

Understanding Ugly Betty: Negotiating Race in a Culturally-Mixed Text

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With its edgy look and comic plots, ABC's series *Ugly Betty* is now on its fourth season. When watching the story of the unglamorous Betty Suárez, the lead character, and her struggles at her upscale job at *Mode*, a fashion magazine in Manhattan, it is easy to draw negative conclusions about the show's intention with Betty and her race. The idea of choosing a Latina character to mock for being not fashionable and ugly is complex. However, a deeper analysis of the series and the response of the audience to this culturally-mixed text allows for a better understanding of the real context and function of this series. Although *Ugly Betty* includes African American and British characters, this study focuses only on Betty Suárez and her Latin American background. Betty's character provides an empowered Latina representation by claiming the right to be herself and be welcomed in places where being physically attractive, white and wealthy are implicit prerequisites. However, this does not mean that the show intends to present all Latinas as unattractive or deprived. Hilda, Betty's sister, represents the attractive Latina that is confident and fashionable. Furthermore, Salma Hayek, producer of the series, cameos on the show performing as Sofia Reyes, a powerful and sexy magazine editor. Thus, we could say that Betty's character is not the embodiment of the Hispanic race. Nonetheless, the fact that she is the protagonist makes her physical features stand out and possibly make us connect her peculiarity with her ethnicity.

This study examines, from the perspective of a multicultural audience, the implications for conceptions of race of the series *Ugly Betty*. As a setup for an audience study, this research begins with a literature review on Latin American images in the U.S. and some insights on Betty's racial implications. Betty's cultural and racial portrayal is presented through a case study of the series' pilot that exemplifies its efforts to tie the series to ethnic subjects. This analysis is then contrasted with an evaluation of the audience based on two series-related websites and observations of discussion boards and threads at the end of two online articles. In summary, this study aims to discover how the viewers are reading the text and, consequently, negotiating its cultural meaning. The multicultural audience is drawing attention to the self-esteem struggles and comedic aspects of the show rather than focusing on Betty as an ugly fish-out-of-the-water.

Latinos seem to be the hottest new market for U.S. television. It is becoming common to see Latino subjects on broadcast networks and cable. *George Lopez*,

Resurrection Boulevard, *Epitafios* and *Ugly Betty* are some examples of Latinos' appeal on U.S. TV. In *Latinos Inc. The Marketing and Making of a People*, media scholar Arlene Dávila studies the media's role in the construction of identities, specifically how Latinos are becoming more aware of the representation of their culture in media. As she points out, "Media texts communicate categories of identity and serve to incorporate or mediate people's relationships within any given group or society" (Dávila 6). Networks can market minorities using images to satisfy audiences and corporate clients. For instance, Latino-oriented TV shows such as *Ugly Betty* can emphasize the idea of closeness in Latin American families to provide audiences with images that they can understand and expect from a Hispanic family.

In regards to the Latina image, Dávila explains that stereotypes are not inherently right or wrong, but have historically produced the image of Latinas as sexy, loud and over-adorned with vibrant colors. These images seem a good marketing tool, since "From the growth of Hispanic marketing, we could easily assume that audiences are indeed attracted by these images" (Dávila 181). However, how people read and consume these images is a question that needs a study of public reception to help determine the series' motives.

Focusing on *Ugly Betty* as a diverse media text, Mary Beltran, a professor at the University of Wisconsin concentrating on Latina studies, discusses the cultural and racial aspects of the show. She argues that the text could distort meanings of *Latinidad* (what it means to be Latino) when set within the context of U.S. racial discourse. She asserts:

While it is true that we have witnessed a growth in Latina representation in the last

decade, I'm not sure these images have grown in number and variety to the extent that the story of a Mexican American woman who will never fit into the world of fashion and beauty can yet be understood as an allegory for how Betty is beautiful on the inside. (Beltran)

Beltran explores *Ugly Betty's* constructions of cultural difference by explaining how sometimes the series mocks Betty's working-class appearance while at the same time it seems to pursue a deeper meaning. Beltran sees *Betty* as the network's effort to attract the growing Latino audience. She acknowledges how Latinos are enjoying and supporting the series: "Several fans pointed out the Latin American roots of the storyline and made it clear that, given this knowledge and their fond memories of the original; they didn't find Betty's appearance an issue in this new, U.S. version" (Beltran)¹. The audience's reading of the text and its cultural meanings will make evident the implications of *Ugly Betty*.

Perhaps *Ugly Betty* entails a more aesthetic message rather than a racial one. Media scholars Kim Akass and Janet McCabe propose that beyond the racial message, Betty Suárez's mission is to confront U.S. obsession with beauty and to promote confidence through a "Be Ugly" campaign promoted by the show's network ABC in 2007. As they explain: "The idea behind the U.S project, we are reliably informed, is to promote self-esteem and end stereotyping at a time when there has been a trend toward an obsession with celebrities of skeletal proportions and Size 00 models" (Akass and McCabe). The authors question whether we have entered a new era where *Ugly Betty* overcomes the ideals of self-esteem based on material and physical appearance, such as those portrayed

in *Sex and the City*, to induce a more natural and realistic female expression. An analysis of *Ugly Betty's* pilot can be used to discover to what extent the racial and beauty discourses are the central focus of the text.

Betty's Cultural Performance

Ugly Betty's pilot episode portrays cultural and class differences to deliver a message of genuine interior beauty. The pilot begins with a medium shot of Betty, drawing attention to her disorganized hair, geek glasses and unattractive braces. She acts nervous while waiting for a job interview at Meade Publications, a fashion magazine company. Her first lines make reference to her cultural background as she tells a beautiful fashion model: "I like your poncho. My dad got me one in Guadalajara" ("Pilot"). As the episode continues, further evidences of her ethnicity and culture appear. Hispanic food, reggaeton music, colorful clothing and house decor, and the Queens borough are part of Betty's domestic world. All of these elements suggest that she comes from a social class that differs from the one she is aspiring to enter, that of the fashion world. Betty's family closeness, stereotypical of Latin American families, contrasts with the hardness of her work environment. As a mechanism to transport the viewer between Betty's two worlds, the text visually contrasts her family side with her job environment: colorful images at home; blue and white tones at *Mode*. Thus, the family side acquires an ethnic tone while the work environment looks sophisticated.

When contrasting the beginning and the end of the series' pilot, a difference in perception about Betty becomes evident. The pilot opens by emphasizing her ugliness as well as her ethnicity and closes showing her in a more sympathetic way. Towards the end of the pilot, an off screen

song sings "She is a beautiful girl" while she walks confidently down the street. Her boss looks at her with empathetic eyes and Betty's insecure image, shown initially, is replaced by an image of a woman who accepts herself. The fact that the episode shows these images and their associations at the end communicates the purpose of the series. Perhaps the message for the audience is in those final shots, where the series draws attention to the synergy between Betty's physical appearance and self-esteem rather than focusing on her as an ugly-outsider.

Having a message focused on Betty's self-esteem does not mean that the show wants to erase her racial background. An examination of *Ugly Betty's* official website demonstrates how the network attempts to connect the series with ethnic discourses. However, the audience, through participation in forums and message boards, seem not to focus much on the racial or cultural topics, but turn their attention more to the issue of a woman being ugly regardless of her ethnicity.

Ugly Betty's Audience: Official and Non-official Websites

The analysis of *Ugly Betty's* official website ("Ugly Betty") will be divided into three parts: the website's interaction with the audience; the strategies it uses to allude to Betty's cultural differences; and the audience responses on the message board. This official website reveals that Betty's cultural background works as a tool to make her a commodity.

The interaction with the audience is mainly found in three sections: *Features*, *Games*, and *Community*. By inviting viewers to identify with the characters, the *Features* section demonstrates the network's effort to make the audience feel that they are part of the show. In addition to offering users a personality quiz that tells them

which character they resemble, they can also buy music related to their favorite character, and submit questions to be answered in the audio podcasts. On the other hand, similar to the face shifts we see in the opening credits of the series, the *Games* section provides a “face shift” game where users can match the character’s faces or have fun with face combinations. This section underscores the show’s emphasis on physical appearance. Finally, under the *Community* section, users can discuss their opinions through message boards and live blogs.

The official website employs strategies to connect the series with ethnic discourses. For instance, the *Shop* link invites users to “Make a fashion statement like Betty!” (“Ugly Betty”). The series sells three particular products that make a clear connection to Betty’s cultural background: a poncho, a T-shirt with a message in Spanish, and a multi-colored purse. The poncho exemplifies the Latin American imagery that the series wants to sell; as the text on the website explains: “Now you can own this infamous —not to mention comfortable— knit poncho! Guadalajara! on the front, and an image of a palm tree, a man wearing a sombrero and a cactus on the back.” The second item is a T-shirt with Betty’s image and a text that says: “Viva la Betty” which translates to “Long Live Betty.” The fact that the text is in Spanish suggests that Latin ethnicity is trendy and people from any cultural background can wear it and look fashionable. Furthermore, the expression “viva” in Spanish is often used by crowds to support candidates or heroes. Consequently the website states: “Support your favorite ugly girl with this ‘Viva La Betty’ tee.” This reveals how the network wants Betty to become an icon, a sort of fashionable anti-hero. The third product is a multi-colored purse carried by Betty in season two. The item reflects the cheerfulness in Betty’s

clothes, to reinforce the stereotype of Latinas over-adorned in colorful combinations. Despite the website’s efforts to make a statement about Betty’s cultural background, audience responses to the show usually do not reflect a connection to this subject. For instance, most of the topics proposed by the viewers on the message boards are related to the series’ season renewal and specific situations that occurred in past episodes such as Betty’s relationship with Gio Rossi.

Notably, in these message boards the users rarely discuss whether Betty’s ugliness is associated with her Hispanic ethnicity or not. However, when users address the topic of Betty and race representations, their comments illustrate how Betty’s background is irrelevant for the viewers. The comments do not seem to reflect a connection between her ugliness and her Mexican heritage. Some interesting responses that appear in a discussion board (“*Ugly Betty*”) related to Betty’s ethnicity were:

Right now it’s not much if Betty is Latina or not. It’s more generic comedy [...] Vanessa Williams is representing a successful African American career driven woman. Though there are plenty (and a bit too much, really) white skin characters. Overall, the show has a positive Latino vibe in it.

I watch it like I watch any show...for entertainment. I’m not watching *Betty* because of Hispanic characters no more than I watched *Fresh Prince of Be Lair* for its black characters. If it’s a good show, I’ll watch it no matter of the ethnic background of the characters.

What I do love about the Suarez are the bits of *Spanglish* heard occasionally AND the fact that one sister is the square nerd (Betty) and the other is the “hot” under-achiever (or is it former bad-girl)? Also, in some

ways the family is a little plural: Ignacio seems more like a South American dad to me (not exactly Mexican, but Mexico has a lot varied regions), Hilda seems to me the typical (and stereotyped) Puerto Rican (think Jennifer Lopez), and Betty and Justin are very much the mainstreamed second- and third-generation children.

These comments suggest that although people acknowledge the fact that Betty is Hispanic, they primarily read the show as an entertaining text. However, to examine the assumption of the audience overlooking Betty's ethnicity, it becomes necessary to contrast the information found here to other data given by the audience at other websites. An illustrative fan-made website was chosen to contrast the official site. The main criteria were: that it had a discussion topic related to the subject of this study, as well as a considerable amount of fan comments. Based on these criteria the site chosen was: "Ugly is in" ("*Ugly is In*").

Through a discussion topic titled "Which Side do you Prefer?" this fan-made site asks viewers to choose between Betty's two worlds: domestic space vs. *Mode*. The discussion's results were as follows: the Suárez/Queens side obtained five votes (33% of the votes) and the Meade/*Mode* side, ten votes (66% of the votes) for a total of 15 votes. This indicates that the audience enjoys watching Betty and her situations in the office, illustrating the point that the ethnic aspect of the show (mostly shown at Betty's home) is not central for the audience. Some interesting responses to the topic were:

Having been born and raised in Queens, I kind of like seeing the writers' interpretation of it, but the drama at Mode seems to be more comedic most of the time.

Whereas the Meade side of the story is funnier and more colorful it is also crueler. I like the Suarez part more. They are crazy on their own account but totally lovable.

I like a mixture of both. It's fun to see her in Daniel's world because she fits but at the same time she doesn't, and its fun to see him in Betty's world because, well for the same reason.

These responses indicate that *Ugly Betty's* audience is tuning-in in search of comedy and entertainment without centering the attention on the ethnicity of the characters. In contrast, professor and media researcher Yeidy Rivero mentions that: "You have a Mexican American family and, *indirectly*, that brings to the table issues of *Latinoness*, culture, migration, citizenship, and *Americanness* that I think are very important (Rivero). However, the viewers participating in the boards seem to understand the series as a text that provides universal topics to which they can relate. For instance, feeling uncomfortable or not attractive in a new environment such as a new job can be familiar to many people independent of their ethnicity. They see Betty as ugly because she has features that are universally considered ugly, such as the blue braces and the messy hair. As explained by media researcher Timothy Havens, "Universal themes are all these things that happen in your own household [...] all these things which are recognizable from your own situation" (386). Viewers read *Ugly Betty* as a U.S. text, not as a window to other cultures, and don't seem to associate the text with the cultural and political subjects mentioned by Rivero.

Representing minorities in U.S. TV implies negotiating a network's branding image, foreign market appeal, and local audience preferences.

It is possible that future shows dealing with Latinos will become as popular as African American sitcoms, already common in broadcast networks, and audiences should be able to relate to them as part of the multiracial country in which they live. This idea is shared by media scholar Scott Wible, who affirms that we will see “An increase in the number of Latino/a actors as well as the number of projects centered in issues of interest to Latino communities” (47). The viewer’s comments on the message boards and the way they seem to be receiving this cultural-mixed text could potentially lead to the creation of more series revolving around Hispanics. The audience’s opinions about a media text can also be found in sources other than official websites or fan-sites.

Ugly Betty’s Audience: Online-Article Threads

At the end of Akass and McCabe’s and Beltran’ *Ugly Betty* articles, users posted comments discussing *Betty*’s racial status. Some interesting responses to the topic were:

User: Kristyn. I first came to the conclusion that the show supported white superiority because of the fact that Betty was made to be “ugly” and poor and all the other white characters were stylish and powerful economically and within Mode. But once the show highlighted and promoted Betty’s intellectual, and moral superiority, it became evident the show offered a counter-hegemonic reading to its initial representations.

User: Juan Pinon. I recognized that the actual representation of Betty can count as a counter-stereotype but it is important to see how easily is to rely initially stereotypes to engage the audience.

These people are aware of the Latino stereotype being portrayed in *Ugly Betty* and the sensitivity of the issue. However, the fact that *Ugly Betty* is a comedy-drama series and not a *telenovela* as the original version, allows dealing with the subject of race without the *telenovela*’s seriousness and dramatism. *Ugly Betty* can deal with race playfully rather than dramatically.

Conclusion

Although *Ugly Betty*’s text and its official Website seem to make efforts to include race discourses, the audience’s perception seems to be far from focusing on racial or cultural matters as the series’ main point. Instead, viewers concentrate more on the entertainment nature of the text. *Ugly Betty* seems to unify culturally-mixed audiences by acting as the connector between Hispanic and Anglo viewers. The series presents universal themes that allow multicultural audiences to relate to them, while acknowledging, but not concentrating on, the multicultural element of the text. While cast as an outsider, Betty becomes an intrinsic component of the society that surrounds her, providing an empowering Latino representation.

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Note

¹ *Ugly Betty* is based on Fernando Gaitán’s *Yo Soy Betty la Fea* (RCN, 1999-2001), the successful Colombian *telenovela* that has been exported to many countries, reaching high audience ratings. *Yo Soy Betty la Fea* and *Ugly*

Betty tell a similar story: an ugly but smart and efficient assistant falls in love with her boss while having to endure her co-workers mocks. Finally, the ugly woman demonstrates that she is beautiful on the inside.

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