

talkshoppe

Peeling Back Labels

How both self-identity and context matter when deciding between Hispanic, Latino, and Latinx



Talk Shoppe is a global consumer research agency based in Los Angeles, California. We delight in helping world-class brands approach growth and innovation with confidence.

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Introduction

As a consumer research company, our job is to distill complex human thoughts, emotions, and behavior into digestible and meaningful insights. To be able to do that, we need to truly understand the people whom we research. Not just who they are as shoppers or consumers, but who they are at their core. But, what does that even mean? What does it mean to know and understand someone deeply? For us at Talk Shoppe, it starts with truly understanding how they see themselves.

In honor of Hispanic Heritage Month last year (September 15 to October 15, 2023), we wanted to explore the theme of identity and labels among the Hispanic population living in the United States. Do people prefer ‘Hispanic’, ‘Latino’, or the relatively new ‘Latinx’? And more importantly, for researchers and marketers, does the label actually impact how people feel towards products or brands? You’d think that this would be an easy question for Talk Shoppe to answer given that we have six employees representing six Latin American countries, but we quickly saw that it was something we couldn’t answer so easily nor without nuance.

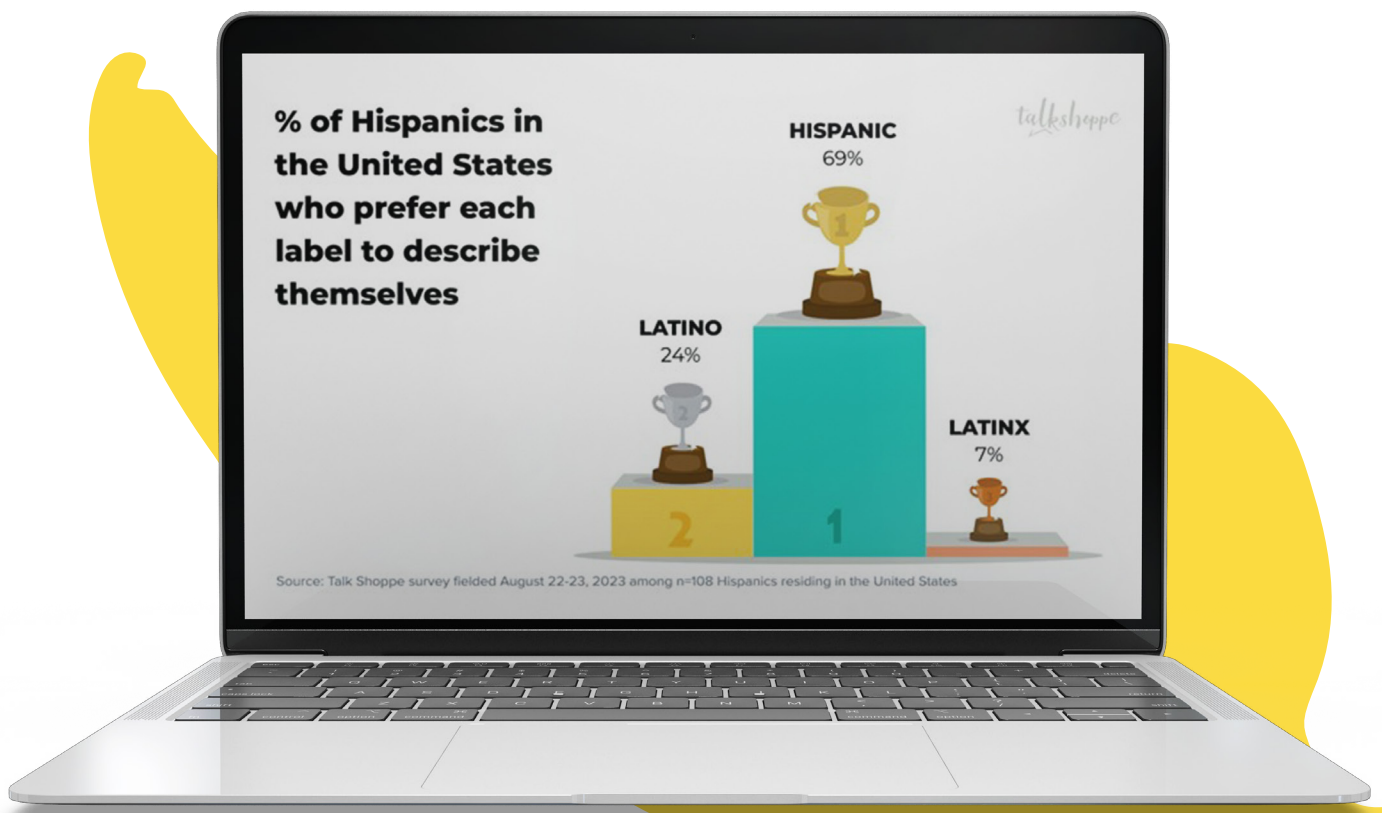
So, new research and thinking had to be done. Let’s jump into it!

We started by asking people directly: what identity label do you prefer?

We fielded a small online survey among adults in the United States in August 2023¹, including people of all races and ethnicities. The sample of people who identified as “Latino, Hispanic, or Latinx” (n=108) spanned across ages, countries of origin, income, and acculturation levels. For ease of reading we will refer to this sample group as “Hispanics” in the remainder of this post, even if it will soon be shown that not everyone prefers to be identified as such. Everyone who did not qualify as such will be referred to as “Non-Hispanics”.

To start off, we wanted to understand the identity label preference among Hispanics by asking them directly: what label do you prefer to describe the population at large² and what label do you prefer when referring to yourself? We asked Non-Hispanics how they think this population prefers to be called.

As shown below, the term “Hispanic” is the preferred label among the Hispanic sample, with nearly 7-in-10 selecting it as their preferred descriptor of both the population at large (64%) and of themselves (69%). Non-Hispanics may have picked on that in their day-to-day lives, as a plurality of them also choose “Hispanic” as the preferred label.



¹ The survey had a sample size of n=200 adults 18+ living in the United States, and was fielded on August 22, 2023.

² To lessen bias, we referred to the population in the question as “the population of people in the United States who are of Mexican, Central American, South American, Caribbean, or Spanish origin or descent.”

We also unearthed interesting nuances by age and Spanish-dominance:

- **Older Hispanics (defined as 35+) see the label ‘Hispanic’ as more universal.** The vast majority of this group prefers this term to describe the population at large and themselves (82% and 78%, respectively).
- **Younger Hispanics (defined as <35) show more variance when talking about the wider Hispanic population.** While the majority of younger Hispanics (60%) ultimately prefer the label ‘Hispanic’ to describe themselves, they are more open to alternatives when describing the wider Hispanic population in the United States: 48% use Hispanic, 38% use Latino, and 14% use Latinx.
- **‘Latino’ garners some more favor among Spanish-dominant Hispanics.** Hispanics who speak Spanish at home at least half of the time are 1.5x more likely to prefer the term ‘Latino’ when referring to themselves compared to those who predominantly speak English at home.

El elefante in the room: isn't it all about Latinx now?

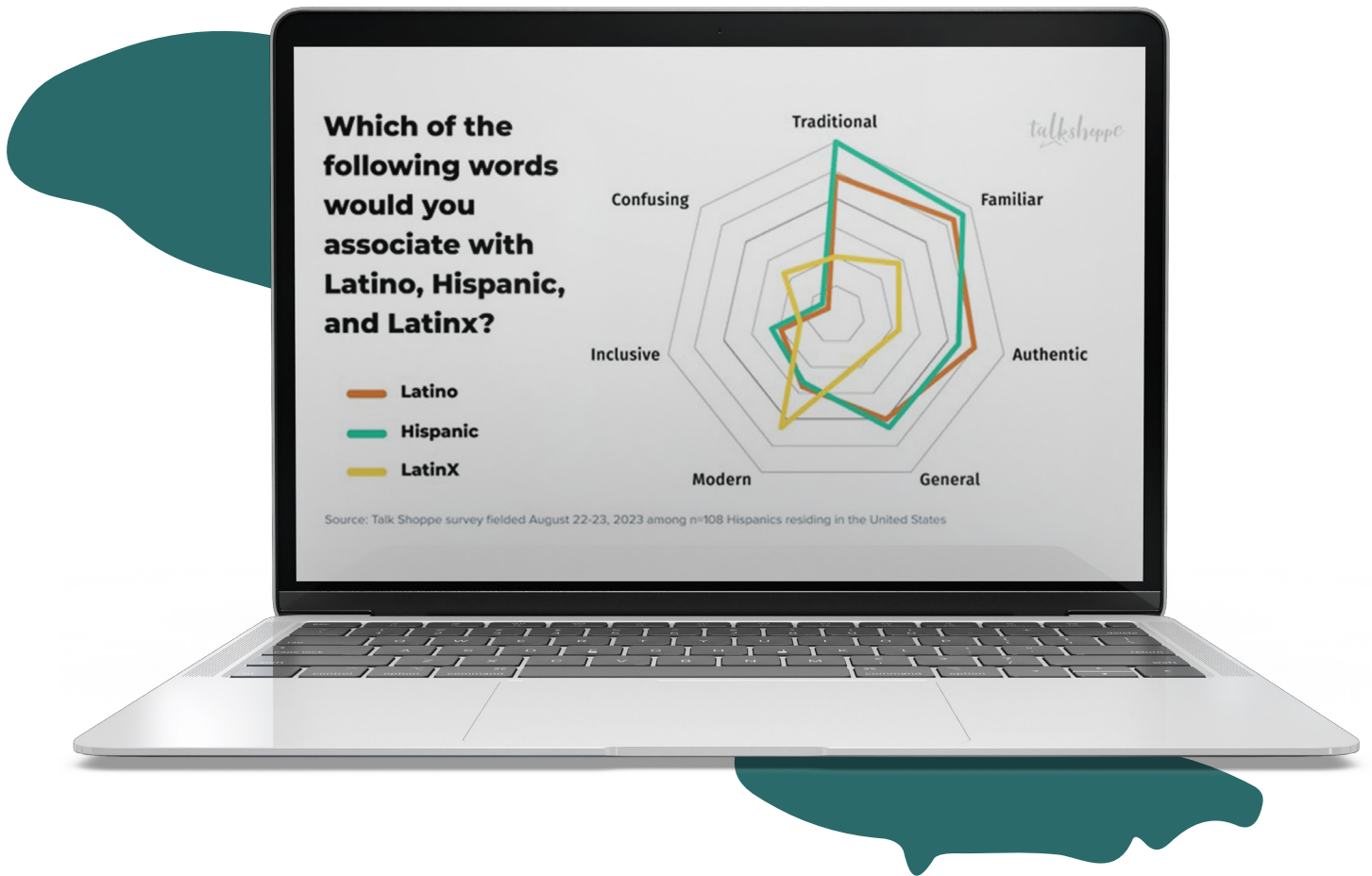
As our data shows, and in line with what the Pew Research Center has found in its own polls³, it is still a relative minority of Hispanics who prefer the term ‘Latinx’. While our data is directional, there is some evidence that this term is somewhat more popular - but still ranks behind ‘Hispanic’ and ‘Latino’ - among younger Hispanics and English-dominant Hispanics.



³ According to a Pew Research Center report published in August 2020, about one-in-four U.S. Hispanics have heard of ‘Latinx’, and just 3% use it.

Shedding some more light on the *why* behind preferences: what's in a name?

Many surveys out there on this subject focus on what Hispanic people prefer to be called, and spend less time on the *why*. This is why we followed up our identify label preference question with an association exercise to see what attributes are associated with 'Hispanic', 'Latino', and 'Latinx'.



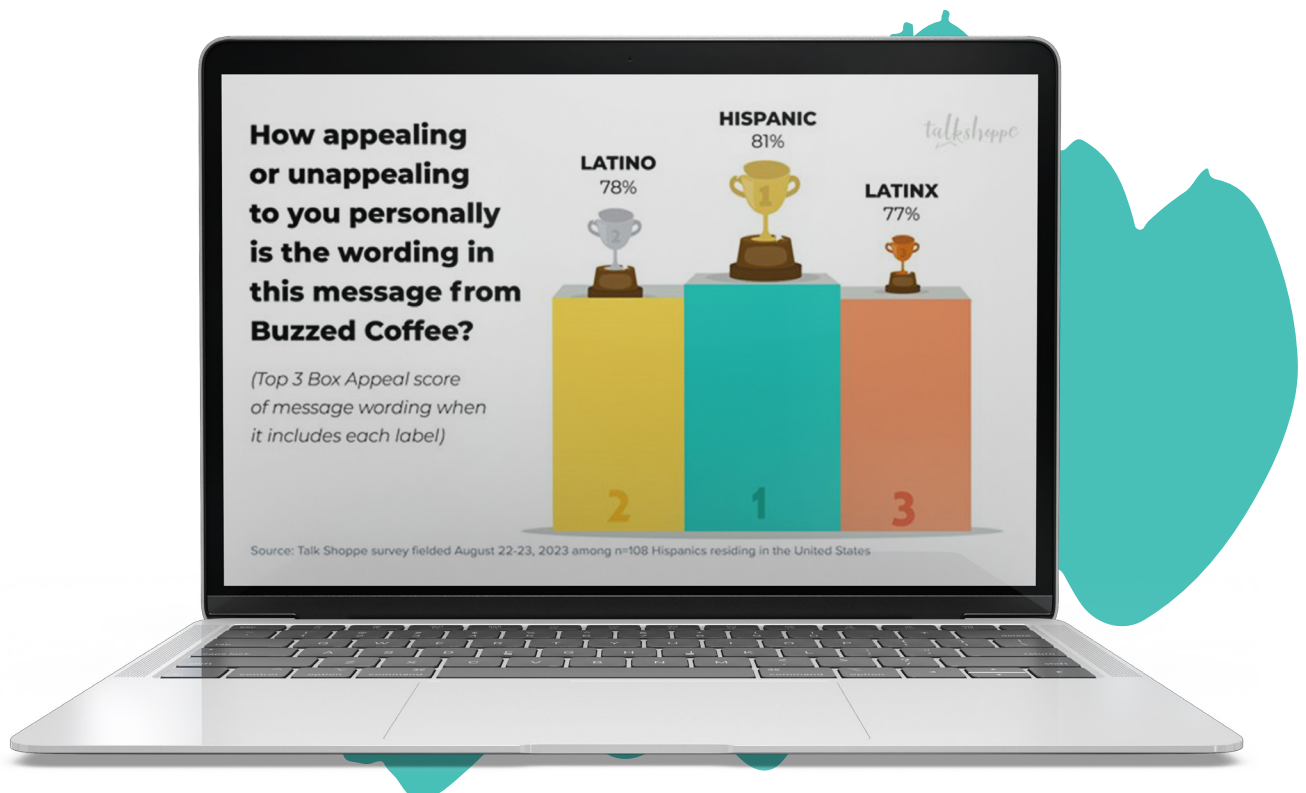
This exercise revealed that the preference among Hispanics for the term 'Hispanic' may be rooted in familiarity and tradition. 'Latino' is associated with these attributes as well, though a bit less, and is also more strongly linked with authenticity. This shows us that while Hispanic is still the technical "winner" when it comes to identity label preference, the term 'Latino' also has its own favorable associations.

The association exercise shines a bright spotlight on why Latinx has not caught on among Hispanics as much. It is seen as a modern term, but perhaps not in the best of ways: it is more strongly associated than the other terms with being politically correct and confusing. Interestingly, while about 1-in-5 Non-Hispanics think 'Latinx' is an inclusive term, only about 1-in-8 Hispanics agree. Inclusivity may be, after all, in the eye of the beholder.

Nothing exists in a vacuum: does the context influence how identity labels go over?

Asking people to pick their preferred identity label from a list is obviously useful, but it can lack nuance. It also doesn't necessarily answer how an identity label may be connected to the shopper or consumer side of a person. To see whether the use of an identity label can actually have an impact on real-life decisions, we decided to run a small experiment.

We did an A/B (more like A/B/C) test among our Hispanic sample, introducing each respondent to just one of three faux-ads for a fake coffee brand we made up for another study, Buzzed Coffee. The message was the same in each one, except for the term used in the description of the new line of flavored coffees that Buzzed was planning to release: we rotated between 'Hispanic flavors & tastes', 'Latino flavors & tastes', and 'Latinx flavors & tastes'.⁴ People were asked to rate the appeal of the message wording after seeing it. The results were absolutely fascinating!



The ranking we observed in the earlier questions about identity label preference (Hispanic leading, Latino a closer second, and Latinx coming in third) also manifests itself in this A/B/C test, except in one very noteworthy aspect: the term 'Latinx' has significantly higher appeal when it is seen in the context of an ad. It still ranks third, but we did not expect it to have this level of appeal given the relative minority of people who say they prefer it as a term to describe both themselves and the wider Hispanic population.

⁴ The exact message in the ad that people were shown was: "Dale sabor a tu vida! Buzzed Coffee is proud to celebrate [Hispanic / Latino / Latinx] flavors and tastes in its new line of coffees, including Café con Leche, Café Cortado, and Café Canela." Every message was seen by ~33 respondents so results are directional.

So, where does that leave us with terminology?

We have three takeaways for researchers and marketers from our survey and small experiment:

1

If forced to just use one label, 'Hispanic' may be it. Even if there isn't a consensus around it, the term 'Hispanic' is preferred by a large majority of Hispanics and is perceived to be more representative, familiar, and traditional. It is not modern nor does it get points for being inclusive, but it is the big-tent term.

2

Different labels have different associations, so be mindful of your audience.

Are you talking to an older or more traditional group? Consider using the term 'Hispanic'. Are you looking to connect with an audience in a more authentic, but still universal, manner? 'Latino' could come into play more. Are you trying to get through to younger, more English-dominant Hispanics? 'Latinx' could be more of an acceptable option here (though it is still preferred by a minority).

3

Context matters - or what you're selling is just as important as what labels you use.

Our experiment offers some directional evidence that using the term Latinx in context ("Latinx flavors and tastes" for a new line of flavored coffee) may not be as unappealing as self-identification preferences might indicate. The tone and content of the ad may be as important, and if people like what you're selling they may look past what identity label you use. You should always research the potential appeal of an identity label or term in the context of your brand or product.

We also know now that identity label selection is not a one-and-done process. It's not as simple as deciding on the "best label" and sticking to it consistently moving forward. For researchers and marketers, this means that an honest quest to understand people - to get to their core - is a continuous one. It means that we need to ask the right questions in the appropriate context, knowing that answers will largely be impacted by whatever situation, brand, or advertising we're exploring at the time.

A wish list from Hispanics to marketers: “I wish brands/media knew that...”

To close out our survey, we asked Hispanic respondents what one thing they wished brands, companies, and the media kept in mind when portraying/including the Hispanic community. **These are the key themes that surfaced:**



Country of origin

Most prefer to ultimately be identified by their country of origin (e.g., Mexican or Mexican-American)



Better representation

It currently feels like ads portray a “catch-all Latino character” and that all brands have the same strategy on how to target the audience (e.g., feature sombreros, bright colors, the abuelita character, etc.)



Not wanting to be a focal point

For some, there is a strong preference not to be singled out by advertising/brand strategies; they are tired of being ‘othered’ and want to be seen just like everyone else

In their own words...



I want to be represented in advertisements but it shouldn't be done just to check off some diversity list. Put some thought into it, and keep doing surveys like this one. I'm also an American and I feel close to my Hispanic and American culture.

- Female, 45-54



Maybe companies should follow the “show don't tell” rule. Instead of pandering in commercials and narrating how Hispanic a person or product is, just show it without any explanation. That way, Hispanics who relate to the ad would do so in a way by relating to what's being shown without the ad being preachy and pushy.

- Male, 18-24

In conclusion

Brands need to take their time and do their homework when it comes to connecting with the Hispanic population in the United States. Many in the Hispanic community feel that few - if any - are doing it 'right' when representing them and trying to build a connection.

Doing the research and addressing them correctly can go a long way to better engage the Hispanic community, not only now but in the future as population trends continue to evolve. Currently, Mexican immigrants make up the majority of the Hispanic population in the U.S., but that is changing. Venezuelans, Dominicans, Hondurans, and Guatemalans are now the fastest growing population amongst U.S. Hispanics. Are brands dedicating enough time to understanding how the people from these countries think of themselves and what labels or terms could go a long way in appealing to them?

Hispanics are paying attention + waiting for brands to truly see them.



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Any questions?

Let's talk.



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