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Latinx vs. Latine: How Culture Influences Identity Language

Language is deeply tied to culture and identity. It shapes how individuals see themselves and how they relate to others. Within the Latin American community, the search for a collective and inclusive identity has led to an evolving use of terms that began with Hispanic, brought up Latino and latina as alternatives, and more recently expanded to Latinx and Latine. Each term has emerged with the hope of representing a broader and diverse community; yet each has also sparked debate, rejection, or redefinition. The rise of Latinx was rooted in progressive movements, particularly feminism and LGBTQ+ advocacy, but it has been criticized for being linguistically incompatible with Spanish and culturally disconnected from much of the community it aims to represent. In response, Latine has surfaced as a more community-driven, linguistically fitting alternative. This paper explores the historical evolution of these identity terms, the cultural tensions they reveal, and why the journey to define identity within such a diverse population remains complex and ongoing.

History of Latinx

In order to understand the term Latinx one must know how and why the term came to be. It all began back in the 1970's when the United States needed to categorize the rising population of immigrants from Spanish-speaking origins/Latin America. The term they first chose was Hispanic which became one of the first pan-ethnic terms and joined questionnaires starting in 1980 (Cardemil et al. 2). Hispanic comes from the word Hispania which is what the Romans called the Iberian Peninsula. It is what Spain is now. Hispanic is used to describe a person of

Spanish-speaking origins, mainly Spain. From when the term was introduced it remained as the official term of the United States Census Bureau and all other governmental agencies for some time (Hispanic).

The people who this term was meant for didn't quite take to it. The people largely identified, and still identify, with their national or regional origins. They preferred to be called Mexicans, Cubans, and even terms such as Chicano or Chapin. There was also the fact that Hispanic was tied heavily with Spain, the country Latin America obtained its freedom from to become its own various separate countries (Cardemil et al. 2). Spain had obtained a great portion of the land in the western hemisphere during the colonization of the "New World," Central America included along with almost half of South America. Central and South America had only obtained their independence in the 19th century through wars and revolutions, it's understandable why there was and is tension around the identity of Hispanic.

With some of the people not quite taking to the term Hispanic another arose in the 1990's, Latino. Latino is another pan-ethnic term, this one referring to people of Latin American descent. The term Latino, a shortening of the word latinoamericano, became popular to the point of joining the U.S. Census Bureau in 2000 (Cardemil et al. 2). While the two terms, Latino and Hispanic, are used interchangeably by some people a key difference is the lack of being tied to Spain and Spanish. Spain is included in Hispanic but not Latino due to the geographical location while Brazilians are included in Latino but not in Hispanic due to their official and primary language being Portuguese (Hispanic). While Spain took part of South America; Brazil and a couple other parts of the neighboring land were colonized by Portugal.

At the time a portion of the people, the progressive and young, preferred the term Latino as they felt Hispanic was forced upon them. That by self identifying as Latino they were

rejecting a term that felt imposed on them by the U.S. Government that was tied to a history of imperialism. With this being the reason for preference in terminology it had been seen as a form of political activism considering Latino at the time was seen as a more progressive term (Cardemil et al. 2).

Latino did not come without its own conflicts though as the term is gendered. There is Latina and Latinas but those terms are only used when describing strictly women. Latino and Latinos are used in all other instances. When describing a group of Latin originating men it is Latinos. When describing a group of Latin originating men and women it is still Latinos. Only when it is solely describing women does the term Latinas find use (Cardemil et al. 2). Many women had an issue with this which brought about the creation and need of Latinx which was supported with protest from feminists within the community.

Only after seeing the conflict that the term Latino brings does the need for Latinx become apparent. The use of Latinx originally came from the feminist movement to pull away from the gendered term Latino (Hispanic). It was not until well into the 2000's that the LGBTQ+ community adopted the term. There was no precise start to take note of when the term Latinx began being used with its connection to the LGBTQ+ community but since it was adopted it has become a term for nonbinary people of Latin origin and has remained a term to refer to a group of men, women, and non-binary individuals with Latin Origins (Alfonseca et al.).

Issues Against Latinx

Just as with every past term for the community, Latinx is not free of its own issue from people within the community. For many, it felt similar to how Hispanic was thrust upon the people, coming from an outside source and tying the people to something they don't relate to.

While the term Latinx is believed to come from select people within the community it eventually was chosen to be pushed onto the rest of the community by people in elite spaces (Salinas).

While Latinx has risen in popularity with time, 51% of the community has not heard of it (Noe-Bustamante et al.). Then those who have heard of it rarely use it or do use it in select settings which rarely involve other primarily Spanish Speakers. Even among those who are familiar with the term, many still primarily identify with their gendered identities, such as Latino or Latina, or simply choose Hispanic, while others in the community express no strong preference at all. The word either isn't known or is rarely used by the majority within the community (Salinas). This applies within the United States, a multicultural setting, outside of the United States the word just isn't used due to the hurdles the word brings up. Within Spanish-speaking countries people simply identify with their nationality leaving no need for the panethnic terms.

The term is inclusive of non-binary people. That can't be said for those who speak the language shared within the community. The common complaint against Latinx is the way it rolls off the tongue, feeling all clunky and disconnected from the rest of Spanish (Hispanic). The letter "X" has no real way of being an ending within the Spanish language. What is problematic with Latinx is its lack of consistency when it comes to those who speak the Spanish language. Spanish is a gendered language which means that nouns, adjectives, and articles follow grammatical gender rules that have existed for centuries. The introduction of the 'X' disrupts these linguistic structures in a way that many native Spanish speakers find unnatural and difficult to include into everyday speech. For many within the community this leap from the norm in Spanish feels more like an imposition from outside forces rather than an organic evolution of the language. To the point that a less popular alternative in the U.S. has been used more frequently in other countries

among Spanish speakers. Latine, a term that has been around almost as long as Latinx has been tied to the LGBTQ+ community, has been found to appeal more with native speakers (Figueroa).

The community is deeply rooted in cultural traditions, which lean conservative. They value religion, heterosexuality, and gender roles. In 2022 it was noticed by Pew Research Center that over half of the surveyed Latinos surveyed were involved in some kind of religion, 43 percent being catholic with 21 percent being Christian and 4 percent falling under other faiths (Manuel Krogstad et al.). It's a decline from former years where far more were tied to religion. In 2010 catholics made up 67 percent of the surveyed, 17 percent were christians, and 3 percent belonged to other faiths. Catholicism is the popular religion but others are similar to it with conservative values that influenced identity, views, and interpersonal relationships. A great portion of the surveyed were raised within a religion which shapes people's views, culture, and much more.

Soon after it began being associated with the LGBTQ+ community it gained traction to where around the mid 2010's universities, media outlets, and progressive organizations began using the term Latinx more frequently (Betancur). While seemingly a positive, how can it truly be when the community it is considered for doesn't embrace or incorporate it. The adoption of the X in Latinx was seen as a challenge to the binary conventions set within the culture. Many prefer Latino, Latina, and Hispanic to the newest term considering the X has been seen as symbolic of views that counter standing beliefs (Manuel Krogstad et al.).

To introduce Latinx challenges values already established within the culture. Latinx gained a new meaning with progressive gender roles and support for the LGBTQ+ community which clashes with the conservative and religious culture of the community. Then the added difficulties of the word with Spanish speakers adds another barrier. Pew's survey results about

the awareness of Latinx supports the difficulties of the community to accept and adopt the term with older generations being less likely than younger generations to accept inclusive language (Noe-Bustamante et al.). While the intention of Latinx was to unite the community under language that acknowledged all identities it resulted in debates and in some cases it furthered the division within the community. Latinx has highlighted the disconnections within the community; between generations, between traditionalists and progressives, and between those rooted in linguistic authenticity and those pushing for greater inclusivity.

Latine and Culture

With new and alternative terms having been created whenever one appears to be problematic for the community, Latine came around soon after Latinx started gaining traction. Just as with Latinx there is no starting point to take note of for the start of Latine but it is believed that it was somewhere in the 2010's that it appeared and started being used as an alternative. Where Latinx fails the community Latine becomes the solution. If any term were to be used for all with Latin American origins it should be Latine.

Latinx just clashes with the culture in many ways, it messes with the language and doesn't fully align with other areas. A great portion of the community comes from countries within Latin America and may not grasp the ideas that go with gender neutral language due to the language barrier and because many face more immediate, pressing concerns. To even be in the space that could impose Latinx is a luxury many don't have. Latin America as a whole has gotten better about education but much of the population has quit studying within grade school, oftentimes dropping out to help their families (Aria et al). Once individuals begin working, it becomes difficult to return to education. They work for their families, the ones they are born into and start, this leaves little time for themselves to even pick up books to improve themselves let

alone getting involved in topics such as ethnic identity and inclusion. Latinx as a term that is meant to be inclusive excludes a great portion of those it is meant for with the topic as a whole being foreign to uneducated and/or solely Spanish speakers (Betancur).

The most conflicting issue with Latinx, the first gender neutral term for the community, is the X and how it disrupts the language (Hispanic). In English Latinx is awkward to say and even more so in Spanish. The letter doesn't fit well in the language as an ending. Unlike Latine which can be said similarly to other words as E is a letter that fits at the end of various words that are already gender neutral. While Spanish is known for having gender included in a large portion of the language many descriptors and titles in Spanish have gender neutral words that end with the letter E such as fuerte, inteligente, cliente, and participante. Latine would absolutely fit as the ending is similar and just like the prior words it fits as both a descriptor and title (Méndez).

Another big issue with Latinx is similar to that of Hispanic, many felt as if it was being imposed on them. While seemingly a positive, the term was being pushed on the community in various elitist spaces such as from corporations, government agencies, and academic institutions. It was the reason why Latine came about, at the time being a term created within the community when another term felt forced by all directions (Betancur).

When coming up with a term for a collective, especially one as complex as a panethnic collective. Plenty should be taken into consideration regarding the culture of the community. Just as Paulo Friere believed education should be culturally situated, identity should be as well (Diaz). If a new idea is to be presented it must be as easy to understand as possible. Latine is the best term for the community as it is the most inclusive term, appealing best to the culture while remaining gender neutral.

Importance of Identity

What originally started as a way of categorizing the growing population of people with Spanish-speaking backgrounds and origins in Latin America within the U.S. has become the search for a term that is as inclusive for the people as can be. It is why Hispanic, the starting term, was dropped for Latino and then evolved into Latinx which should become Latine. The jump from term to term is more than a linguistic shift, it is a reflection of the community's ongoing effort to define itself.

Latinx, while well meaning, emerged from academic and activist spaces (Salinas). It has faced criticism for its lack of cultural and linguistic alignment. However, Latine came up from within the community itself offering a more organic and accessible alternative. The difference in how the terms gained traction highlights the importance of cultural context in language, aligning well with Paulo Freire's belief that meaningful change must be rooted in the lived experiences of the people it seeks to represent.

Though it may seem like a privilege to discuss the terminology for identity it is important to do so. Topics that seem like a luxury to cover often start in smaller, elite spaces before becoming widespread. Over time, what begins as a specific or debated term can become widely accepted as more people recognize its value (Dearing & Cox). The development of Latine is part of this process, showing that language evolves to better reflect the people who use it.

Language is a powerful tool when it comes to shaping identity, community, and belonging. The debate over Latinx and Latine is not just about words, it is about who gets to define their own identity and how inclusivity interacts with culture. As Latine gains recognition; it represents a step toward a more community-driven, linguistically fitting, and culturally grounded way of expressing gender neutrality. In the end, the evolution of these terms is not

about replacing the past but about ensuring that language continues to reflect the people who speak it.

The emergence of alternatives after the introduction of Hispanic; Latino and Latina, Latinx, and Latine, reflects more than changing vocabulary. It represents a community continually reassessing its relationship with language, culture, and inclusivity. While Latinx was introduced for the need of gender-neutral terminology, it sparked division due to its perceived imposition and linguistic awkwardness. Latine, on the other hand, arises from within the community, offering a culturally and phonetically accessible option that better aligns with Freirean ideas of change rooted in lived experience. Still, no single term can fully encompass the identities, histories, and values of such a multifaceted group. Identity remains deeply personal, shaped by language but never fully defined by it. The ongoing conversation around these terms is not about finding one perfect word; it's about continuing to listen, adapt, and allow space for individuals to identify themselves in ways that feel authentic.

Author's Thoughts

I am a young Latino from a primarily Spanish-speaking household. I have been covering this topic as well as I can, acknowledging my biases and removing them to the best of my ability to cover the topic with a more objective view. I love my heritage and the Spanish language. I grew up enriched by both. I also am in support of progressive gender roles and the LGBTQ+ community. I believe all people should be who they are without fear of being ostracized.

This paper came about through the exploration of Latinx. Originally I wanted to cover the history of this specific term but I realized to get the full scope of its history more had to be covered. I ended up learning about Hispanic and Latino, which I had a rough idea about to begin. I wasn't taught anything around these categorizations and when I was young, I saw them as one in the same.

Though I don't personally identify as Latinx or Latine, I fully support those who do. That support is what led me to dive deeper into this topic. These terms aren't widely known or understood across the community, and I wanted to bring attention to them and the conversations surrounding them.

After all the research and reflection, I've come to believe that there may never be a single term that fully encompasses the entire community, that there will always be disagreement. Identity is deeply personal, and each person should have the space to define themselves in the way that feels most authentic.

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