

2000

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Lima, Lucelia, "Univision Television Network: A Cultural Experience" (2000). *Senior Research Projects*. 82.
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Univision Television Network: A Cultural Experience

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Southern Scholars Senior Project

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7 April 2000

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Introduction

Univision Television Network (UTN) is the largest and most-watched Spanish-language broadcast network in the United States. It owns and operates 14 stations (see Appendix A).

UTN is part of Univision Communications Inc. along with the Univision Television Group, an entity that manages the station group, and Galavision, a cable network (“KMEX-TV Information”).

Univision reaches 91% of the “blazing” U.S. Hispanic market, clearly more Spanish-speaking viewers than the other four major networks combined (Grover 74).

Univision Communications Inc. is a public corporation traded on the New York Stock Exchange (UVN). The company is directed by Chairman and CEO A. Jerrold Perenchio and the President and Chief Operating Officer Henry Cisneros, former Cabinet Member and Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (“KMEX-TV Information”).

Univision Television Network is the nation’s fifth-largest television network with about 4 million prime-time viewers, being the fastest-growing broadcast outlet in the U.S. While the other four largest networks lost a combined 1.4 million viewers in the key 18-to-34-year-old demographic last season, Univision’s comparable audience grew by nearly a quarter of a million. And while it attracts 91% of the nation’s prime-time Spanish-language audience, the network also has more teen viewers than MTV, more young male viewers than ESPN, and three times the overall audience of CNN (Baxter, “Univision Posts” C5).

According to KMEX-TV, Univision’s station in Los Angeles, California, “the appeal of the Spanish Language Television goes far beyond the Spanish Language.” Henry Cisneros released a statement that says, “increasing recognition that directly targeting the burgeoning Hispanic

population through Spanish-language television makes both cultural and financial sense” (Baxter, “Univision Posts” C5). Univision’s programming chief Mario Rodrigues states that, “It’s not a language issue as much as a cultural issue,” when the network must decide what programs to air to sustain growth (Jensen A1). Many Hispanics watch Spanish-language television because they “simply feel more comfortable with their own culture” (Miller 1).

KMEX-TV gives the following seven reasons why Hispanics tune to Univision Television Network Spanish TV:

1. feature of Hispanic characters, lifestyles and locales
2. emphasis on core Hispanic values—the family and tradition
3. quality programming with first rate production values
4. culturally relevant news emphasis on Hispanic community and international coverage (Latin America)
5. concept of the *novela* (“novel”)—stories with a beginning, middle and end—a long standing part of Hispanic culture
6. first-run programs in primetime 52 weeks a year
7. programming that is not available through any other source (“National Hispanic Market”).

Incorporated within these seven reasons is Hispanic culture, the main factor that attracts viewers to the Univision Television Network *telenovelas* and its major television programs such as *El Show de Cristina*, *Sábado Gigante*, *Despierta América*, and *Primer Impacto*.

Hispanic Culture

The *word* culture is defined in *The American Heritage Dictionary*, 2nd college edition, as “The totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought characteristic of a community or population.” When Hispanics leave their home country and move to the U.S., they are exposed to a totally different culture. Their arts, beliefs and behavior patterns are influenced by the North Americans they come in contact with. To once again experience the feeling of Hispanic culture is something just about every Spanish-speaking immigrant is searching for. Univision’s programs bring back that feeling of being closer to home. By watching *telenovelas*, or soap-operas, which are a very important part of the Hispanic culture, and other programs commonly seen in their home country, immigrants feel the joy of experiencing the same things as if they were in their home land.

Through careful planning of all their programs, Univision has achieved what no other Spanish-language television network has been able to accomplish. They’ve brought Hispanic culture to each one of their viewers’ homes. Univision’s daily programs are focused on letting their viewers know what is happening in their home countries. News stories are always focused on issues important to the Hispanic community. UTN’s *telenovelas* are ones the viewer would see in their native land.

A major cultural difference between English speakers and Spanish speakers is expressed by the language. Alberto Alvaro Rios gives a very good example which, although small, is used in just about every Spanish class as a “central” difference between these two cultures. In English, one would say, “I dropped the glass,” if such a thing should happen. It is an “I-centered instance,

rugged individualism in its smallest moment.” In Spanish, one would say, “Se me cayó el vaso,” which means, “The glass, it fell from me.” This difference shows that in the Hispanic culture the blame for doing something negative is usually taken away from the individual and placed on the object. As Rios describes, “it is a different world view, a way of accommodating the world, of living with it instead of changing it” (1).

Hispanic culture can also be defined by Hispanic music, movies and *telenovelas*. Hispanic music has a penetrating and unique beat. Hispanic movies and *telenovelas* have captivating plots that draw viewers.

Telenovelas

Telenovelas are the “lucrative staples” of Spanish-language television (Jensen A1). *Columbia Journalism Review* writes that “much of network’s popularity rests on its *telenovelas*—spicy soap operas produced primarily in Mexico” (“Cineros Goes to Broadcast” 19). In 1992, Univision’s executives inked long-term deals with Mexican media giant Televisa and Venezuela’s Venevision to give Univision three hours a night of their “tear-jerking *novelas*.” To keep teens tuned in, programmers added youth-oriented soaps. Merrill Lynch analyst Jessica Reif Cohen says, “They listen to their audience better than any network around” (Grover 74).

Univision’s full power station with cable coverage in Las Vegas, KINC-TV 15, advertises *telenovelas* on its Web page as “habit-forming soap-opera entertainment offering love, thrills, and humor. With captivating scenery and intense plots while showcasing popular Hispanic actors/actresses.” It is not surprising Univision draws the newly arrived Latino crowd but also Latino viewers who could watch English-language TV.

Univision's most popular *novelas* from Televisa and Venevision are under contract to air through 2017; in exchange the two foreign partners get 14.7% of Univision's revenue. The *novelas* themselves have become more sophisticated; they also target different age groups. Univision stacked them in a three-hour block designed to appeal to children at 7 p.m., teens at 8 p.m. and adults at 9 p.m. As a result, network ratings tripled (Jensen A1). Univision's "long-form" telenovelas allowed KMEX to win prime time in adults 18-34 (8.4 rating) and 18-49 (6.7 rating), with each growing by more than 60% over the year before (Freeman 9).

El Show de Cristina

Univision's 4 p.m. program, *El Show de Cristina*, or Cristina's Talk Show, has dominated the Spanish-language audience for 10 seasons (Consoli 9). *El Show de Cristina* is described by Univision's Web site as "Controversial, informative, provocative . . . gives viewers an exciting hour of no-holds-barred discussions on a wide variety of subjects." According to KINC-TV 15 the show is timely, educational, and the highest rated daytime program on Spanish-language TV.

El Show de Cristina attracts a variety of Latino audiences because the show highlights moral issues that are controversial within Hispanic culture. The show also features famous Hispanic singers as guests, and the studio audience gets to ask this singer anything they would like to know about them. It gives Hispanic people an opportunity to interact with their stars. One special episode a very famous Hispanic actor, Antonio Banderas, came to Cristina's show and talked about his professional and personal life. Also, in a different episode, a Hispanic actress and singer Thalia was interviewed.

Sábado Gigante

Univision's most popular Saturday night program is *Sábado Gigante*, or "Giant Saturday." With its "unabashed blend of entertainment, drama, and promotion," it is viewed by as many as two million Spanish-speaking homes in the U.S. each week. Together with *telenovelas* or "soap-operas," movies, and news, *Sábado Gigante* is the network's highest rated show (Grover 74). Unlike any show on the traditional U.S. broadcast networks, *Sábado Gigante* lasts four hours. The show includes music, games, contests and audience participation.

Despierta América

Univision has taken many bilingual viewers away from English-language networks at least since 1995. One of its strategies was to create a program called *Despierta América*, a three-hour morning program similar in format to ABC's *Good Morning America* and NBC's *Today*. The live morning show *Despierta América* includes information, showbiz updates, and the day's breaking news. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, "The lively unpredictable show quickly drew an audience to what had been a dead spot in Univision's lineup, doubling the network's morning ratings in Miami and tripling viewership in New York" (Baxter, "Spanish-language" F5).

Primer Impacto

A program which started out as Univision's *Noticias y Mas*, "News and More," has now changed its name to *Primer Impacto*, "First Impact." This program is among the most popular programs on U. S. Spanish-language television. It started in 1991 with a mix of news, consumer information, virgin apparitions, and teenage suicide pacts. *Primer Impacto* became so popular among the Hispanic population in 1993 that they expanded it from thirty minutes to a full hour. At

the regional Emmy ceremony in Miami in 1990 the program won three awards, including one for outstanding investigative reporting, for a story about an ultraconservative branch of the Catholic church accused of “brainwashing” Hispanic girls into becoming nuns (Paternostro 11).

Primer Impacto is a news magazine show that airs weekdays at 5 p.m. It delivers stories that “really make an impact, ranging from the bizarre to the incredible—plus entertainment news, sports, weather and a special astrology segment” (“Univision.net”).

Other Programs

To avoid alienating any nationality, a longtime policy of maintaining a neutral Spanish accent in the domestically produced programs is enforced. The network also requires producers and talent to stay away from slang and humor that appeals only to Mexicans, Cubans or Puerto Ricans (Jensen A1).

In 1992, Univision’s Chairman and CEO A Jerrold Perenchio, 69, produced a Spanish version of Sesame Street and beefed up news and sports (Grover 74). As a result, large audiences were drawn to Univision’s news programming. Its Miami affiliate WLTV has had a higher-rated newscast than either CBS, NBC, or Fox. In Los Angeles, the nation’s number two market, Univision’s flagship station KMEX-TV regularly beats its “Big Three” competitors among young adult viewers (“Cineros Goes to Broadcast” 19).

History

Spanish language TV in the United States dates back to 1961, when Mexico’s Grupo Televisa bought a station in San Antonio, Texas, and began broadcasting. During the next two

decades, it assembled a string of stations in Hispanic markets across the U.S., but was forced to sell them in the early 1980s after the FCC found Televisa in violation of foreign ownership rules (“Diversifying the TV Landscape” 16A).

In 1987, the Spanish International Network, also known as Televisa, sold its ten TV stations to Hallmark Cards Inc. for \$620 million and changed the name of its network to Univision (Baker 30). In 1992, CEO Perenchio bought control of Univision from Hallmark Cards Inc. for \$550 million, and quickly rebuilt it to tap into the booming Hispanic market (Grover 74).

Finances

In January 2000, the *Los Angeles Times* described Univision as “the nation’s fastest growing and most profitable broadcast company.” Total spending by U.S. Hispanics, estimated at \$411 billion in 1999, is expected to grow 30% in the next 10 years (Grover 74).

During Cisneros’ presidency, which began after he left HUD in January 1997, Univision has thrived. In 1998, Univision reported operating profit of \$131.2 million on revenue of \$577.1 million, up 25.6% from \$104.4 million in operating profit and \$459.7 million in revenue in 1997. Since Perenchio took the company public in 1996, Univision’s stock has more than quadrupled (Burkin 115).

Analyst Niraj A. Gupta of Schroder & Co. estimates that, “Univision’s 1999 operating earnings should rise by 50%, to \$197.2 million, on 16% higher sales of \$671 million.” Investors responded by nearly tripling Univision’s stock price in the past year, to about 100 (Grover 74). According to an article by Elizabeth Jensen and Kevin Barker for the *Los Angeles Times*, Univision’s stock price has more than tripled in the last two years (A1).

Univision's Biggest Rival: Telemundo

Telemundo is Univision's biggest rival, which reaches 85% of Hispanic households in the U.S. and Puerto Rico. In 1999, Telemundo, under new owners Sony and Liberty Media, faltered in its strategy to lure assimilated Latinos with high production values and mainstream stories. Viewers rejected the execution, if not the strategy of using series based on Sony-owned scripts from *Starsky and Hutch* and *Charlie's Angels*. Telemundo's shows, airing just twice a week, were crushed by Univision's telenovelas, which hook viewers with new episodes each weeknight (Jensen A1). Univision's average number of young viewers during prime time has risen from 738,000 to 974,000, while Telemundo fell 11% to 107,000 in 1999 (Adams 20).

Univision's Most Recent Approach: The Web

Univision hopes to leverage its TV dominance to entice Hispanic users onto the Web. So far, about 7 million of the 32 million Spanish speakers in the U.S. are online, says Internet consultant Jupiter Communications Inc. Still, Univision is starting late. Star Media Networks, the largest Spanish-language Net-access provider in Latin America and in the U.S., has powerful equity partners in NBC Inc. and Hearst Corp. In the last two years, it has spent more than \$100 million on marketing the StarMedia.com sites and captured 1.2 billion page views in the third quarter, up 71% over a year earlier. In November, News Corp., Comcast Corp., and others invested \$67 million into Yupi.com, a network of Spanish-language sites. And Telemundo is a partner in Quepasa.com Inc., which is also backed by Fox Entertainment Group. According to Betsy Scolnick, Star Media's senior vice-president for business development, "It's going to take a lot for Univision to make an impact in this space" (Grover 74).

One way Univision is making up for the lost time is by excluding ads from other Web companies on its TV shows. This gives Univision an exclusive platform by which to promote its new Internet service. With its incredible success, it is obvious that Univision will hardly miss the lost Internet advertising revenue. Since many younger viewers are switching from the big networks to Univision \$425 million worth of commercial time for this season's programs have been sold. That is 42% more than last year, and more than triple the growth rate of the big networks (Grover 74).

Conclusion

Univision's success is due to the inclusion of some aspect of Hispanic culture in all its programs. *Telenovelas* and Univision's major television programs such as *El Show de Cristina*, *Sábado Gigante*, *Despierta América*, and *Primer Impacto* provide Hispanics with an everyday cultural experience.

Hispanic culture is represented not only by the language but also by distinctive art, beliefs, music, movies and *telenovelas*. Univision's programs focus on issues important to Hispanics. News coverage includes reports that allow viewers to find out what is happening in their home countries. The network also provides *telenovelas* and programs that the viewer has already become familiar with in their native land.

Univision plays a major role in providing culture-based programming for Hispanics in the U.S. Its programs appeal to Hispanic culture more than any other networks. Univision Television Network will continue to be the fastest-growing, most-watched and most-profitable Spanish-language network in the United States.

Appendix A

There are fourteen Univision owned and operated stations in the United States. Five are located in California:

KABE-LP Channel 39 in Bakersfield

KFTV-TV Channel 21 in Fresno

KMEX-TV Channel 34 in Los Angeles

KUVS-TV Channel 19 in Modesto, and

KDTV Channel 14 in San Francisco

Three are located in Texas: KUVN-TV Channel 23 in Dallas

KXLN-TV Channel 45 in Houston, and

KWEX-TV Channel 41 in San Antonio.

The other six stations are scattered around the country:

KLUZ-TV Channel 41 in Albuquerque, New Mexico

WGBO-TV Channel 66 in Chicago, Illinois

WLTW-TV Channel 23 in Miami, Florida

WXTV-TV Channel 41 in Newark, New Jersey

WXTV-LP Channel 42 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and

KTVW-TV Channel 33 in Phoenix, Arizona.

Source: "KMEX-TV Information"

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SOUTHERN SCHOLARS SENIOR PROJECT

Name: Lucelia D. Lima Date: 1-28-00 Major: International Studies-Spanish

SENIOR PROJECT

A significant scholarly project, involving research, writing, or special performance, appropriate to the major in question, is ordinarily completed the senior year. The project is expected to be of sufficiently high quality to warrant a grade of A and to justify public presentation.

Under the guidance of a faculty advisor, the Senior Project should be an original work, should use primary sources when applicable, should have a table of contents and works cited page, should give convincing evidence to support a strong thesis, and should use the methods and writing style appropriate to the discipline.

The completed project, to be turned in in duplicate, must be approved by the Honors Committee in consultation with the student's supervising professor three weeks prior to graduation. Please include the advisor's name on the title page. The 2-3 hours of credit for this project is done as directed study or in a research class.

Keeping in mind the above senior project description, please describe in as much detail as you can the project you will undertake. You may attach a separate sheet if you wish:

I will ~~research~~ ^{and} document the factors that have contributed to the explosion of Univision, the largest Spanish-language television network in the United States.

My thesis is:

Spanish culture is the main factor that determines the popularity of the Univision Television Network.

Signature of faculty advisor Helmut Ott Expected date of completion Mar 21

Approval to be signed by faculty advisor when completed:

This project has been completed as planned: ✓

This in an "A" project: Hel. Ott

This project is worth 2-3 hours of credit: 2

Advisor's Final Signature Helmut Ott

Chair, Honors Committee _____ Date Approved: _____

Dear Advisor, please write your final evaluation on the project on the reverse side of this page. Comment on the characteristics that make this "A" quality work.