



The Marketing & Distribution of *Selena*

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After *La Bamba*'s success during the "Hispanic Hollywood" era, U.S. Latinx films of the early 1990s, such as *Desperado*, failed to become box office hits. *Selena* appeared to be the one U.S. Latinx film of the 1990s that crossed over to a mainstream audience and became a massive crossover hit. *Selena* was an uplifting story about the dynamic Tejana singer who was on the verge of becoming a mainstream star before she was tragically murdered. The film received favorable reviews from well-known mainstream film critics and featured a breakout performance by Jennifer Lopez. Though Warner Bros. spent a significant amount promoting the film, *Selena* ultimately appealed only to a Latinx audience and failed to produce significant box office numbers. *Selena* became another example of how Hollywood studios and small independent film marketers struggled to promote U.S. Latinx films successfully throughout the 1990s. This trend of poor box office performance by films that featured U.S. Latinx talent resulted in Hollywood studios losing interest in promoting and distributing these motion pictures. Hollywood studios also began shifting their focus from motion pictures that appealed to a domestic audience to films with global appeal as international box office receipts became the studio's primary revenue stream. As a result of these two trends, Hollywood distributors promoted and circulated one U.S. Latinx film from 1997 to 2008 that utilized the studio's specific name during its theatrical release. Studio specialty divisions and independent distributors generally have marketed and distributed U.S. Latinx films during this period.

This essay extends a previous brief analysis of *Selena*'s casting, publicity, marketing, and distribution. The paper extends the previous examination to incorporate a more detailed description of the promotion and circulation of this motion picture. Furthermore, this composition evaluates how and why Warner Bros. failed to effectively promote and distribute *Selena*, one of the most significant U.S. Latinx films in the 1990s. The essay ultimately examines how Warner Bros.' investments (or lack of) in *Selena* illustrated the film industry's continual failure to support U.S. Latinx films sufficiently.

Literature Review and Theory

The paper's emphasis on the marketing and distribution of U.S. Latinx motion pictures is an area that many scholars do not analyze. These two portions of the motion picture industry are understudied because studios define marketing and distribution documents as proprietary information. Academics often do not have access to this information, making it a challenge to

analyze, though some academics have briefly studied promotional decisions: for example, Gabriel Meléndez's essay on the motion picture *Bless Me, Ultima*. Meléndez's (2016) paper does not explicitly focus on the film's promotion or distribution campaign. However, he briefly discusses how Arenas Entertainment, owned by Santiago Pozo, a Spanish-born marketing professional, decided to premiere *Bless Me, Ultima* in El Paso, Texas, rather than in Albuquerque or Santa Fe, which disappointed many people from New Mexico (Meléndez, 2016). Although this paper focuses on a different era, it extends his argument that non-Latinx professionals make critical decisions that ultimately hurt the box office performance of Latinx films.

David Rosen's book with Peter Hamilton, *Off-Hollywood: The Making & Marketing of Independent Films*, is an important book for any paper that centers on independent film marketing and distribution. These two authors cite several economic, social, and political factors, like a greater demand for content created by growth media outlets and the maturation of the large baby boomer audience, which led to the success of 1980s independent films (Rosen & Hamilton, 1990, p. 261). The authors also interview various marketing and distribution professionals who describe the various tactics used to creatively promote and launch independent films or ethnic studio films with a limited advertising budget. The book discusses the campaigns of three U.S. Latinx films: *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*, *El Norte*, and *Stand and Deliver*. This paper echoes a recurring issue for Latinx-themed motion pictures: the constant struggle to secure sufficient marketing and distribution budgets even when promoted by a major studio.

Linden Dalecki's (2012) essay on Maverick Entertainment analyzes how this company promotes and distributes low-budget motion pictures that are released directly to DVD or direct download. Some of Maverick's films are bilingual, Latinx-themed films such as *Hoodrats* (2005), and the company plans to produce several more Latinx-themed films in the future. Dalecki details the different tactics this distributor uses to target underserved, urban youths (African Americans and Latinx), such as employing similar film titles to box office hits and casting lesser-known rap stars (Dalecki, 2012). Dalecki emphasizes that much of Maverick Entertainment's success lies in its ability to effectively target and reach "micro-niche" audiences that large studios like Warner Bros. often fail to serve. This essay further supports his argument that large Hollywood studios still struggle to position niche motion pictures and serve niche audiences, as they lack the necessary expertise to promote and distribute these products effectively.

Arlene Davila's seminal book, *Latinos Inc.*, is a foundational piece of literature for this essay. Her book highlights how educated Latinx Americans developed Spanish-language advertising agencies that were responsible for constructing a U.S. Latinx market that may have resulted in many misperceptions about this ethnic group (Davila, 2001, p. 2). Davila studies how these marketing misperceptions impact mainstream marketers and the general public's perception of U.S. Latinxs (Davila, 2001, p. 4). This essay broadly extends her argument, while also stressing that film marketers provided an inaccurate U.S. Latinx market profile. For example, *Selena's* advertising campaign was heavily influenced by Santiago Pozo, a highly educated non-U.S. Latinx marketing professional who strongly advocated that Spanish-language media is the best advertising tactic to reach this era's bilingual or English-dominant Latinx audience.

Other scholars, such as Chon Noriega, Charles Ramirez-Berg, and Tomas Ybarra-Frausto, have divided Chicano filmmaking into distinct periods. Ramirez-Berg maintains that Chicano filmmaking in the early 1980s was in its second stage (Ramirez-Berg, 2002, pp. 186-187). Noriega (2000) asserts that it is somewhere between its second stage (noncommercial funding) and third stage (the introduction of Chicano cinema into U.S. theaters). On the other hand, Ybarra-Frausto (1990) cites *Zoot Suit* as the beginning of the third stage. Similarly, Ana M. Lopez splits Cuban

Cinema into periods by describing the three generations of Cuban filmmakers. She contends that second-generation filmmakers of the early 1980s were more acculturated due to their training in United States institutions. These films, like *Crossover Dreams* (1985), focus on less political dialogue and emphasize how Cubans adapt to life in the U.S. (Lopez, 1996, p. 47). These scholars focus on the types of films being produced and the political discourse of the period. However, they do not analyze how the marketplace affects motion picture production, distribution, and exhibition.

My dissertation examined the marketing and distribution of Latinx films for over a 30-year period (Puente, 2004). Within my dissertation, I briefly summarize how some Latinx films like *Selena* and *Spy Kids* were promoted and distributed. I also wrote an essay on how the early 1990s gave rise to a three-tiered film structure, comprising independent, studio specialty, and studio distributors, which significantly impacted the promotion and circulation of Latinx films (Puente, 2012b). Next, my article “Marketing and Distribution Lessons from Hispanic Hollywood” (2012) focuses on how Latinx films were promoted and distributed in the Hispanic Hollywood of the late 1980s. Lastly, I wrote a book, *The Marketing and Promotion of U.S. Latino Films* (2011), which provides a brief description of how marketers and distributors promoted and circulated some Latinx motion pictures from the early 1980s to the 21st century. I, however, have yet to write an extensive essay on the marketing and distribution of a specific Latinx motion picture.

This essay will implement Mary Beth Haralovich’s (1986) approach to studying periodization to analyze how Warner Bros. promoted, advertised, and distributed *Selena*. Haralovich’s method is like Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery’s (1985) approaches to studying historical periods. Allen and Gomery argue that significant political, social, and economic events can create smaller and distinct periods, referred to as periodization (Allen & Gomery, 1985, p. 48). For example, Warner Bros. may have agreed to produce *Selena* because they understood the Latinx market of the late 1990s, largely untapped by Hollywood studios, had become an increasingly English-speaking market with a buying power of over \$200 million (Rodriguez, 1997). Haralovich also agrees that periodization is a vital methodology for studying an era. However, she contends that this approach typically takes a top-down perspective and should integrate broader social processes (Haralovich, 1986, p. 6). Her eventual solution to this problem is to study cultural margins like Latinx popular culture to gain a better understanding of our overall culture (Haralovich, 1986). She also emphasizes the importance of examining the “conflict” and “resistance” within a culture (Haralovich, 1986). For example, the National Council of La Raza, an influential civil rights organization, began to critique film studios for their lack of Latinx film representation, including a harsh 1994 report entitled “Out of the Picture” that may have put some pressure on the studios to produce Latinx stories like *Selena* (Navarrete, 1994). Haralovich (1986) concludes that Allen and Gomery’s approach to studying social film history needs to be expanded by accentuating “social facts outside the immediate film industry” (p. 10). This essay aims to expand the understanding of “social facts” outside mainstream hit films or successful film franchises by studying one of the most significant Latinx motion pictures of the 1990s.

Casting & Promotion of *Selena*

Selena (1997) centers on the meteoric rise of Tejana singer Selena Quintanilla (Jennifer Lopez). Selena was on the verge of being the first Tejana singer to crossover and become a mainstream star, but her career was cut short by an employee who shot and killed her at the age of 23 (Hindes, 1997). Shortly after her death, Selena’s father, Abraham Quintanilla, decided to

produce a film about Selena. He quickly hired a notable Latinx producer, Moctesuma Esparza, to help him complete this motion picture (Puente, 2004). Quintanilla stated, “I chose Esparza because he’s in tune with our culture” (Barrios, 1995, p.9). Esparza teamed up with Robert Katz to create Esparza/Katz Productions in 1986 (Barnes, 2022). Esparza was one of the few Latinx producers with a proven track record of completing similar projects. He previously produced a few notable Latinx films like *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* (1981) and *The Milagro Beanfield War* (1988). Quintanilla also hired Gregory Nava, who directed *El Norte* (1983) and *Mi Familia/My Family* (1995), to be the film’s director (Barrios, 1995).

During the casting phase, *Selena* generated significant publicity when they implemented a national casting call to locate both a young and an adult Selena. Nancy De Los Santos, Associate Producer, asserts, “The goal was to find the actors to play these two roles. It was not a publicity [stunt]” (De Los Santos, N., personal communication, July 3, 2003). The casting call occurred in five cities, attracting over 22,000 girls for the two Selena roles (Menard, 1997). *Selena*’s casting call received a lot of unexpected publicity, including television coverage (Puente, 2011). De Los Santos (personal communication, July 3, 2003) recalls “picking up the *Los Angeles Times* and seeing this picture of three little Selenas in color on the top half of the paper. At that point, you never saw Latinxs’ pictures in a happy photograph on the top half of the *Los Angeles Times*.”

Director Gregory Nava eventually selected a little-known Puerto Rican actress named Jennifer Lopez to play Selena. While Lopez’s initial big break was as a Fly Girl on the hit comedy sketch series *In Living Color*, this would be Lopez’s first starring role in a large studio motion picture. She had previously acted in a small role in *Mi Familia/My Family*. Nava selected Sally Meza as the 10-year-old Selena (Menard, 1997). Several *My Family/Mi Familia* cast members, like Edward James Olmos and Jacob Vargas, were also in this film. The film’s other co-star was Jon Seda, who was best known for his role in *I Like It Like That* (Puente, 2011).

During the film’s production, Associate Producers Nancy De Los Santos and Carolina Caldera visited Latinx neighborhoods to generate a buzz within the community (Puente, 2011). De Los Santos (personal communication, July 3, 2003) stated that everyone worked extremely hard during the film’s production phase to keep everyone excited about the movie: “We did everything from handing out flyers to going on every Tejano [radio] station that would have us, and there were many because we were a big deal there in San Antonio and Corpus Christi.” Their hard work paid off when 32,000 fans attended San Antonio’s Alamodome, which doubled as the setting for Selena’s exciting performance during the Astrodome concert scene (De Los Santos, 1997). They also attracted another 8,000 fans to Poteet, Texas, a tiny town about 40 miles south of San Antonio that doubled as a Monterrey, Mexico concert scene. *Selena*’s producers and a San Antonio marketing firm, PMG, created the Selena Movie Festival while filming the scene (De Los Santos, 1997). The producers also entertained people between shooting breaks with comedian Rick Gutierrez and musical acts like Jenifer y Los Jetz and Pete Astudillo.

Selena initially received publicity from the popular *El Show de Cristina*, a Spanish-language talk show hosted by Cristina Saralegui (Puente, 2011). She traveled to Poteet, Texas to do an entire episode on the making of *Selena* in 1996. Cristina simultaneously interviewed the primary cast members and Selena’s family members. The interviews were charming as the primary cast members struggled to answer the questions in Spanish. During these interviews, Lopez admitted one of the most challenging aspects of making the film was learning how to do interviews in Spanish. Lastly, Cristina interviewed director Gregory Nava and asked why he selected Jennifer Lopez and Edward James Olmos for their respective roles. In closing, Nava emphasized the importance of the Latinx community supporting the motion picture that celebrates her life (Saralegui, 1996).

Selena received extensive free publicity from mainstream media before its theatrical release. However, some of the publicity did not boost the film's profile. *Time* magazine briefly summarized the motion picture (Corliss & Ressler, 1997), mentioning that Jennifer Lopez lived with Selena's sister, Suzette, and got scolded by Selena's mother for her poor eating habits (Corliss & Ressler, 1997). Lopez stated, "She told me I was just like Selena," (Corliss & Ressler, 1997) which she took as a compliment. The article featured quotes from director Gregory Nava, producer Moctesuma Esparza, and from Abraham Quintanilla. However, Nava and Esparza's quotes centered on working with Mr. Quintanilla, and Quintanilla's quotes mainly were about immense grief. So, the article did not feature many quotes praising the feature film's quality or Jennifer Lopez's performance.

During the film's theatrical run, *Cosmopolitan* magazine did a brief one-page question-and-answer article with Jennifer Lopez about some of her recent movie roles (Puente, 2011). Lopez talked about *Money Train*, *Anaconda*, and *U-Turn*. However, she did mention that she is most proud of her role in *Selena*. Lopez briefly talked about the emotional *Selena* set, pointing out that it was draining to be Selena because she felt like she was the focal point of the Quintanillas' energy (Hensley, 1997). It wasn't until over 30,000 people attended a concert scene that Lopez knew Selena's fans would accept her in this role. (Hensley, 1997). Most of the interview focused on her new engagement and some of her other movie roles.

Hispanic magazine wrote a positive story about the making of *Selena*. The author believed that *Selena*, which cost \$18 million, could become the first Latinx film to reach the 100 million mark (Menard, 1997). The article describes the entire process from development to the film's completion. The story also mentions how each cast member spent time with Selena's real family counterparts to become more acquainted with their mannerisms. For example, Chris Perez let Jon Seda borrow his guitar and coached him on how to play the instrument. The bonds that occurred throughout filming the motion picture made a compelling film (Menard, 1997).

Selena received good reviews from significant film critics from newspapers like *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*. Film critic Stephen Holden (1997) from the *New York Times* enjoyed certain aspects of the film, such as learning about Tejano music. Holden enjoyed Selena's voice and Lopez's lip-synchs. He, however, did not like Selena's highly sanitized depiction. Holden felt the film needed a more complicated depiction of Selena, which would have highlighted some of her flaws and would have made the story less bland. He did not enjoy how the film handled the conflict between Selena and her father when she decided to elope and marry Chris Perez (Holden, 1997). Film critic Kenneth Turan from the *Los Angeles Times* also enjoyed Jennifer Lopez's performance, especially the film's music scenes and felt her performance would launch Lopez into stardom. However, he did not enjoy Abraham Quintanilla's script control. Like Stephen Holden, he felt the film had a too-sanitized depiction of Selena, whose most significant obstacle was overcoming her loving but overbearing father (Turan, 1997).

Prominent trade publications like *Variety* and *Hollywood Reporter* also gave *Selena* positive reviews. *Variety*'s Todd McCarthy echoed a similar critique that the film did not provide a complex portrait of Selena and predicted that the film would likely not crossover to a mainstream audience for its non-complicated depiction of Selena. He, however, also enjoyed Jennifer Lopez's and other cast members' performances (McCarthy, 1997). *Hollywood Reporter*'s Duane Byrge (1997) enjoyed Jennifer Lopez's "electric performance." He also liked Edward James Olmos' performance, which captured her father's determination and ambition. He felt the film would do well with her Mexican American fans. However, he was unsure if the film would resonate with moviegoers who had never heard of Selena (Byrge, 1997).

Hollywood Reporter ran an additional article by Roger Cels about *Selena*. Cels mentioned that the film generated some positive “buzz” in pre-release polls. The essay identified Latinx girls and the Mexican American market as the key target audience likely to support the film. Cels argued that the Mexican American community may passionately support the film since the Hollywood studios largely overlook the community. The author asserted that Warner Bros. was also trying to target a mainstream female audience. He felt the film could attract Caucasian females since her sudden death made her somewhat familiar with this audience (Cels, 1997).

A few weeks later, Oprah interviewed Selena’s family and Jennifer Lopez simultaneously on her show (Puente, 2011). The interview was bittersweet. Most of Oprah’s interview centered on the family’s grief. The viewers and the audience sensed the family’s grief when discussing Selena’s life. Shortly afterward, Jennifer Lopez appeared on stage; the mood changed drastically. She was excited about this incredible opportunity to have earned the role of Selena and spoke about how this role was quite challenging. She also discussed trying to capture Selena’s personality by watching many Selena videos. The interview’s dual tones may have distracted the viewers and audiences from being interested in the motion picture (Winfrey, 1997).

Selena’s publicity campaign did receive a significant boost from *Latina* magazine. The publication shared the film’s target audience—young Latinas. Christy Haubegger, the magazine’s founder, came up with the idea to do a *Selena* promotional tour sponsored by the magazine (Puente, 2011). Gabriel Reyes, a publicist for *Latina*, described the tour: “We paired up with local Latino charities and local organizations. We did premiere events and red-carpet events in about ten cities nationwide with the talent. They served very well as grassroots screenings” (personal communication, June 26, 2003). De Los Santos (personal communication, July 3, 2003) credited Haubegger for the tour’s success, describing Haubegger as “the absolute heroine of the movie.”

However, the Quintanilla family almost canceled the successful *Latina* magazine promotional tour. According to De Los Santos, they were upset about a one-page article written about Selena which described her as being a Madonna-whore archetype (Puente, 2004). Afterward, the film’s director, Gregory Nava, and the film’s producer, Montezuma Esparza, sat down and talked to Abraham Quintanilla. They were finally able to convince Mr. Quintanilla to continue the tour. De Los Santos (personal communication, July 3, 2003) describes one of the key concessions made at the San Antonio screening to continue the tour: “The *Latina* staff members were tearing that page out of the magazine before it could be distributed at the premiere.”

Several large companies sponsored *Selena*’s pre-screening parties. Coca-Cola hosted a “hottest ticket in town” national sweepstakes at the San Antonio Act III Embassy Theatre, where the winners watched a screening of *Selena*. Steve Horn, Assistant Vice President, Consumer Segment Marketing, stated, “The promotion [allowed them] to pay tribute to her and her fans” (San Antonio hosts a private screening of Selena movie, 1997). Banc One also conducted screening parties in heavily populated Latinx markets (Elliott, 1997). JCPenney and Honda held 13 screenings in heavily populated Latinx markets like Los Angeles and Chicago (Elliott, 1997). A Best Buy store in Cerritos (Los Angeles area) gave away 500 tickets for the pre-screening of the film (Puente, 2011).

Throughout the film’s theatrical run, Gabriel Reyes worked hard to maintain publicity for the film. He continually sought to publicize the talent at his disposal (Puente, 2004). Reyes describes how he managed to get additional media exposure for the film. “We made sure that the film remained in the minds of the consumers by doing many radio interviews and ensuring that the daily papers were still covering the film” (personal communication, June 26, 2003). Reyes also stated that he tried to be creative with his pitches to journalists. “My pitches were everything from the success of the film, the good box offices we were achieving, the fact it was a groundbreaking

film, the fact that it was Jennifer Lopez's first film, every kind of angle I used to keep the coverage fresh with newspapers" (personal communication, June 26, 2003).

The Advertising of *Selena*

Selena was able to capitalize on product placement escalation in motion pictures. Product placement occurs when a company's product or logo is inserted within a film scene or the incorporation of a product's name within the film's dialogue (Segrave, 2004, p. 1). The product placement deals can range from free products to multi-million dollar promotional partnership deals. These placements can be a cost-effective method of reaching a target audience because it is less expensive than television advertising. Budweiser and Coca-Cola planned to prominently feature their products in the film as an advertising strategy to reach U.S. Latinx moviegoers (Sandler, 1997). Banc One placed its logo prominently in the film's opening sequence as *Selena* performed to a sold-out Astrodome surrounded by Banc One banners (Souhrada, 1997). These companies hoped their product placements would attract a growing Latinx market to their products.

Selena also managed to secure an extensive \$1 million promotional tie-in agreement with Banc One (Elliott, 1997). Bank branches also conducted film ticket sweepstakes (Elliott, 1997). Q Productions, owned by Selena's father, allowed Banc One to produce custom-made checks and debit cards featuring Selena's image to offer customers (Lannert, 1997; Sandler, 1997). Banc One's radio spots promoted its affiliation with the film as well (Sandler, 1997). The bank's promotional tie-in efforts hoped its film support would produce a "halo effect" with Selena fans, which meant people would buy products from companies associated with their favorite movie star, performer, or athlete.

Selena's music was popular with the Latinx community and was on the verge of crossing over with the general market before her murder. Her growing popularity attracted the attention of other mainstream companies like Budweiser and Coca-Cola (Puente, 2011). They supported the film's soundtrack by setting up end-cap displays in 10,000 retail stores featuring Selena and the soundtrack prominently (Lannert, 1997; Sandler, 1997). Budweiser launched a "bounce back" program with the Musicland chain that enabled customers to receive a coupon at a Budweiser display and receive a \$2 discount on the soundtrack (Lannert, 1997). Major retailers such as Walmart and Best Buy also proposed to set up displays to promote the film's soundtrack (Sandler, 1997). The support these mainstream stores gave for the soundtrack and the film to reach the Latinx audience was unsurprising. Her music and film were ideal vehicles to reach this community.

Warner Bros. hoped *Selena*'s soundtrack would provide important visibility for the motion picture. The distributor featured "Last Dance/The Hustle/On the Radio" in its trailers (Lannert, 1997). It was also the first single to be released nationwide on the radio before the film's debut and before the soundtrack was available in retail stores (Chuang, 1997; Lannert, 1997). Warner Bros. produced a music video that aired on popular mainstream cable networks like VH1 and MTV to reach a more mainstream audience (Chuang, 1997). Shortly afterward, *Selena*'s soundtrack debuted in record stores about ten days before *Selena*'s premiere to generate more awareness. *Selena*'s soundtrack featured 10 English and two Spanish songs (Lannert, 1997). *Selena*'s bilingual soundtrack eased Warner Bros.' ability to develop a simultaneous English-language and Spanish-language marketing campaign (Chuang, 1997). For instance, its songs secured "spins" on mainstream and Spanish-language radio stations. Lastly, VH1 aired a one-hour Selena tribute before the film (Chuang, 1997). Besides all the tactics above that were used to promote the soundtrack,

Vice President David Palacios at EMI Latin stated the film screenings in 30 to 40 markets would help increase the soundtrack sales because radio contests were awarding the winners a free copy of the soundtrack and a free ticket to a pre-screening of the motion picture (Lannert, 1997).

Warner Bros. implemented a dual-language marketing campaign featuring English and Spanish. It hoped its English-language advertising campaign would attract a mainstream audience, allowing the film to crossover. Warner Bros. and its president Barry Reardon “[believed] young girls could be buying [the movie] in a pretty strong way” (Hindes, 1997). Lynn Whitney, VP of Worldwide Media, claimed, “[There was] also a separate campaign aimed at a broad crossover audience” (Hindes, 1997). Consequently, Warner Bros. purchased advertisements on popular programs like *The Simpsons*, *Moesha*, and *Friends* to attract English-speaking Latinx and potentially non-Latinx audiences.

For its Spanish-language campaign, Esparza also hired Santiago Pozo, one of the pioneers of Spanish-language film marketing, to help with the film’s advertising campaign (Puente, 2004). He contended that it was the first time he had been given enough money to implement a multimillion-dollar, multimedia campaign targeting Selena’s core audience, a “hard-core Hispanic market” (S. Pozo, personal communication, July 8, 2003). The campaign featured full-page advertisements in Spanish-language newspapers like *La Opinion*. Santiago Pozo contends that Warner Bros. provided him sufficient resources to develop an effective, comprehensive Spanish-language marketing campaign (personal communication, July 8, 2003). Lynn Whitney stated, “There [was] a complete Spanish-language campaign with print, network, and spot ads” (Hindes, 1997). Before *Selena*, the average film spent only a few hundred thousand dollars for national buys targeting Spanish-speaking moviegoers.

Distribution and Box Office of *Selena*

In March 1997, Warner Bros. premiered *Selena* on 1,850 screens, one of the largest launches of a U.S. Latinx film to date (Puente, 2004). It had a solid opening weekend, grossing over \$11.6 million. *Selena* was number #2 on *Variety*’s box office top 10 list behind *Liar Liar* (Dominguez, 1997). Warner Bros. simultaneously released 17 Spanish-language subtitled prints along with English-language prints (Romney & Eller, 2000). *Selena* performed exceptionally well in markets with large Latinx populations like Los Angeles (\$2.8 million), Dallas (\$1.5 million), and New York (\$1.4 million) (Dominguez, 1997). Thousands of moviegoers lined up to watch the film outside several San Antonio theaters (Dominguez, 1997). *Selena*’s early box office success appeared to create enough momentum to become the highest-grossing U.S. Latinx film in history.

Selena remained in *Variety*’s top 10 box office hits for the initial four weeks of its theatrical run. Warner Bros. expanded *Selena*’s screen count to 1,873 for its second week, but its box office figure dropped by almost 50 percent to \$6.1 million. The film exhibitors began to pull *Selena* off its screens by its third week when it dipped to 1,583, and its box office dipped to \$3.4 million. *Selena*’s box office dropped to \$1.8 million on 990 screens by its fourth week. Over the next ten weeks, theater chains gradually removed the film from the screens. *Selena* ultimately grossed a modest \$35.7 million at the box office over its 15-week theatrical run (The Numbers, 2024).

Evaluation of *Selena*'s Promotional and Distribution Campaign

Warner Bros.' *Selena* promotional and distribution campaign followed Columbia's *La Bamba* template. Both movies highlighted a similar narrative that celebrated the lives of young, talented Latinx singers on the verge of crossing over before their untimely deaths. Both campaigns hoped the film's soundtrack would attract music fans to the movie theater, used bilingual advertising campaigns, and released English-language and Spanish-language prints to attract the general market and Spanish-speaking moviegoers.

Warner Bros. implemented a dual-language advertising campaign that targeted Spanish-language and English-language U.S. Latinxs. Esparza (personal communication, August 13, 2002) felt Warner Bros. ran an excellent dual-language publicity campaign that attracted many Spanish-speaking and English-speaking Latinxs to the film. An essential component of Warner Bros.' marketing campaign focused on the English-speaking portion of this ethnic market. The distributor spent about 80% of its marketing budget on reaching more acculturated, English-speaking Latinxs like young people and the native-born (Esparza, personal communication, August 13, 2002). Warner Bros. also spent an unprecedented amount on targeting Spanish-speaking Latinx. Esparza claims they spent \$2 million on Spanish-language advertising, representing the highest figure ever for a Latinx film. Warner Bros.' Spanish-language campaign and the vast amount of other publicity attracted many immigrant families to the film (Esparza, personal communication, August 13, 2002). Warner Bros.' marketing strategy effectively reached many U.S. Latinx moviegoers – especially Latinx girls (Esparza, M., personal communication, August 13, 2002). Warner Bros.' campaign aggressively targeted Latinx moviegoers and successfully attracted an audience that Hollywood studios often overlook.

However, Warner Bros. spent relatively little on *Selena*'s general promotional campaign. While \$8 million is a relatively high advertising budget for a U.S. Latinx film, the other studio distributors of this era spent over \$22 million in advertising, more than double *Selena*'s marketing costs (Klady, 1998). Film marketers often spend a great deal of advertising money to create awareness or “buzz” among the target and secondary target audiences. Ideally, the film marketer can reach these audiences with enough compelling advertisements to attract them during the first few weeks of a film's theatrical run. The film marketer needs to attract these audiences quickly because most of a film's box office is generated in the first few weeks. Simultaneously, film marketers hope that these early moviegoers, often known as opinion leaders, will generate significant positive word-of-mouth that will enable their films to develop “legs.” The moviegoers' positive word-of-mouth is critical to a film's success because it helps the film remain relevant in the audience's mind, which is essential when competing distributors are debuting new films weekly. Warner Bros.' *Selena* campaign likely did not spend enough money to create awareness with the general market moviegoers. As Meléndez (2016) points out, critical decisions like the allocation of an advertising budget are made by non-Latinx professionals which negatively affects Latinx products.

As a result, Warner Bros.' relatively small general market advertising campaign failed to attract one of its primary target audiences: non-Latinx girls. Barry Reardon, the president of distribution at Warner Bros. “[believed] young girls could [have bought] this in a pretty strong way” (Hindes, 1997). The National Research Group highlighted the lack of visibility with mainstream audiences a week before *Selena*'s debut when its data indicated the film gained little to no awareness among national moviegoers (Hindes, 1997). Their research was correct; only 15% of *Selena*'s audience was non-Latinx (Chagollan, 1997). Warner Bros.' campaign needed a more

robust general market campaign to convince non-Latinx moviegoers to watch this film because Selena was not a well-known singer outside of the Tejano music scene. The film also lacked recognizable talent that could attract non-Latinx moviegoers. Rosen and Hamilton highlighted Warner Bros.' inability to effectively target one of its primary target audiences in the *Stand and Deliver* case study, which hurt the film's theatrical box office figures (Rosen & Hamilton, 1990, p. 216). The identical issue reoccurred in this campaign. Therefore, Selena's campaign needed to allocate more funds to create awareness with this audience or better position the film in the marketplace, as it was not an easy motion picture to promote to the mainstream audience.

The Quintanilla family may have also impacted Warner Bros.' marketing campaign. Selena's family and Jennifer Lopez appeared on the popular *Oprah Winfrey Show* which was an ideal opportunity for the mainstream audience to get to know the film's cast besides Lopez. However, the talk show initially featured the Quintanilla family, who expressed their obvious grief over losing their young daughter and sister. Such raw emotion was quite compelling for viewers who may have been unfamiliar with Selena's music and her tragic murder. The second part of Oprah's interview featured Lopez who expressed her excitement about playing this role and being given the role of Selena in her first Hollywood film. Oprah's interviews were an odd mix of grief and excitement, and these conflicting emotions may have led to the viewers becoming so distracted by the family's obvious heartache that Lopez's part of the interview which focused on the feature film and celebrated Selena's life was overshadowed. Suppose the film's promoters insisted on featuring Lopez and the other cast members instead of the grieving family. In that case, it is possible that the talk show could have been an excellent opportunity for the film marketers to emotionally connect the viewers with the film's talent, which was unknown to most mainstream audiences.

Basuroy et al. (2003) conducted a study that discovered a correlation between positive reviews from film critics and box office results. One of their conclusions was that studio marketers should encourage advanced screenings for critics to maximize a film's box office (Basuroy, et al. 2003). Warner Bros. certainly hoped that *Selena's* somewhat positive reviews would have been a useful tool to generate awareness with mainstream moviegoers and increase the film's box office, but *Selena's* failure to cross over to the mainstream audience highlights the diminishing power of the film critic. Significant mainstream newspapers like *The New York Times* and trade publications like *Variety* gave the film fairly positive reviews. However, these reviews from influential newspapers and trade publications only reached a limited audience. Most people do not read newspapers like *The Los Angeles Times* or trade publications like *The Hollywood Reporter*. Therefore, a positive review is not an effective tool for attracting many moviegoers to watch motion pictures or for increasing a film's box office numbers. Not surprisingly, Basuroy et al. (2003) also concluded that positive reviews do not necessarily enhance a film's box office and also concluded a big budget and a well-known star are insurance policies against negative reviews. While *Selena* did not receive negative reviews, some of the film critics did criticize the plot. If the film had a larger budget and a well-known star, it could have overcome some of the critics' comments.

Warner Bros.' promotional campaign also highlights that a soundtrack is not a particularly effective tactic for driving an audience to the movies. The soundtrack's song "Last Dance/The Hustle/On the Radio" did appear on popular cable channels like MTV, creating some film awareness. *Selena's* soundtrack was also quite successful and went platinum, selling more than a million copies; however, the soundtrack's success did not help the film become profitable. While music consumers and moviegoers are similar audiences, they are two distinct audiences in terms of the popular culture they consume.

Latina magazine's approach in promoting *Selena* in Latinx markets could have served as a model for how Warner Bros. could promote the film in non-Latinx markets. *Latina* magazine conducted an aggressive promotional campaign that entailed red carpet events and grassroots screenings in Latinx markets to generate a "buzz" for the film. If Warner Bros. had conducted a similar campaign offering more word-of-mouth screenings in non-Latinx markets because the film did not have a notable mainstream star, it is possible that the film could have had better chance of crossing over to a non-Latinx audience. However, the lack of awareness of non-Latinx moviegoers highlights that Warner Bros. did not generate awareness in non-Latinx markets. The lack of awareness outside of the Latinx community echoes Dalecki's (2012) assertion that Hollywood studios often lack the expertise to promote niche market content effectively. Consequently, *Selena*'s box office results plummeted after its strong opening weekend, which was largely supported by the Latinx community, but the film lacked mainstream support.

Warner Bros.' release date for *Selena* likely affected the film's box office figures. While every motion picture enters a highly competitive marketplace, especially when a film lacks a well-known star, Warner Bros. decided to premiere *Selena* in late March against Jim Carrey's *Liar Liar*. Warner Bros. should have avoided direct competition with a Jim Carrey motion picture because, at the time, he was one of Hollywood's biggest stars. Warner Bros. also should have considered releasing the film at a different time of the year, like September, to coincide with Mexican Independence Day celebration or around a long weekend like Labor Day. A different release date could have helped the film stand out against the competition.

Warner Bros. implemented a simultaneous release of Spanish-subtitled prints with English-language prints at venues that may have been unnecessary (Puente, 2011). The distributor tried to cater to U.S. Latinx moviegoers by catering to both market segments. Warner Bros. recognized that a large segment of the U.S. Latinx market was Spanish-dominant and wanted to accommodate these moviegoers, but the dual release of prints did not significantly bolster the film's box office figures. Warner Bros. discovered that acculturated U.S. Latinxs preferred to watch *Selena* with traditional English-language prints over the Spanish-subtitled prints (Romney & Eller, 2000). Therefore, the distribution of two different types of prints was customer-friendly, but it was not a successful venture for the distributor because the Spanish-language prints were not a necessary expense for the distributor. Davila (2001) points out that non-Latinx professionals have a marketing misperception of the Latinx market. Warner Bros. could have saved some money in its distribution expenses had it only circulated *Selena* with English-language prints.

Lastly, Warner Bros. may have released *Selena* on too many screens based on how much the distributor spent on advertising. Marketing's essential function is to support the distribution of prints by creating awareness. In this case, *Selena* was widely released on 1,850 screens nationwide. However, Warner Bros. only supported these prints with a \$10 million advertising campaign, a relatively low figure for a studio film from this era and thus, should have opted for a smaller distribution release like a regional or platform release.

Selena's box office of over \$35 million did not recoup Warner Bros.' \$18 million production and \$10 million marketing investment. A distributor only collects about 50% of a film's box office, referred to as a film rental. While the motion picture did not produce a profit theatrically, *Selena* generated an additional \$29.4 million in video sales (Wallace, 1998). By including this ancillary revenue, the film most likely did generate a small profit for Warner Bros.

Conclusions

1996 to 2000 represents a period of box office disappointment for U.S. Latinx films, as most of those motion pictures failed to meet the expectations of independent, specialty, and studio distributors. Warner Bros. circulated *Selena*, the most prominent film of this period and felt confident that *Selena* could surpass the box office figures of *La Bamba*, which grossed about \$55 million and became the highest-grossing U.S. Latinx film in Hollywood history (Dominguez, 1997). The studio released the film widely and aggressively promoted it in mainstream and Spanish-language media. While the film provided a valuable template for attracting many U.S. Latinx moviegoers, *Selena* never appealed to a mainstream audience. Her underdog story of an emerging Tejana music singer tragically killed never resonated with mainstream U.S. audiences. The fact that Selena was a star in a niche music scene limited the film's ability to crossover. Also, Jennifer Lopez was not yet a well-known Hollywood star who could have appealed to a mainstream audience.

Selena's success in attracting English-speaking Latinxs presented future challenges for U.S. Latinx marketers and distributors. First, they must disregard the long-held notion that communicating with them in Spanish was the best way to reach the U.S. Latinx community (Davila, 2001, pp. 70-71). Challenging the long-held stereotypes of this community, most Latinx individuals were either bilingual or English-dominant, which meant that English media was the best way to reach this increasingly acculturated audience (Rodriguez, 1997). The next challenge is to devise a cost-efficient strategy to reach an acculturated and more English-dominant U.S. Latinx audience who consume the same films, television programs, and similar music as their non-Latinx peers. Consequently, a marketer must spend more money reaching an acculturated Latinx than a Spanish speaker. More effectively reaching this specific population segment is critical for marketing agencies because this acculturated, more English-dominant U.S. Latinx audience is a heavy moviegoing audience (Pachon et al., 1999). Lastly, distributors also need to disregard the notion that Latinx moviegoers prefer subtitled or dubbed prints for these types of motion pictures. Film marketers and distributors needed to erase the long-held stereotype that Latinx people were primarily Spanish speakers.

Selena's campaign also underscores the unique challenge of promoting a Latinx film to a broader audience. These marketers want to attract Latinx moviegoers to these narratives portrayed by Latinx talent, yet if the marketer promotes the motion picture as a Latinx film, it may inadvertently undermine the campaign by pigeonholing it as an "ethnic" film. Since the marketers simultaneously must be able to promote the film to a non-Latinx audience, marketers of Latinx film must walk a fine line between reaching a Latinx audience and somehow not losing the interest of non-Latinx moviegoers.

Warner Bros.' inability to promote a U.S. Latinx film that crossed over to a mainstream audience profoundly affected how many U.S. Latinx films would be incorporated into the studios' pipeline. *Selena* was the last U.S. Latinx film to utilize a studio brand in its distribution of this era. Studios have released other U.S. Latinx films like the *Spy Kids* trilogy, but they have also utilized the studio's specialty division brand in its distribution and marketing. The promotion and distribution of *Selena* provided another example of studio distributors lacking an understanding of how best to promote a U.S. Latinx motion picture to mainstream audiences. Studio film marketers had not developed an effective crossover marketing template to attract a mainstream audience to U.S. Latinx films.

On the surface, Warner Bros. appeared to implement effective marketing and distribution tactics for *Selena* that successfully created awareness and attracted its primary target audience, but this author attributes the film's lack of "buzz" to Warner Bros. not spending enough advertising funds to promote the film in non-Latinx markets and not attracting non-Latinx teen girls, a critical and influential secondary target audience. Although *Selena* had a solid opening weekend that generated over \$11 million at the box office, indicating that many Latinx moviegoers attended, the film's weekly box office dropping nearly 50% from the first to the second week suggesting that the primary target market failed to provide the film with a significant "buzz" or the positive word-of-mouth, vital for all motion pictures striving to have long theatrical runs. It is possible that first-week Latinx moviegoers did not enjoy this motion picture enough to tell their friends and family, which would give the film strong "legs" or positive momentum, enabling it to produce a significant box office for the second week. Warner Bros.' reliance on the Latinx market also highlights that it is too small to sustain significant awareness to produce high box office grosses for a long period of time. Thus, the distributor likely needed to implement a more robust advertising and promotional campaign (including word-of-mouth, screenings, and red-carpet events to generate more awareness in non-Latinx markets if Warner Bros. wanted *Selena* to crossover and attract non-Latinx moviegoers. Simply put, these films need the support of non-Latinx moviegoers to be commercially successful domestically.

In closing, *Selena* had many elements that suggested it would perform well at the box office. The film received positive reviews for Jennifer Lopez's outstanding performance, had a strong soundtrack, and told an appealing underdog story about an anonymous girl on the verge of mainstream success before her untimely death. Warner Bros. spent an unprecedented amount on *Selena*'s Spanish-language marketing campaign to create awareness within the Latinx market. Over the first weeks, the distributor took advantage of grassroots efforts from *Latina* magazine and other corporate sponsors to attract many Latinx moviegoers. However, the film lost momentum quickly because Warner Bros. was unable to not attract non-Latinx moviegoers. Without a marketable Latinx star, the distributor needed to spend more money to sell this potentially universal story to a non-Latinx audience. Without a concerted effort to promote this film nationally with a solid English-language campaign, Warner Bros. easily fell back on the continual tropes to explain why Latinx films fail at the box office: mainstream moviegoers did not consider U.S. Latinx films to be universal stories. While Latinx stories may not attract non-Latinx moviegoers, studios will only know definitively if they invest similar production, advertising, and distribution resources in Latinx films and non-Latinx films. With an insufficient national advertising and promotional campaign to create awareness among all moviegoers, especially non-Latinx teenage girls, *Selena* generated a disappointing box office result and ultimately failed to exceed *La Bamba*'s box office figure.

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