LOCAL

Latino, Latinx, or Latine? What LGBTQ+ Houstonians think of these terms

By **Jhair Romero**, *Staff writer*

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Gift Article



Austin Davis Ruiz, a local LGBTQ activist, on March 31, 2023, at The Montrose Center in Houston.
Raquel Natalicchio/Staff photographer

In Houston, like in most parts of the country, Latino LGBTQ+ leaders are divided on the gender-neutral terms Latinx and Latine, with some lauding them as beacons of inclusivity and others berating them as grammatically awkward or just plain clunky.

Both terms have grown more popular in recent years as a way to be more inclusive to women and the LGBTQ+ community by replacing the traditionally masculine -o suffix in Latino with -x or -e. The identifiers have prompted praise and scrutiny from across the country. Beyond the U.S., these terms haven't gained much traction, experts said.

But LGBTQ+ Houstonians sorting through these terms to describe themselves were everything but neutral on the matter.

Anandrea Molina, a transgender activist and founder of the Organización Latina de Trans in Texas, uses Latinx and Latine regularly. She said LGBTQ+ Latinos have been debating the benefits and downfalls of these words for years.

"There's a lot of division within our community because of these terms," Molina said in Spanish, using the gender-neutral Latine. "This is an opportunity for everyone to feel included. This is just our first step."

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Despite their controversies, Molina said Latinx and Latine are safe havens for those who don't fall within the gender binary.

"So many people feel threatened by what's been established (in the Spanish language)," she said. "But what's been established aren't necessarily the rules."

Opponents of the new terms often disapprove of the fact that the new terms circumvent the grammatically gendered structure of the Spanish language, which in most cases uses the suffixes to signify whether a word is masculine (-o) or feminine (-a).

Elia Chinó, a Houston trans advocate, said the terms Latinx and Latine erase both gender identity and heritage for members of the Latino LGBTQ+ community.

“I’m disappointed that now everyone uses them,” said Chinó, who founded FLAS, the Fundación Latinoamericana De Acción Social in 1994 to help improve sexual health education in the Latino community during the AIDS epidemic “It’s like we’re losing our Spanish.”

Her biggest criticism is that the terms don’t adhere to traditional Spanish grammar, which emphasizes gender identities.

“I feel like we’re more marginalized with the -x,” said Chinó, who is originally from Mexico.

In 2021, the League of United Latin American Citizens, the nation’s oldest Latino civil rights organization, weighed in on the same side, dropping Latinx from its official communications.

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The hesitancy of many Spanish speakers to use the modern terms mirrors people’s attitudes toward gender-neutral language in English, said Austin Davis Ruiz, a local LGBTQ+ activist.

He uses Latine often and said he has noticed a shift toward gender-neutral terminology within the Latino LGBTQ+ community in Houston.

Still, he acknowledged it will take time for terms such as Latinx and Latine to reach widespread use.

“It’s basically asking people to totally rewrite how they were taught and what they grew up on,” Ruiz said.

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The debate among Latinos over these terms has spanned decades, according to University of Houston professor Guadalupe San Miguel, who focuses on Latino history and politics.

Latinx and Latine have roots in the Chicano Movement of the mid-20th century, he said. Early activists, constrained by a language that emphasized masculinity, struggled to find inclusive labels within their community, San Miguel said. This led to new expressions such as Chicano/a, Xicano (as a way to connect with languages indigenous to Mexico) and eventually Chicanx.

Although there is no clear origin story as to how the -x suffix came to be, the term Latino got the same treatment when it became the predominant identifier for people with cultural ties to Latin America in the 1970s.

The term Latine evolved as an alternative because it more closely resembled Spanish, which uses gender-neutral suffixes in words such as estudiante (student) and residente (resident).

"This is all part of a long history of people within the community trying to define themselves," San Miguel said. "It's a continuing struggle."

A range of politicians have weighed in on the debate, including some who scoff at the idea of gender-neutral terms.

Arkansas Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders, a Republican, noted that few people actually use Latinx. Citing a 2021 Gallup poll that found only 4 percent of U.S. Latinos prefer the term Latinx, she banned the term in an executive order this year, striking it from use in official state documents.

But it's not only conservatives who bristle at the term. Latino Democrats in Connecticut are trying to squash the gender-neutral term through a bill in their state legislature, arguing it is offensive to Spanish speakers.

No one, politician or layperson, of course, can dictate what Latinx, Latine or Latino people choose to call themselves or one another.

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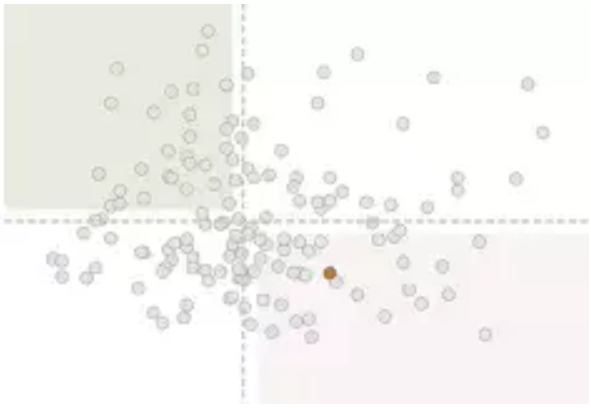
Jhair Romero is the Latino communities reporter for the Houston Chronicle's community/inequity team.

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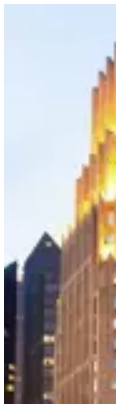
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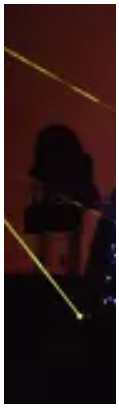
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