referenced in the article.

© 2007 VNU eMedia Inc. All rights reserved.