

**LATINO USA** invites students, teachers, and parents to use our program and our web site as an educational resource. This page is for use in your classroom, library, or home. From the [Latino USA Learning Resources](http://www.latinousa.org/learning/) web page (<http://www.latinousa.org/learning/>) you can access Real Audio files and written transcripts of stories, and suggestions for their use.



**María Martin**

**TACO BELL AND LATINO  
STEREOTYPES  
By MARÍA MARTIN**

**The dog's name is Dinky, and he's just a few inches off the ground. But this Chihuahua, who Taco Bell says was rescued from a pound, has ignited something of a controversy about advertising images, subliminal messages, and what they say about Mexican culture. LATINO USA's María Martin has this report.**

MARÍA MARTIN: Two young men ride in an older-model BMW while happily munching fast food from you-know-where. Above the back seat sits a bobbing plastic dog. Suddenly, the young men look in the rear-view mirror and the plastic canine's been replaced by a little pointy-eared Chihuahua with bulging eyes. This dog's very much alive, and he'll do just about anything to get his little canine teeth around some of that food.

DINKY: Yo quiero Taco Bell!

VADA HILL: It was a line that we thought was a cute line. I mean, it comes right out of our quasi-Mexican image. It comes right out of what's unique and distinctive about this brand.

MARÍA MARTIN: That's Vada Hill, in charge of the marketing campaign featuring the [Chihuahua called Dinky](http://www.everwonder.com/david/tacobelldog.html) (<http://www.everwonder.com/david/tacobelldog.html>). The campaign's been very successful for [Taco Bell](http://www.tacobell.com) (<http://www.tacobell.com>). But in recent weeks, it's also stirred up some controversy, which appears to have begun with the comments of former Clearwater, Florida, Mayor Gabriel Cazares. He's the former president of the Tampa, Florida, chapter of LULAC, the League for United Latin American Citizens.

GABRIEL CAZARES: I think it was an unfortunate commercial. I think that the use of a dog to depict Mexicans was very demeaning. If Taco Bell wanted to depict someone that would reflect Mexican culture we have many live, two-legged artists, singers, dancers, musicians-some great people in America that could have been selected to give a testimonial for Taco Bell (and) say, "Yo quiero un taco." And that wouldn't have been offensive.

MARÍA MARTIN: But many other Latinos didn't respond so negatively to the ads, as did Mr. Cazares.

LISA NAVARRETE: People when there's sort of a real thing that crosses the line, we hear from folks, and then we follow up on that. We hadn't heard at all.

MARÍA MARTIN: Lisa Navarrete is the deputy vice president for public information for the National Council of La Raza in Washington.

LISA NAVARRETE: I don't really see a problem with the commercial, but I think the issue is a larger one, which is, this really points to how our community is so sensitive to its image and negative media image that it has (at) any kind of portrayal at all. **Because our portrayals on television are so few and far between, and when they are on they're usually negative, that it's very understandable that people in our community would be very sensitive to any kind of portrayal on television. And I think this is one of those cases.**

MARÍA MARTIN: As for the League of United Latin American Citizens, they quickly disavowed Mr. Cazares' statements and [made clear he was speaking only as an individual](http://www.lulac.org/Issues/Releases/TacoBell.html) (<http://www.lulac.org/Issues/Releases/TacoBell.html>). Cuauhtemoc Figueroa is the organization's director of policy and communications.

CUAUHTEMOC FIGUEROA: Mr. Cazares has every right to believe and think the way he does about those commercials, and there are probably others in our organization that believe the same way as Mr. Cazares, but they haven't brought that to the attention of our organization.

MARÍA MARTIN: Would you say that this is a non-issue?

CUAUHTEMOC FIGUEROA: I would say initially, that was the reaction of our president, that it was a non-issue, because it frustrated Belen Robles, our president. Because for her, I mean, she goes around the country and travels extensively to meet with our state directors and addressing the issues affecting various Hispanic communities, Dominicans, Puertorriqueños, Mexican Americans, Cubanos. And she extensively travels. And this wasn't on the radar screen. It hadn't come up.

MARÍA MARTIN: In other commercials, Dinky is seen walking up a fire escape, passing by the open windows of many apartments.

DINKY: What is a logarithm?

MARÍA MARTIN: In one commercial, a couple is watching Jeopardy on television as he resolutely makes his way to get some of that food.

DINKY: Yo quiero Taco Bell!

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: Advertising has to have some elements of sexuality and aggression to be really successful, and people have known that on Madison Avenue since the 1950s. So advertising is never accidental.

MARÍA MARTIN: [Amalia Mesa-Bains](http://www.monterey.edu/academic/faculty/mesa-bains.html) (<http://www.monterey.edu/academic/faculty/mesa-bains.html>) is the director for visual and public art at California State University at Monterey Bay. She's a well-known artist and a scholar who studies advertising as a function of identity formation. For Mesa-Bains, negative images about Mexican culture are at the core of Taco Bell's message.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: So I think to take a Chihuahua, which is of course a dog, it's an animal, and use it to articulate in Spanish is really to personify Mexicans as animals. So it has two sides, because it's so cute and seductive. But I always ask my students to look at it: What is a Chihuahua? It's a dog. What is a dog? It's an animal. What is a female dog? We all know what those things are.

MARÍA MARTIN: Some people would say this is not a negative image, because you have a little dog that is so clever that he can get from the balcony to the car because he's so interested in getting to eat the Taco Bell food. In another commercial, he answers the Jeopardy question correctly on his way to get the Taco Bell food. So it's a clever little dog, and maybe it represents Latinos as clever people.

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: But it also represents Latinos as animals that have to scamper for their food. And I maintain that you have to look at the context in which that dog appears. That a dog appears near a brothel, that's a love hotel. That dog appears with low-riders. That dog appears with black people sitting in armchairs, snacking away while they watch television all day. What is that about? And to look at the dog is to look at the campaign of Taco Bell over these years-transgressive, seductive images.

MARÍA MARTIN: In the 1970s, Latinos rallied to protest the use of the image of a sleepy bandit in a large sombrero as an advertising symbol in a commercial for Frito's corn chips. The so-called Frito Bandito was eventually taken off the air. Twenty years later, the images, says Mesa-Bains, are not so blatant. **But even seemingly innocuous images, she says, are still capable of doing damage.**

AMALIA MESA-BAINS: I mean, we live in segregated communities. Half the time, people never meet us, but they certainly watch television. And this inundates endlessly. I'll give you a couple of scenarios about what the impact of it is. I have a friend who has a young boy, who's a teenager. And she overheard him talking to his friends, and in the voice of the Chihuahua he was speaking of a girl he liked. 'Yo quiero,' and then he named the girl. My husband had a student come into his class whose daughter came home from school in tears because she had been teased relentlessly by her peers as Miss Chihuahua, because she was Mexican. So these images and this concept is probably one of the most profound influences that we need to deal with, and we have accepted it over and over again. And I really think it's time for the institutions that represent us to speak up.

MARÍA MARTIN: An informal on-line poll conducted recently by Latino Net found people equally split among those who were offended by the Chihuahua commercial, those who were not, and those who thought it was a non-issue.

For its part, Taco Bell says in a statement by their vice president, that the company takes pride in the Mexican heritage of its food, and that their consumer research, including that done among Hispanics, indicates that people are being entertained and not offended.

For LATINO USA, I'm María Martin.

**María Martin**, (<http://www.latinousa.org/faq/staff/mmartin.html>), executive producer of LATINO USA, is a graduate student at Ohio State University.

---

## **Using LATINO USA By YASMIN YAVAR**

Suggestions for school, home, and libraries

Grades: 7-12 and beyond

Subjects: Current Events, Social Studies, and Language Arts

We've developed these suggestions with the help of students and teachers, along with our reporters. We're even more interested in learning how you use the piece.

[Click here to share your ideas.](mailto:deangraber@mail.utexas.edu) (deangraber@mail.utexas.edu)

After exploring initial reactions to the story, here are some ideas for discussion, writing and research.

### **LANGUAGE ARTS:**

Ask students to identify the various players in this report and to summarize their arguments.

Explore the terminology used in the piece. For example, what is the difference between not being offended by the Dinky commercial, and believing it is a **non-issue**?

What is meant by:

quasi-Mexican image

Advertising is never accidental

Even seemingly innocuous images are capable of doing damage.

Think of creative ways for students to express their opinions of the Taco Bell controversy in writing. These can include a persuasive essay, poem, letter to Taco Bell, or a speech that a Taco Bell executive might give to justify the ads.

Hold an in-class community meeting and/or a special "board meeting" of Taco Bell, to take action on the Dinky ads. Ask students to play the roles of various parties in the story. Have other students "cover" the events as members of the media.

**CURRENT EVENTS:**

Research Taco Bell's business and the history of its Dinky campaign. Has Taco Bell lost, or gained customers as a result? Are some people still speaking out against the ads, or has the controversy faded? How has Taco Bell responded?

[See and hear the Taco Bell ads.](http://www.everwonder.com/david/tacobelldog.html)

(<http://www.everwonder.com/david/tacobelldog.html>)

[Taco Bell's home page.](http://www.tacobell.com) (<http://www.tacobell.com>)

Discuss and/or research other controversial advertisements. Compare them with the Taco Bell campaign.

**SOCIAL STUDIES:**

Examine the nature of advertising in society and discuss an advertiser's responsibility to the public. Begin by brainstorming about advertising. What are its objectives, and whose interests does it serve? Who regulates it, and how?

Do students agree with Amalia Mesa-Bains' statement that advertising must contain elements of sexuality and aggression to succeed? Do the Dinky commercials contain these elements?

What are some stereotypes about Latinos that the media has fostered in the past (such as the Frito Bandito)? Does Dinky fall into the same category? Why, or why not?

Discuss the difference between an advertisement's intended message and the audience's actual perception. How can Dinky provoke such a variety of reactions-ranging from those who believe he is cute, seductive and clever, to others who are offended that he is a dog used to market "quasi-Mexican" food?

Can and should advertisers be responsible for the perceptions and consequences of their campaigns?

If Taco Bell has unintentionally offended some people, how should the company be expected to respond? Can consumers take legal action to force a company to kill an ad deemed offensive by some?

Take a vote in your classroom as to whether Dinky is offensive, not offensive, or a non-issue. What, if any, stereotype does he perpetuate about Latinos?

Discuss the statement: "We live in segregated communities. Half the time, people never meet us, but they certainly watch television."

### **CURRENT EVENTS: Sensitivity, hypersensitivity and political correctness**

Discuss Lisa Navarrete's comment: "Because our portrayals on television are so few and far between, and when they are on they're usually negative, ... it's very understandable that people in our community would be very sensitive to any kind of portrayal on television."

"Political correctness" is a buzzword of the 1990s and is often used to mean hypersensitivity. What do these terms mean, and what is the difference between the two? Do they relate at all to the Dinky controversy?

Examine other comparable incidents in the news, such as the Washington, D.C. official who resigned over his use of the word "niggardly." Are there ties to the Dinky story?

### **COMMENTARIES ABOUT DINKY**

["Ay Chihuahua," by Roger Hernandez](#)

(<http://www.latinolink.com/opinion/opinion98/0322OROG.HTM>)

["Chill-out on the Chihuahua and Seinfeld," by Linda Chavez](#)

(<http://www.jewishworldreview.com/cols/chavez051298.html>)

["A Dinky Controversy," by Jack R. Payton](#)

([http://www.nando.net/newsroom/ntn/voices/042298/voices12\\_25643\\_body.html](http://www.nando.net/newsroom/ntn/voices/042298/voices12_25643_body.html))

**Yasmin Yavar graduated from Bellaire High School in Houston, Texas and now attends the University of Texas at Austin. She is a student associate for LATINO USA.**

[Send feedback on this page](#) (deangraber@mail.utexas.edu)

LATINO USA's education project is sponsored by the [Dell Computer Corporation](http://www.dell.com). (<http://www.dell.com>)