

Our Obsession With Celebrity Is Being Fueled by Latinx Immigrants



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Illustration by Alex Izaguirre/Fusion

Britney Spears shaving her head at the height of a very public meltdown. Kristen Stewart busted cheating on Robert Pattinson. Rare shots of Gwyneth Paltrow and Chris Martin's kids. These high-water marks of mid-aughts celebrity were captured by the same paparazzo: an immigrant from El Salvador.

The paparazzo who in 2005 crashed into Lindsay Lohan's Mercedes-Benz and who had a famous spat with Justin Bieber? He's Latino. And the photographer who was killed by a car on Pacific Coast Highway as he followed Bieber's white Ferrari? He was Latino, too.

The most widely recognized celebrity photos taken in the last decade were likely taken by Latinx paparazzi—many of them immigrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, and Brazil, according to Dr. Vanessa Díaz, an anthropologist and visiting researcher at University of California, Los Angeles who has been interviewing celebrity photographers since 2010.

Industry insiders say there's anywhere between 150 to 500 paparazzi in Los Angeles at any given moment. Dr. Díaz estimates the number of celebrity photographers is closer to 150–200 and her research found about 62% of them are Latinx—about half of whom are undocumented immigrants.

Dr. Díaz said she is the first to identify just how many of these photographers are Latinx. Her research will be included in a forthcoming book, *Manufacturing Celebrity: Race, Gender, and the Cultural Politics of Red Carpet and Paparazzi Work*.

The demographic shift in the industry ramped up after the 2008 financial crisis. “It used to be all white guys,” one celebrity photo agency owner said in a 2008 interview with The Associated Press. “There's a lot of illegals out there,” said another veteran agency CEO.

Before the financial crisis, the majority of paparazzi in L.A. were white, feeding an insatiable demand for celebrity pictures that could command tens of thousands of dollars for a single shot. These days, there's a lot less money in the industry, with shrinking budgets at publications and celebrities selling or posting their own pictures on social media. As the business became less lucrative and more complicated, white photographers left the jobs and more Latinx moved in.

“I call them knuckle-scraping mouth breathers,” Frank Griffin, who runs the Bauer-Griffin agency, told the AP in 2008. “They can either make \$1,500 a month running around with cameras, or they can go rob a 7-Eleven.”

Dr. Díaz, who at one point in her career reported from red carpets for *People*, says the industry now has more paparazzi who are Latinx, black, or Asian and Pacific Islanders, many of them Filipinos. Most of the photographers are under the age of 40 and only about 4% of them are white, according to Dr. Díaz's research.

GIF ▶

Paparazzi in Los Angeles race to capture images of a celebrity.

The shift in the industry, Dr. Díaz says, is partly due to networks in the Latinx community and “the willingness of these Latino laborers to work around the clock in a line of work that is publicly denigrated.”

“They’re treated as subhuman but they’re producing the work that we all love to like,” she said recently at a presentation at the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, where she is a researcher.

She said it’s not surprising to her that a profession that was already hated would transition to becoming dominated by Latinx workers.

“The jobs that Americans don’t want are not just those that are too menial, but also jobs that are too stigmatized,” she said.

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Now, when the photographers are waiting for celebrities to make an appearance, they’re almost always speaking in Spanish. Or Portuguese, according to Galo Ramirez, who started working in the industry at 24 and was a full-time celebrity photographer for more than a decade.

“I was pretty young when I got the job and there was a certain kind of excitement,” Ramirez, who was born in

El Salvador and moved to California when he was six years old, told Fusion.

When Ramirez, who is now 36 and a U.S. citizen, started working as a paparazzo, photographers could make anywhere from \$10,000 to \$20,000 a month. That's huge, especially considering that the average Latinx who attended some college make about \$2,756 per month working full-time, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Galo Ramirez in 2011 waiting to take pictures of Jennifer Lopez at the set for her music video "Papi" in Los Angeles. (Photo: Vanessa Díaz)

For undocumented immigrants, selling photos to an agency as a freelancer can also be just as lucrative a position.

Ramirez said he was attracted to the job because he could make his own schedule, he was his own boss, and it paid better than any other job he could get at the time. He started working in the industry shortly after he dropped out of college.

"I was given an opportunity to make the kind of money that, at that age, I would not have been able to make without a degree," said Ramirez, who has collaborated with Dr. Díaz in her research.

He also made headlines himself in 2005 when the minivan he was driving crashed into Lindsay Lohan's Mercedes-Benz. Initially, he was arrested and accused of intentionally crashing into her car, but prosecutors eventually decided there was not enough evidence to charge him.

Ramirez says the pay isn't as significant these days, which is why he is no longer working in the industry. He wouldn't say what he's doing for work now, but said being a paparazzo was not a good living.

Jose Gonzalez, who has been working as a paparazzo for 14 years, is known as “El Primo” amongst other photographers. His cousin was working as a paparazzo and helped him get a job at an agency that sends photographers out searching for celebrities. He came to the U.S. in 1987 from El Salvador and now lives in Los Angeles with his two children.

He told me there are two types of paparazzi: those who photograph celebrities discreetly from afar and those who linger outside of studios and businesses waiting for them to make an appearance.

The paparazzi who hang out in front of businesses looking for any celebrity to show up are nicknamed “the Home Depots,” a reference to the day laborers who stand in front of the hardware stores looking for work. (Dr. Diaz said the moniker reinforces notions of invisible immigrant workers.)

“The real paparazzi work alone,” Gonzalez, 45, told Fusion. “You’ll only see one or two working on the lucrative jobs, not 20 paparazzi.”

Before he started taking celebrity pictures, he was a construction worker installing rain gutters. He said photography work may be cleaner, but it’s not easy.

“People say working as a paparazzo is easy compared to other jobs, but the job is psychologically exhausting,” he said.

Gonzalez said he regularly sits in his car for eight hours at a time waiting for celebrities to leave their homes. That means that for hours at a time, he can’t close his eyes and can’t really be on his phone. To avoid being recognized, he can’t park in front of the celebrity’s house, so he waits in his car on a nearby street, his attention always drawn to oncoming traffic.

“You have to be focused, so you’re not relaxing,” he said.

But those long hours can seriously pay off. In November 2005, Gonzalez shot the photos that confirmed Nicole Kidman and Keith Urban were dating. The agency he was working for at the time sent him and his cousin to Pennsylvania, where Urban was set to perform. When there were no signs of Kidman, Gonzalez tailed Urban’s tour bus to Boston.

They arrived at 4 AM, he remembers, and it was snowing. All the hotels were sold out, so they slept in the car. But they were low on gas from the trip, and all the nearby stations had closed. It came down to a choice between having enough fuel to get their photo or keep the car on to stay warm through the snowy morning. They snoozed in the cold.

After driving for hours and freezing all night, they got their shot the next day: Urban and Kidman, walking hand-in-hand. Gonzalez estimates the photo made about \$500,000. He says he got a bonus of about \$15,000 for the job.

“This is a game. If you work for an agency, you get a salary of about \$5,000 a month plus commission, and they gave me what they wanted,” said Gonzalez, who now works independently.

And while he and his cousin managed to get the shot of Kidman and Urban for the big payday they needed, there are plenty of times when the hours of trailing and waiting and hoping don’t pan out.

“If you’ve worked for two to three days and you don’t get the shot you need, then you have a lot of time to be frustrated,” he said.

As one veteran photographer recently put it in a *Los Angeles Magazine* interview, “no one has our back. You get the shot or you don’t eat.”

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In the past few decades, some elements of paparazzi work have actually been criminalized in California.

In 1998, a year after Princess Diana was killed in a Paris car crash, California became the first state in the nation to pass legislation restricting the work of paparazzi. “Under this bill, the so-called ‘stalkerazzi’ will be deterred from driving their human prey to distraction, or even death,” then California Gov. Pete Wilson said when he signed the bill. At the time, ABC, CBS, CNN, NBC, and the American Civil Liberties Union opposed the state law.

Since then, there's been at least four more laws that criminalize tactics used by paparazzi that have been signed into law by Governors Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jerry Brown.

Dr. Díaz noted the laws have primarily focused on punishing the photographers who carry out the work and not the magazines, TV shows, and websites that buy the images.

It's unclear how often these paparazzi laws are actually enforced. Representatives from the Los Angeles Police and Sheriff's Departments told Fusion they don't track or keep data by profession or laws.

But the laws do add another layer of risk of deportation for undocumented paparazzi, especially when President Trump's administration is targeting immigrants who have been arrested for deportation.

Dr. Díaz compared the production and consumption of paparazzi photos to the experience of Latinx laborers on farms who pick the fruit and vegetables that feed the nation.

She said people “never think about the economic, political, and labor practices that led to us eating this fruit.”

“Most people are not reading *Us Weekly*, or looking at websites, or even watching the nightly news where paparazzi images are featured and thinking about the fact that freelance Latinx labor produced those images,” she said.

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