Telenovelas and Racism in Mexico: Towards an Ethnophenotypic Analysis of the Audiovisual[1]

Telenovelas y racismo en México: hacia el análisis etnofenotípico del audiovisual

Telenovelas e racismo no México: rumo a uma análise etnofenotípica dos audiovisuais

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This article presents preliminary results of a research in which 27 Mexican telenovelas are analyzed to understand key aspects of the representation of alterity and racism. The intersectional analysis, focused on identifying the skin tone of the casts, shows the preponderance of certain ethnophenotypes that reveal a racist bias in telenovelas. The analytical model developed here aims to generate indicators for the measurement of patterns of socio-cultural diversity in audiovisual production and public policies for the regulation of the sector.

KEYWORDS: Racism, telenovelas, ethnophenotype, audiovisual inclusion, sociocultural diversity.

Este artículo presenta resultados preliminares de una investigación más amplia en la que se analizan 27 telenovelas mexicanas para comprender aspectos clave de la representación de alteridades y el racismo en el ámbito audiovisual. El análisis de carácter interseccional, concentrado en caracterizar el peso relativo de la tonalidad de piel de los elencos, muestra la preponderancia de ciertos etnofenotipos que revelan un sesgo racista en las telenovelas analizadas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Racismo, telenovelas, etnofenotipo, inclusión audiovisual, diversidad sociocultural.

Este artigo apresenta os resultados preliminares de uma investigação mais ampla na qual 27 telenovelas mexicanas são analisadas para entender os principais aspectos da representação da alteridade e do racismo na esfera audiovisual. A análise interseccional, focada na caracterização do peso relativo do tom de pele dos elencos, mostra a preponderância de certos etnofenótipos que revelam um viés racista nas telenovelas analisadas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Racismo, novelas, etnofenótipo, inclusão audiovisual, diversidade sociocultural.

INTRODUCTION

One of the main objectives of the research we report here is to demonstrate in a reliable way one of the modalities in which the most popular television productions in Mexico participate in racist practices. To this end, we analyzed 27 telenovelas based on a comparative model of an intersectional nature focused mainly on analyzing the ethnoraciality denoted by the skin tones of the acting casts of the contents examined.[4] Various sources have pointed out what for many observers is evident at first glance: that the dominant trend of television productions in Mexico privileges physical types of actors and actresses conventionally identified as white, to the detriment of the phenotypic diversity that predominates in our country (Caballero Ávila, 2013; Dorcé Ramos, 2005; Hecht, 2007; Navarrete, 2016; Paxman, 2021; Tipa, 2019; We are mitú, 2017). In the most recent edition of his groundbreaking book *El Tigre, Emilio Azcárraga Milmo*, historian Andrew Paxman (2021) points out:

> Racism manifested itself in the marginalization of most of the Mexican population and their dark complexion … Even telenovelas heroines –whether they were elementary school teachers, orphans, or even scavengers– were white-skinned, often blonde women. Many foreigners who had recently arrived in Mexico turned on the television and wondered why Mexican programs represented a country that strangely resembled Swedish people, [even] Azcárraga Milmo went so far as to express: "What Televisa needs are two white channels and two channels ... for blacks" (p. 12).

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4   Given the high volume of information resulting from the intersectional analysis of the corpus, we chose to divide the presentation of results into several modules. The first, which we display here, accounts for a panoramic view of ethnoraciality and certain intersectional aspects; the second analyzes with greater granularity how in each specific melodramatic story the categories of class and gender are intertwined with those of ethnoraciality, generating unique connotations in each case; finally, in the third module, we return to the panoramic view to identify general patterns in the total corpus of the study.

For those of us who have been analyzing the audiovisual industry for several decades, an assertion of this type is not strange, even though it has been difficult for us to explain and properly characterize the phenomenon in a satisfactory way. We have been able to witness how casting, both in national cinematography and in television production, is known for its use of leading performers with white complexions, since they are considered –in dominant socio-textual discourse– to carry traits of "normality", beauty and virtue inherent to such phenotypic condition. In contrast, brown or black actors and actresses whose phenotype does not coincide with the standards of hegemonic and heteronormative beauty are relegated to marginal roles, most of the time stereotyped or exoticized in their characterization of class, gender or ethnicity by linking them to undervalued or even stigmatized trades or cultural practices.

What we will name here as *ethnophenotyping*[5] refers precisely to those social practices that classify, categorize and differentiate people hierarchically according to a sense of perceived commonality (ethno) that they assign to bodily appearance (phenotype) of individuals or groups of people. Those singular treats are then arbitrarily related to

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[5]   We suggest this neologism because ethnoraciality, a much more common term, emphasizes general social practices of recognition based on ethnic markers or linked to certain forms of racialization. However, we consider the notion of *ethnophenotype* narrows down the analytical spectrum to incorporate more specific practices that are constitutive ways of *seeing, perceiving, describing and naming* otherness in terms of the mode in which the phenotypic and its surrounding attributes are interpreted. What we put at the center of the process is the body as a visible or observable entity of inscription and perception of otherness. In part, this heuristic resource dialogues with the work of anthropologist Fredrik Barth (1976) on diacritics, the linguistic notion which alludes to signs that modify the pronunciation of words (from the Greek etymology *diakritikós*, to distinguish). In the context of the social uses of ethnicity, Barth characterizes them as a type of sign that denotes the markings or accents in the ethnic distinction between culturally distinct groups, especially on the linguistic level, but also in physical appearance, and in bodily expressiveness.

biological, behavioral, or moral attributes that are essentially ascribed to individuals or human groups in racial, ethnic, gendered or class-oriented terms. In other words, phenotypes are constructed, circulated and appropriated positionally. Thus, we argue that social stratification is a complex phenomenon which produces peculiar identification effects in different geohistorical contexts (Hall, 2019). Therefore, the articulation of categories of class, gender, ethnicity, and racialization is manifested through singular experiences and perceptions of intersectionality that organize and dispute the social formations of alterity through the mediation of audiovisual technologies (Briones, 2005; Dorcé, 2005, 2015).

In our regional context, mestizaje, as an ideological formation, elaborates a particular grammar and aesthetics in the mediatized visualization of ethnophenotypes in the public sphere, which, among other things, celebrates racial mixture and indeterminacy (*color blindness*) while naturalizing surreptitious or ambiguous forms of ethnic and racial discrimination, which nevertheless have very clear pernicious effects on the political axis of gender relations (Ortega Domínguez, 2022). That is, in certain environments, racialization determines peremptory aspects of gender and class, hence we question how, in the audiovisual spectrum, racialization operates furtively as a stratifying criterion in the formation of television casts, specifically through a significant marking of skin color (dermal ethnophenotype).

The social mediations involved in the generation of ethnopheno-types are epistemic, sensory, and affective in nature. They leave their mark on the uses we make of audiovisual technologies to act, per-ceive, represent and distinguish what is familiar to us (the domestic / *heimlich*)[6] from what is alien to us (otherness), by virtue of the tensions and contradictions that this binarism produces in the field of mediatized everyday experience. As we know, melodrama and telenovelas have

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[6]   The German term that refers to that which is related to home and domestic that is also furtive, visible only to the community. For an extraordinary critical genealogy of the history of domesticity in this sense and the idea of home as territory in its relationship with technologies and identity experi-ences, see Morley (2005).

been the most popular genre and format in Latin America to the extent that their stories express structures of feeling that in their symbolic density narrate in carnivalesque ways the conflictive affective conformation of national communities and their continuous foundational dramas in the context of the unequal modernization of social relations (Dorcé Ramos, 2005; Herlinghaus, 2002; Mattelart & Mattelart, 1987).

In that sense, we should ask ourselves why to date, if for decades, we have had the empirical certainty that telenovelas have been discriminatory in their castings and in the narrative confection of those fictions, no academic study has systematically documented these specific forms of racist exclusion. The answer to this formulation is too broad to be considered here. However, we can advance some hypotheses in this regard in the following section where we review the most salient aspects of the state of the art. The most significant contributions that we recognize there also serve to theoretically frame the modalities in which telenovelas are positioned as actors of social reproduction –operating in complex and contradictory ways in the face of political challenges– of inequality and injustice.

SOCIAL SCIENCES AND RESEARCH ON RACISM IN MEXICO

Racism in Mexico is a serious problem that has multiple implications that we are only beginning to understand. Even though in the last two decades scientific studies on the production, circulation and consumption of audiovisual fiction have been consolidated in Mexico, to date there are very few studies in this area which analyze how these social practices affect the reproduction of racism in our country. In part, this omission responds to the dominant theoretical-conceptual logics of the field of social sciences and humanities that have tended to prioritize approaches to social antagonisms and solidarities focused on social class, ethnicity, gender, or the relationship between these, in different socio-political processes. Much of the work derived from these multiple traditions and intellectual commitments has been fundamental in the design of public policies, regulations, and legal frameworks aimed at guaranteeing human rights in Mexico.

Although a strategic area of these studies has productively focused on identifying historical-structural practices and processes that perpetuate various forms of discrimination –from coloniality, the eugenicist project of *mestizaje*, gender disparity, to criticisms of indigenism– systemic racism continues to be a phenomenon marginally studied by the sciences in Mexico (Castellanos Guerrero, 1991, 2009; Gall, 1999; Moreno Figueroa, 2008; Navarrete, 2016; Velázquez, 2011).

Despite the persistence of what we could call the *denialist articulation* around racism at the national level, this line of research has shown significant growth, especially in the field of historiography, sociology and anthropology (*Estudios Sociológicos*, 2022; Islas & Ang, 2024). It is encouraging to observe, for example, how initiatives promoted by pioneering researchers in this line since the 90s have been promoted at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (Racism and Autonomy Research Line), the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (INTEGRA-CEIICH), the Colegio de México (PRODER), the National Institute of Anthropology and History, the Council to Prevent and Eliminate Discrimination, or even the National Institute of Statistics and Geography.

The Zapatista uprising of 1994 made it clear then that anti-indigenous racism was at the center of social formation and State policies that legitimized the exclusion, precariousness, and even annihilation of indigenous communities, as well as other marginalized populations. The Zapatista forms of organization, heirs to the legacy of peasant and workers' struggles, strongly challenged a multiplicity of social actors of the so-called third sector that have contributed to the integration of collectives with a wide range of demands, among others, the anti-racist struggle that has taken on a notorious public visibility in socio-digital networks and in the mass media (Dorcé Ramos, 2022; Gómez Izquierdo, 2002; Iturriaga Acevedo, 2016). All this has produced a conducive environment in which the academic research agenda on racism and its relationship with socioeconomic inequality is expanding its spectrum of operation.

CULTURAL AND COMMUNICATION STUDIES ON RACISM

In line with the trends indicated above, the field of scientific studies on communication still lags very far behind in this area. The review of specialized literature shows that, although there are laudable efforts that are breaking through on the issue, racism is not a structurally recognized phenomenon in the field (Tipa, 2021). It is significant, thus, that a substantial part of the existing works on the role played by the discursivity of racism and the media representation of alterities in Mexico have been championed from anthropology, historiography or cultural studies. Mexican anthropology has had a much more fruitful relationship with historiography over time, which has allowed both disciplines to recognize (dis)continuities in complex social processes and their relationship with social practices mediated by the press, radio, cinema or TV. The incorporation of ethnography as a central epistemic practice in this discipline favors the deployment of perspectives that not only give "density" to empirical work but also make it possible to identify and describe in a pragmatic way the connections between practices, institutions, territories, communities and technological mediations. Archival historiographic work, on the other hand, has provided a set of tools that, based on documentary evidence, challenge biased readings of the past and certain naïve interpretations of memory.

The fertile interweaving of historical-anthropological transdisciplinary perspectives in the studies of cinematographic visuality can be found in the works of Pérez Montfort (2007), Tuñón (2009), Tierney (2012), Arroyo (2011), Pulido Llano (2010) and García (2022), to name a few examples. Their work has been unraveling the intertextual character –which condenses discourses of literature, the arts, the press and academia– with which Mexican cinema also became a matrix of meaning that normalizes representations of the indigenous through a *whitening*, which, as we seek to verify with this study, remains dominant in television fiction. This operation instituted problematic stereotypes about indigenous people and other ethnicities to the extent that this filmography acted as a symbolic gesture of inclusion / historical reparation –with respect to colonization and the formation of modern Mexico– narrating stories starring indigenous characters that were

played by white actors and characterized in a condescending way from the discourse of mestizaje. This line of research has been important, among other things, because it has been shaping a transdisciplinary perspective on the social construction of identities, alterities and cultural identifications that germinate in the field of production and consumption of Mexican golden age cinema and the legitimation of it as national heritage.

The intermediality of these discourses takes written and printed communication as one of the strongest foundational referents where the historical inscription of discriminatory logics and practices in Mexico take place. This is confirmed by the wealth of works of a historiographical nature, which in their archival scrutiny have analyzed administrative documents, diaries, memoirs, scientific treatises and, of course, newspapers, serials or other literary sources to understand the discontinuities and persistence of the fields of social antagonism structured by etnoracial stratification (Aguirre Beltrán, 1994; Alberro & Aizpuru, 2013; Althouse, 2005; Vinson, 2018). In this regard, research on the role played by the press, textbooks and popular magazines in the reproduction of racism highlights dense political networks in which the State, civil society and private initiative are relevant agents in the ideological orientation of formal education and entertainment with deep xenophobic and racist biases (Corona & Le Mûr, 2017; Gutiérrez, as cited in Tipa, 2021; Masferrer León, 2016). In a sustained manner, indigenous, black, Jewish, Chinese or Japanese ancestry serve as a reference to dehumanize, caricature and stigmatize these populations while extolling an ethnocentric vision of mestizo modernity (Domínguez Pérez, 2019; Iturriaga Acevedo, 2016; Navarro Granados, 2015; Pineda, 2003).

Regarding the analysis of television content and the representation of national alterities, innovative studies have been carried out in Nuevo León that seek to document how television content –both fictional and factual– mobilize stereotypical representations and how these are valued in a diverse way in the reception process (Marañón Lazcano & Muñiz, 2012). These works focused on understanding the stratification of representations of indigenous people on local and national television, analyzing how ethnicity was stereotypically denoted through the characterization of certain phenotypes, finding that:

The presence of "indigenous characters" is very small and with secondary roles, represented as field workers, fishermen, domestic servants, healers or midwives. Likewise, the "indigenous" on Mexican television is a person with a white complexion [when demographically speaking the vast majority of indigenous groups in Mexico are browned skinned], with black eyes and hair, with a "standard" physical appearance or a tendency to fatness and of short or average stature, dressed in "traditional Mexican" clothing and speaking with a "peculiar accent" (Muñiz et al., as cited in Tipa, 2021, p. 155).

Although these studies do not conceptualize their findings from a critical theorization of race, they do recognize discriminatory patterns in these practices of cultural production and consumption that can be read as racist expressions that produce meaning by associating ethnicity, class, and racialization in stigmatizing terms.

Concomitantly, the work of Durin and Vásquez (2013) develops a sophisticated model for documenting the sexist, classist, and racist discourse on domestic workers that is brought together in various media formats, including classic titles in the history of telenovelas such as *María Isabel*, *Simplemente María*, etc. The research in question –which results converge with the work of Silveira Saravia (2009)– explores through interviews with a group of television viewers, how they value in a polyvalent way the representation of the "servants" that occur in these melodramas: they mobilize the stereotype of indigenous, peasant and migrant women as naïve or even uncivilized, who nevertheless are also noble, strong characters that always seek to "surpass themselves" through social mobility.

Whether using textual analysis, content analysis or other qualitative techniques, this body of research has been able to advance our knowledge about the way in which content in different formats and genres expresses and reproduces racist schemes in the media in Mexico. Based on what has been briefly described here, our research seeks to supplement these lines of inquiry by reviewing to what extent the production of telenovelas today continues to encourage discriminatory practices, not only at the level of the stories they tell, but also in the way they tell them through the confection of their acting casts. In particular, we

explore plausible ways to formally account for the whiteness of the leading casts of telenovelas as being not incidental, but rather systematic. We designed the following research protocol to frame this question with theoretical-methodological considerations which seek to further capture some of the complexities so far exposed.

ETHNOPHENOTYPE: RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS

An initial assumption for developing our work is that racism operates constitutively by interweaving and making sense of social experiences of class, gender, and ethnicity in an intersectional way (Combahee River Collective 1977/1983; Crenshaw Williams, 1989; Hall, 1988; Viveros Vigoya, 2016). Therefore, an analysis that aims to account for the intersectional dimension of the phenomenon should not be reduced to a one-dimensional description of social typologies –such as skin color, sexuality, gender, etc.– to infer the connotations that are mobilized throughout the process of social production of meaning in telenovelas.[7]

   In the research project[8] from which this article is derived, we identify the set of phenotypic typologies of the casts, based on the associative character they acquire in the performance of characters played by actresses and actors. Its ethnophenotype is enhanced or altered in the production process for dramaturgical purposes to affect the denotative plane of the story. In this way, content is given to the characterizations that symbolically assign characters a specific socioeconomic

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[7]   Here we want to insist on the processual nature of the production, circulation and consumption of media content in relation to Paul du Gay's Circle of Culture model. As we know, the very process of producing telenovelas involves the activation of multiple paratexts related to the life and work of the actors and actresses in which references to the constitution of their ethnophenotypes are evident.

[8]   The project, coordinated by André Dorcé, is: "Documentation and analysis of the representation of sociocultural diversity in the Mexican audiovisual spectrum (2024-2027)", approved in 2024 by the Consejo Divisional of the División de Ciencias de la Comunicación y Diseño at UAM-Cuajimalpa,

level, a sex-gender orientation, ethnoraciality and other substantive behavioral characteristics, which, when put in relation to each other, not only produce dramatic *pathos*, but also identity connotations of an intra- and extra-diegetic nature. The constitution of socially recognizable archetypes and stereotypes in televisual melodramas is mediated by the use of ethnophenotypes. The symbolic density of these social typologies (archetypes and stereotypes) is partly due to the fact that they tend to be personified by employing people with hierarchical and normalized phenotypes (skin color, eyes, hair, complexion, height, etc.).[9]

We argue that racialization operates as a homogenizing and reductionist logic through discursive devices that symbolize visual attributes, such as skin color (dermal ethnophenotype), in a systemic way in the field of hegemonic cultural production (Jablonski, 2021). This pattern is verifiable, on a macro-observation scale, regardless of the narrative singularities that each telenovela exposes. To understand the intersectional dimension of each title analyzed (how sex-gender and socioeconomic relations are represented in a racist mode), it was necessary first to evaluate how the emblematic attribute of racialization (skin tone) is used in the extradiegetic plane of a large sample of television programs. It is from this framework that we consider it possible to understand how the specificity of racist practices in television production is articulated with the representation of ethnicity, gender and class in the contexts of melodramatic fictionality. For reasons of space and heuristic convenience, in this article we will primarily account for the indicators related to skin tone (*Colorimetry indices*), with the understanding that the results presented here intend to emphasize the visual dimension of racism, enunciating in a rather general way the quantitative indications on intersectionality.

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[9] Let's think of some emblematic cases: Verónica Castro playing *Rosa Salvaje*, a young woman in extreme poverty who does not look like we *assume* most people in that condition do; Adela Noriega as an indigenous woman in *María Isabel* (1997); Angelique Boyer as a low-class coastal fisherwoman in *El amor invencible* (2023); Angélica María as a Lacandon indigenous in *Yara* (1979); Thalía as a pepenadora, costeña, or itinerant in *María Mercedes* (1992), *María del Mar* (1994), or *María la del barrio* (1996), respectively.

With these objectives in mind, we decided to analyze telenovelas produced by TelevisaUnivision, a hegemonic company in the Mexican and Spanish-speaking U.S. markets, which has generated these fictions in a sustained manner and with the highest rating share in the last three years (Vasallo de Lopes et al., 2024).[10] Table 1 lists the titles of the telenovelas that the conglomerate has produced in the selected period.

TABLE 1
TELENOVELAS ANALYZED

Vencer la culpa (2023)	*Mi secreto* (2022)	*Mi fortuna es amarte* (2021-2022)
Tierra de esperanza (2023)	*La madrastra* (2022)	*Contigo sí* (2021-2022)
Pienso en ti (2023)	*Vencer la ausencia* (2022)	*Sos Me estoy enamorando* (2021-2022)
Eternamente amándonos (2023)	*Mujer de nadie* (2022)	*Vencer el pasado* (2021)
El amor invencible (2023)	*La herencia* (2022)	*La desalmada* (2021)
Perdona nuestros pecados (2023)	*Corazón guerrero* (2022)	*Si nos dejan* (2021)
Mi camino es amarte (2022)	*El último rey* (2022)	*Diseñando tu amor* (2021)
Cabo (2022)	*Los ricos también lloran* (2022)	*¿Qué le pasa a mi familia?* (2021)
Corona de lágrimas 2 (2022)	*Amor dividido* (2022)	*Fuego ardiente* (2021)

Source: The authors.

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[10] We consider that generating a sample of titles produced in a period of between three and four years would allow us to identify fluctuations or continuities in the variables to be observed in our analysis. The aim is to continue refining this analysis model to be able to take larger samples and carry out a much more extensive longitudinal study to complement the research.

Under these considerations, we document the categories derived from ethnophenotypic profiles (skin tone, gender identity, class, and ethnoraciality), depending on the hierarchical distribution of the cast (from the leading actresses to extras).[11] We examined how many people in the cast are male or female, what is the character's sexual orientation, their ethnoraciality and the correspondence between these variables and skin tone linked to other complementary referents alluding to the complexion and dominant beauty schemes. In the attached section on methodology, we explain in more detail the logic with which we weigh the validity criteria for the analysis of variables whose observation could be subject to biases or subjective assessments by the team of analysts. Regarding the skin tones of the casts, we chose to use the Monk Skin Tone Scale (MSTS) scheme together (Monk, 2019).[12]

From these queries and assumptions, we derive specific questions divided into two modules that correspond to two different, although complementary, methodological scopes. The first was addressed with a content analysis and the second with a more detailed textual analysis.[13] We focus on identifying whether there is a correlation between skin tone and the leading or relatively marginal role assigned to those who make

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[11] It should be noted that not all actors or people who appear in the frame are recognized in the credits of the productions. We only include in our analysis performers who are named with a space in the credits. Although there are more or less shared contractual criteria in the industry for the presentation of credits on screen, in our study we decided to divide the casts in terms of the frequency and centrality with which the performers appear on screen, from the most prominent to incidental performers: protagonists, supporting cast, secondary cast, bits and extras.

[12] Subsequently, we will refer to these data as *Colorimetry Indices* (CIs).

[13] In the second module, behavioral attributes related to the social roles prescribed to the characters were identified in relation to the indicators resulting from the first module. That is, it was sought to identify what type of staging occurs with respect to the gender condition and socioeconomic level of the characters, based on particular phenotypes. In the annexed section of methodology, we present the outline and complete justification of both modules.

up the total set of performers in each telenovela. Thus, it is intended to answer the following research questions:

1. How many actors and actresses (cast) appear in a significant way throughout the telenovela?
2. How is the full cast configured based on the different levels in the colorimetry indices (CI)?
3. What is the range of colorimetry indices (CI) for the entire cast?
4. How many actors and actresses participate in the leading roles?
5. How is the variation of colorimetry indices (CI) distributed with respect to the cast hierarchies (protagonists, secondary cast, supporting cast, etc.)?
6. Based on the colorimetry indices, what is the tonal average of the protagonist core?
7. How many LGTBQ+ characters appear in the corpus?
8. How many explicitly ethnoracially marked characters appear in the corpus?

METHODOLOGY

The collection, systematization and analysis of necessary data for this research was possible thanks to the design of a database that allowed the management of qualitative information and image files with metadata. Once the design of the database was completed, it was necessary to identify and consult various documentary sources (videographic, bibliographic and biographical materials available online and other archives) to obtain basic records on each of the television productions analyzed.

In order to carry out the work of analyzing the material, it was necessary to form a team of six analysts: a general coordinator, a technical coordinator and four analysts with advanced training in communication studies. The people who participated in the study accredited a 10-hour workshop of training in critical representational analysis and content analysis oriented towards intersectionality issues. A work scheme was designed to maintain consistency in the process of capturing information and preliminary analysis in the database, using

a coding notebook to monitor data production, as well as to identify substantive discrepancies or possible errors in the categorization criteria.

Access and systematization of the analysis

Access to video material was made through subscriptions to ViX's SVOD and through several YouTube channels specialized in telenovelas. To carry out the content and textual analysis, it was necessary to examine at least nine episodes of each production. At least three episodes were taken from the beginning, three from the middle and three from the final section of the story. According to the specificities of the production analyzed, there were cases in which it was necessary to analyze more episodes. This selection logic allows: 1) to identify which actors and actresses make up the cast that has the greatest prominence on screen, 2) to identify the professional roles of the characters and other sociodemographic characterizations, and 3) to identify the plot of the narrative, the dramatic arcs of the characters, and the way in which gender and class relations are represented based on ethnophenotypic patterns. Regarding the inquiry corresponding to the first module, the set of variables interwoven and that are empirically identifiable are shown in Table 2:

TABLE 2

VARIABLES TO IDENTIFY AND ANALYZE	
Skin tone	Socioeconomic level
Gender identity	Professional role
Sexual preference	Physical build
Social age	Adscription to hegemonic beauty models
	Where appropriate, ethnicity

Source: The authors.

To specifically address the typification, colorimetry indices and other attributes visible in the casts studied, folders were compiled with both individual images of each actor and actress, as well as images of the casts interacting in specific sequences of the analyzed

productions. After conducting a pilot test to determine the average number of actors and actresses who participate in the substantive cast, it was established that including 30 people would be enough to account for the most emblematic characters. This group of objects of analysis includes images of supporting actors and actresses, extras or "bits" that we consider significant due to the ethnophenotypic characteristics associated with their character. Thus, 6 200 images corresponding to 870 characters and approximately 280 episodes totaling more than 200 hours of video material were analyzed.

A criteria for selecting images was that the photographs had sufficient resolution and quality to be able to discern –by approximation– the color and tonality of the skin using the MSTS scale.[14] In the first phase of the procedure, the analysts used the MSTS in contrast to the selected images to establish which shades were closest to each of the values.[15] Using this procedure we were able to establish the degrees of tonal similarity between the measurement references and the images analyzed to characterize the *Colorimetry Index* of all the selected casts.[16] We were thus able to locate the skin tones of the performers homologating the MSTS scale, so that we had comparative ranges to answer the research questions. In this scheme, the range of shades from the lightest to the darkest is represented by 10 sets of tonal ranges that correspond to a number from 1 to 10 in ascending order (see Figure 1). As we will see in the next section, this model allows us to systematize

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[14] See https://skintone.google/the-scale

[15] The use of tonal schemes does not intend to establish an identical or symmetrical correspondence between these scales and the color perceived in each character, but to be able to determine the relative closeness of the pigmentation of the casts with general ranges associated with the spectrum of what is commonly described as light, brown and dark complexion. The subtle variations perceived by analysts in each case tended to be within the limits of each of the ten tonal ranges.

[16] Extensive explanations of the reliability and methodological validity of the use of these tools can be read here in Spanish: https://figshare.com/s/994793af3139bf156c06

the analysis of the casts in the terms already defined and to be able to recognize patterns in the corpus of analysis.

FIGURE 1

SKIN TONE RESEARCH AI GOOGLE

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
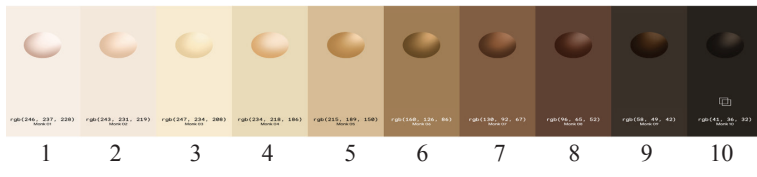
Source: Skin Research @ Google AI.

RESULTS

To facilitate the interpretation of the results, we have arranged two tables that bring together the total relevant data of the 27 programs of the corpus (see Tables 3 and 4). In this feature, we do not detail the results on a case-by-case basis, as we are interested in generating a panoramic view of the total universe of all the content analyzed. In Table 3, in column A, we show the average of the total number of members that make up the general casts of the 27 telenovelas. In column B we show the average of the ranges of shades corresponding to the colorimetry index of all actors and actresses (MSTS). To characterize the existing acting hierarchies in the assignment of primary and secondary leading roles, we group the actors and actresses who appear most prominently on screen in the category of Protagonist Core (NP). The total number of participants in such a nucleus is reported in column C. We chose to average the colorimetry indices of that NP and report it in column D.

In Table 4, we order the general data referring to the variables of gender, class, and ethnoraciality that allow us to establish, in a preliminary way, the degree of correspondence that these have with the variables of the CI.[17]

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[17]   It is important to emphasize that for this level of analysis we are not seeking to describe the singularity of the relations of gender, class or ethnoraciality

TABLE 3

GLOBAL RESULTS OF COLORIMETRY INDEX (CI) ANALYSIS
OF THE ENTIRE CORPUS

A	B	C	D
Average of actors analyzed in general cast	Average colorimetry index overall cast	Average of actors analyzed in protagonist nucleus	Average epidermal ethnophenotype (EFE) in protagonist nucleus
31.9629	2.5595	4.5925	2.1711

Source: The authors.

The analysis of the dataset allowed us to make the following assessments. Regarding the analysis of the Colorimetry Index (CI), the general average of shades of the sample is 2.55 on the MSTS scale (see Figure 1), that is, the pigmentation of the casts in these fictions tends to correspond with the first three ranges of lighter colors of MSTS. Sex-gender and class diversity is represented following the same logic that manifests a whitening aesthetic in which regardless of the socioeconomic level, sexual orientation or gender identity of the characters, they are characterized by people with a white CI. In fact, the inclusion of LGBTQ+ characters is negligible (1.8%) and tends strongly to operate within the dominant scheme of whiteness. The socioeconomic spectrum, from the upper to the lower class, tends to be played by white actors; however, we observe that the high socioeconomic range tends not to be interpreted by people with darker complexions in the CI. In other words, brown people do not play characters with economic power. Actors and actresses with a darker epidermal phenotype, from range 4 onwards, practically do not participate in significant roles in terms of leading or dramatic prominence. Exceptionally, the

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represented at the narrative level, but at the level of a denotative visuality based on the quantification of the relevant sociodemographic categories. In a subsequent complementary analysis, it is intended to contrast the perspectives of the general denotative visuality against the symbolic particularities of each telenovela.

TABLE 4

GLOBAL RESULTS OF ANALYSIS OF GENDER, CLASS, AND ETHNORACIALITY VARIABLES OF THE ENTIRE CORPUS

I	II	III	IV	V	VI
Percentage of CIS men	Percentage of CIS women	Percentage of LGBTQ+ characters	Percentage of characters by socioeconomic level	Ethnophenotype of hegemonic beauty	MERE* percentage Mestizo
49.1%	50.6%	1.85%	High: 35% Middle high: 10% Middle: 33% Middle low: 9% Low: 12%	70%	99%

* MERE is the acronym for Explicit Ethno-Racial Marking, that is, the characters are characterized by making explicit mentions of their ethnic origin, nationality or raciality.

Source: The authors.

members of the cast of darker NPs are mostly men (cis), which implies that in this production scheme, very brown women (cis or trans) are not members of the NP. Actors and actresses with this epidermal attribute are relegated to marginal roles that involve less screen time and most of the time, the adoption of morally and ethnoracially stereotyped professions (domestic workers, service personnel, criminals and police). The correlate of this propensity is that in the constitution of the protagonist core (NP) the first 2 lighter ranges of MSTS are favored (average of 2.17, see Figure 1). In other words, the members of NP have an even lighter complexion than the rest of the cast. A significant correlation in this sense is the correspondence we find between the whiteness of NPs and the dominance of ethnophenotypes of hegemonic beauty. In the corpus analyzed, the notion of hegemonic beauty is constituted, in a very notorious way, by the scheme of the dominant whiteness. In the set of telenovelas analyzed, no significant indigenous, Afro-Mexican, or other ethnoracialized characters appeared in any of the casts (Gómez Rodríguez & Méndez Pupo, 2023).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results presented here corroborate and complement various indications –which had not been verified at this scale– that have denounced the modalities in which telenovelas express and incite unique forms of racism and discrimination in Mexico. The data produced by this research clearly show that the productions analyzed systematically exclude actors and actresses with brown ethnophenotypes (≥ 4 in MSTS) in the formation of the leading casts. The sociocultural and ethnic diversity of the country is excluded and reduced to a set of stereotypical identity tropes that requires whitening to dramatically reconcile social alterities: the petty "inclusion" of LGBTQ+ characters in the analyzed plots operates on the condition that it only occurs with an "acceptable" degree of whiteness, the same canon that by definition does not admit the existence of indigenous or Afro-Mexican characters in that milieu.

We have been able to document the existing trend that the most marginal roles –in terms of screen presence and dramatic relevance– are assigned to performers with darker ethnophenotypic attributes and

with traits different from those of white hegemonic beauty (Doncel de la Colina & Miranda Villanueva, 2017; Krozer & Gómez, 2023; Ortiz Piedrahíta, 2013). In this sense, our results are consistent with other studies on racism that allow us to outline the complexity of the phenomenon beyond the television screen. For example, the sociodemographic project PRODER, developed by COLMEX, produced very convincing evidence that establishes that the skin tone of the vast majority of people in Mexico fluctuates between ranges 4 and 7 of MSTM, and that the records of ranges 1 to 3 represent less than 1% of the country's population (personal communication with Patricio Solís, reference based on the estimate of the PRODER survey analyzed in Solís et al., 2025). Despite this condition, white leading casts monopolize more than 98% of the prominent positions of the telenovelas studied here. The same COLMEX study has shown substantive relationships between perceptions of ethnoraciality and social practices of socioeconomic stratification that affect people's negative perception of their social environment and themselves (Reyes-Martínez et al., 2022). This echoes the testimonies collected by Moreno Figueroa (2012) in the study in which she identified that for many women "the color of the [brown] skin and beauty were also clearly linked to a series of emotions such as shame, pain, slight and the desire to be 'normal' and not to be 'insignificant'" (p. 2).

Analyzed in this context, the data published here are unequivocal indications of a type of discrimination of a racist nature that excludes and stigmatizes people with bodily features different from those of an arbitrary, unjust, and degrading norm that mobilizes aesthetic violence that is especially harmful against women (Pineda, 2021). These discriminatory practices not only have a negative impact on the process of democratization of the representation and social consumption of television fiction in Mexico. They also express in a transversal way the racist habitus in the audiovisual labor market. An area that is increasingly precarious due to the logic of capitalism under platform corporations (Belmont Cortés & Calónico Lucio, 2024). A systemic exclusion is exercised from the workforce of actors and actresses whose brown, *prieto* or black ethnophenotypes do not conform to the ideal corporeality of the dominant whiteness.

Articles 1 and 6 of the Mexican Constitution, respectively, explicitly establish the prohibition of all forms of discrimination, both in the workplace and in the field of broadcasting. Various NGOs and anti-racist groups such as COPERA, Poder Prieto or Racismo MX have been instrumental in making these practices visible, specifically in the media (Rodríguez, 2021). With regard to the rights of audiences –established in Article 256 of the Federal Telecommunications and Broadcasting Law– we consider that this research provides elements that demonstrate how the prerogatives and obligations of the matter are contravened by the concessionaires. Subject to consideration of the caveats of the case, what we present here could also be evidence of legal or ethical non-compliance with anti-discrimination regulations in the United States, a territory in which the content reviewed in this study is also televised by its co-producer, Univision.[18]

The results of our work provide inputs for the public discussion on the role that these studies should adopt in the design of quality measurement schemes for inclusion and equality policies adopted by private and public cultural actors in audiovisual production. To achieve the best possible impact in these areas, it is necessary to expand the intersectionality criteria used in our analytical model, so that in future iterations, variables not included in this study are incorporated, such as those related to the representation and inclusion of people with various forms of disability in various audiovisual formats. Although with this work we have been able to advance some methodological aspects relevant to the line of research on discrimination and racism, it is still necessary to continue refining it with broader samples that are representative of other areas of audiovisual production (for instance, streaming platforms such

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[18] At the time of writing, official initiatives on DE&I (Diversity, Equality and Inclusion, characterized as "woke") policies are being strongly challenged and canceled by the Donald Trump administration, as well as by various media corporations aligned with that political program. It is reasonable to assume that to the extent that this pro-discriminatory program gains legitimacy in Latin America, more visibly in Argentina, Brazil, or El Salvador, inclusion policies will be the subject of much more intense disputes.

as Netflix, Prime Video, Disney+, etc.). It is also necessary to contrast such procedures with analogous exercises carried out in international contexts and to subject them to a much more detailed theoretical discussion. The notion of ethnophenotype still needs to be conceptualized in a robust way and can be enhanced with audience studies that systematically investigate how in intermedial reception phenomena such as the one studied here structure the visuality of alterities, producing particular biases. Biases that are projected into algorithmic systems and artificial intelligence mechanisms associated with the identification and categorization of people in informational models designed for strategic decision-making in all areas of life.

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