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Xiomara and Alba: Stereotypes Explored in *Jane the Virgin*

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### Xiomara and Alba: Stereotypes Explored in *Jane the Virgin*

Television has the capability to highlight relationship dynamics and shine a spotlight on underrepresented topics and groups. Shows like *Jane the Virgin* are given the platform to represent the Latino population and to go beyond the degrading stereotypes that Latinos often portray on television. *Jane the Virgin* is a satirical telenovela and romantic-comedy drama that addresses representational issues such as Latino stereotypes through Jane Villanueva's mother and grandmother, Xiomara and Alba. They are portrayed as foil characters to each other's contrasting viewpoints and differences. On the surface, Xiomara is portrayed as an irresponsible mother but beyond her portrayal, she is a mature woman who cares for her daughter. Portrayed in stereotypes on television, Alba plays the fiercely strict, immigrant grandmother that has good intentions. *Jane the Virgin* is able to challenge stereotypes of Latinos by contrasting Xiomara with Alba; it is their simultaneous performances that further highlight stereotypical representation within Latinos.

Xiomara, Jane's mother, is pregnant with Jane at the age of sixteen. She portrays the common Latino stereotype of the irresponsible young mother. There are many instances of Xiomara not fulfilling her mother duties and role reversals between Jane and Xiomara. In episode four of *Jane the Virgin*, there is a flashback to when young Jane was watching Xiomara getting ready to leave the house for a date. It is ironic that even though Jane was a child, she played the mother role. Jane asked her mom, "What time are you coming home? You have an interview tomorrow" (Reims, 2014, 1:33). Young Jane continues playing the motherly figure role when she mentions, "Don't drink too much, don't kiss too much and don't forget to call if you're going to be late" (Reims, 2014, 1:40). Both of Jane's comments further highlight absence of a motherly figure towards Jane. Xiomara's carefree viewpoints are also shown in discussions

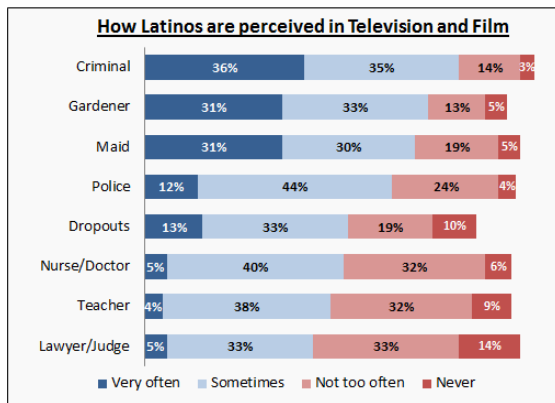
about virginity. In the third episode of the series, there is a flashback to when Jane was sixteen and Xiomara and Alba console her about the boy leaving Jane when she told the boy she was planning on waiting until marriage. Xiomara's response revealed her youthful rebelliousness: "Maybe next time, just don't tell him about the whole 'virgin until marriage' thing" (Averill, 2014, 1:38). From Xiomara's tone, she does not believe that waiting until marriage is important in comparison to what older people that tend to follow traditions, such as her mom, think. However, even though Xiomara is perceived to be rebellious and stubborn, she is strong, independent, and truly cares for her daughter. This is shown when her mother debates whether to tell Jane the identity of her father. The internal battle between Xiomara and her thoughts lasts for several episodes. In episode four Xiomara responds to Jane's fury about not revealing her father's identity with "Because you aren't a mother yet... what if [Rogeilo] wanted to take you away? It was easier to pretend that [Rogeilo] didn't exist" (Reims, 2014, 10:23, 10:26-10:28). Although Jane did not understand Xiomara's words initially, Xiomara's love is depicted in this scene. *Jane the Virgin* utilizes Xiomara's character to portray youth and ignorance but also depth throughout the series.

Jane's grandmother Alba is a recurring character on *Jane the Virgin*. Although Alba's character is comical through her seriousness and fierceness due to the rigid elderly stereotype she depicts, Alba is also used to prompt the viewer to think about how acts of love can be shown. Alba is a devout Catholic that has intentions on sharing her religious beliefs with Jane, with one of them being saving oneself until marriage (Grell, 2017, p. 40). However, although Alba imprints her religious beliefs onto Jane, Alba does not follow Catholicism blindly, with an example being, "when Xiomara tells Alba about her pregnancy, Alba tells Xiomara to have an abortion" (Grell, 2017, p.40). Alba thought this at the time, she regrets ever thinking this way

since Jane entered her life. Even though it may seem like Alba is bossy and blunt, it all stems from the fact that she genuinely adores and cares for Jane as this is shown in the pilot, “Jane is listed as one of [Alba’s] passions” (Grell, 2017, p.40). In addition to Alba playing the religious Latino stereotype, she also plays the first-generation immigrant role and is seen as an outsider in comparison to the other characters in the show. Alba is seen to understand English but only speaks Spanish, something very common among immigrants. Though Alba is the only character in the series that is an outsider in this way, “the depiction of ‘otherness’ through language is culturally significant and relevant to many Latinos” (Grell, 2017, p. 41). Although there are many people in the United States that do not speak English, the narrative of feeling misplaced is not well portrayed, *Jane the Virgin* gives the platform for this story to be told. Alba’s passion love for Jane and is demonstrated through her thoughts and actions, and it is through Alba’s character that further reveal representation of Latinos that are not prevalent in society.

Unlike most American television shows, *Jane the Virgin* is one of few television shows that has a predominately Latino cast. This statistic depicts how underrepresented Latinos are on television, “only 3-4% of the characters on television are Latino; however, Latinos make up about 16% of the population of the United States, the largest minority in the country (Tukachinsky, Mastro, & Yarchi, 2015). Generally, Latinos are depicted as low-class citizens in society. In the diagram below, Latinos are often perceived to be criminals, gardeners and maids most often in television, which is far from the truth in regard to representation (2012). However,

*Jane the Virgin* goes beyond portraying the normalized stereotypical to display strong, independent and dynamic characters like Xiomara and Alba on the big screen.



Source: Latino Decisions national telephone poll for NHMC, n=900, +/- 3.3%

One key element contributes to the diversity of stories to the show: a female creator and show runner. In Mihaela Mihailova’s article on female showrunners, she states that “female creators—a historically underrepresented group in American television—are experiences a surge in creative

leadership opportunities in the field more broadly” (Mihailova, 2019, p. 1009). Although the article is written with a critical analysis on American TV animation, this can also be applied to shows like *Jane the Virgin*. Jennie Snyder Urman is creator of the show and “puts a notable emphasis behind female voices, with most of the episodes being directed and written by women” (Chaney, 2018). When Xiomara and Alba come together in *Jane the Virgin*, their characters are celebrated for portraying beyond having a stereotype and having complexity. Despite their differences, Xiomara and Alba’s strong sense of family that both women bring show how much one cares for each other.

Some television shows challenge stereotypes of preconceived notions through the use of its characters. Xiomara and Alba function in *Jane the Virgin* to support these stereotypes and common portrayals, but also bring complexity their respective roles, making it clear to the audience that Latinos do not have a single story or narrative, unlike what is typically seen in television. Even though Alba and Jane often view Xiomara as free-spirited and lacking responsibility, Xiomara cares towards her family, although sometimes she does not know how to articulate her feelings and thoughts. Alba on the surface seems fierce, and stern, but beyond this,

she loves her family fiercely and has the purest intentions. An important factor why there are strong, independent female characters like Xiomara and Alba is because of a female creator and showrunner. *Jane the Virgin* is an excellent example and reminder why having female dominated narratives are important: it gives a spotlight on topics that normally are shied away from telling.

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