

THE LATINA EXPERIENCE:  
ETHNIC MARKERS & IDENTITY BUILDING AT AN HISPANIC SERVING  
INSTITUTION

by

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THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts in Sociology at  
The University of Texas at Arlington  
May 2022

Arlington, Texas

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## ABSTRACT

This study addresses the identity reconstruction process and ethnic marker development of 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Latina undergraduates attending a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). A qualitative study consisting of 12 individual interviews and a focus group consisting of two new respondents and two old ones ( $N=14$ ) were conducted virtually to understand how identity was reconstructed, and which ethnic markers this new generation uses to identify other Latinx. To understand the identity reconstruction process and ethnic marker identification, borderlands theory with a focus on the *mestiza* consciousness was employed. Results show that not all Latinas reconstruct their identity once they start attending an HSI. On the contrary, while some reconstructed their identity because they experienced a predominantly white k-12 education and did not have a strong connection to their culture before attending the university, others enhanced their identity. Identity enhancement occurred for those Latinas who had a strong sense of Latinx identity before attending the university. Their experiences at the university confirmed what they already believed of themselves and exposed them to a new social environment where they became even more secure in their identities. As for the ethnic markers, results suggest that this new generation of Latinas is redefining ethnic boundaries and markers. They confirmed past research by using language as a prominent ethnic marker but added kinship ties and skin tone. Kinship ties appeared in the way they talked about their families and how their Latinidad stemmed from family connections. Skin tone, on the other hand, was discussed about in terms of white-passing and white-washing Latinx. Their thought process revealed that it was not so much about skin tone (though it still was), but it was more about behavior and how one viewed their own culture.

## INTRODUCTION

The first time I questioned my own identity as a Latina was in 2012 when I left my beloved island of Puerto Rico and migrated to Texas. At times it feels as if most Americans only know of Puerto Rico due to its art and/or music, but to me, the island had been home my entire life. Small, but expansive in the ways that counted, PR was a place where I was proud to be *Boricuas*, to be Puerto Rican. At 17, the question of my ethnic identity did not impact my life as much as it did once I migrated to the U.S. After settling in Texas, I was classified as a *Latina* and a *Hispanic*, which were terms I had barely heard of back home. It seemed as if my national identity became irrelevant when I started introducing myself to others. Since I knew Spanish, I was classified as *Latina*. However, I was simultaneously ridiculed for my “bad” Spanish and my “white-passing” physical attributes. Due to these new contradicting interactions, I began questioning what made me Puerto Rican, what made me Latina. Who was I? Where did I fit in?

Due to the demographics in Texas, and as my circle of friends expanded, I interacted with a lot of Mexican and Mexican American individuals. Before this, I had very limited interaction with this particular nationality in the Latinx community. Until I came to the U.S., I had met one Mexican man, a classmate of mine, and one whom I regretfully admit was made fun of due to his accent. I quickly learned that Mexicans were the majority in Texas while Puerto Ricans were the minority, which created a bit of turmoil in me as I tried to figure out my own ethnic identity. However, as time went by, I learned that my pan-ethnic identity as *Latina* and my national identity as Puerto Rican were not exclusive. I could have both. I would eventually become comfortable speaking my Puerto Rican Spanish and celebrating the traditions of my culture. This level of acceptance took years to develop. Once I felt comfortable enough in my identity, I

started talking to other Latinx to see if my experience was shared, and although there are some differences, there are many similarities.

Latinos are currently ranked as the largest racial/ethnic minority subpopulation in the United States, currently making up 23% of the nation's population (U.S. Census Bureau 2021). Latinx is the largest non-white, ethnoracial group in the United States (Vargas 2015). There is an incredible amount of diversity within the Latinx group, in terms of socioeconomic class and phenotypic features. This means that there is no *real and stereotypical* way someone should look in the Latinx community. Because of this, what Latinx define as ethnic markers, or identifiers, varies within the community and outside of it. However, the most common ethnic markers are language and national origin (Jiménez 2010:105).

How Latinx identify ethnically is a long process that spans from adolescence and into adulthood (Phinney 1989, 1993; Feliciano 2009). The various identities Latinx may form during their early teenage years might not be the ones they keep once they become young adults, since it is not until young adulthood that they secure their ethnic identities (Phinney 1989, 1993). This is seen most easily on college campuses, where Feliciano (2009) finds that higher education leads to an increase in hyphenated identities, i.e., Mexican-Americans. The 2<sup>nd</sup> generation (of immigrants) gains a heightened sense of ethnic identity because of both *seeing themselves*, and *being seen* as minorities on campus. If they identified as plain “American” teenagers, Feliciano's (2009:150) research indicates that they are not viewed that way non-Latinx once they attend college. Therefore, ethnic identification is influenced by the labels outsiders place on these individuals (Nagel 1994), and depends, to some extent, on how flexible identities are within individuals (Waters 1990).

Identity is influenced by social interactions throughout one's life (Aparicio 2007:44). It is also influenced by the environments individual finds themselves in, as those environments introduce them to new people and experiences (Lauer and Handel 1977:17). College campuses for 18-25-year-olds are one of the most common environments. Post-secondary education, specifically on diverse campuses, is known to be a turning point in how undergraduates form, define and reconstruct their identity (Torres 2003:543).

While most of the research on Latinx identity has been conducted on predominately white (PW) campuses, a literature is emerging on Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI), which are academic institutions, colleges, or universities, where at least 25% of its population of full-time undergraduate students identify as Hispanic (Diverse Issues in Higher Education 2019). Accounting for a total of 17% of all academic institutions as of 2020 (Revilla-Garcia 2021), HSIs are thought to be supportive of Latinos and more prepared to help with their needs and concerns, but there is little research to support that (Contreras and Gandara 2006:97) and thus a vacuum in the literature.

There is also little research on how Latinas, specifically, are supported on college campuses, PW or HSI. Latinas tend to find themselves in a bind where they are encouraged to seek higher education but to also conform to behavioral gender-related expectations by their parents (Dion and Dion 2001:517), which is known as "the good daughter dilemma" (Espinoza 2010). This can cause stress and isolation that can either lead to assimilation or a securing of their ethnic identity (Dion and Dion 2001; Torres 2003).

Second-generation Latinx identity is different than first or third generations, in that the former generally feel caught between two worlds – their parents' country of origin and the dominant society in which they grew up (Waters 1996:65). However, there is a lack of research

around formal higher education and Latinx, specifically Latina, ethnic identity development (Torres et al. 2012).

### *My Study*

Throughout this study, I seek to answer two main research questions: What are the ethnic markers among Latina undergraduates? How does ethnic identity change and/or get reconstructed among 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Latina undergraduates at a Hispanic Serving Institution?

The focus will be on second-generation Latinas with the exception to include those in the 1.5 generation due to most research lumping both groups into the label “second generation” (Farley and Alba 2002). I will use the conventional sociological definition of immigrant generation (i.e., first/1.5/second) based on the country in which the Latinas were mostly socialized and educated. Thus, the second-generation refers to Latinas who were born in the United States from at least one parent who immigrated shortly before their birth; 1.5 generation includes those who immigrated sometime between their primary and high school years and retain memories from their life back in their country of origin; and first-generation refers to those who immigrated to the United States after high school years (Pew Research Center 2013; Farley and Alba 2002).

To address the lack of research surrounding this topic, this study investigates how 1.5-2<sup>nd</sup> generation Latina undergraduates reconstruct their identity at a Hispanic Serving Institution. I also investigate the ethnic markers this population uses to identify themselves as well as others in their community. This study uses the term “Latinx” instead of “Latino” to encompass the entire community as “Latinx” in a way that is gender-neutral and inclusive of all those who belong to the community (Vidal-Ortiz and Martínez 2018).

First, I discuss the theoretical model used for this study – borderlands theory. Secondly, I review the research on identity among Latinx, specifically in Latinas, and how their identities are

constructed and reconstructed through institutional contacts, dissimilar contexts, friends and family, and gender. Then I examine the ethnic markers found in the research, such as kinship ties and language, for the Latinx population. In the next section, I will explain the methodology of the study, which uses qualitative inquiry. Afterwards, I interpret my findings, which are divided into two parts – identity and ethnic markers. Finally, I conclude my study by exploring the implications, limitations as well as future directions for this research.



## DEVELOPING A SENSE OF ETHNIC IDENTITY

### **Theory**

The conceptual framework for this study includes elements of borderlands theory. Latinx scholars, specifically, have used borderlands theory more to understand identity development among Latinx. Borderland scholars provide an interpretative framework to explain how Mexican Americans experience the world living between two different cultures (Elenes and Delgado Bernal 2010:72). From this perspective, a borderland is a third space that results from the intersection between two (Anzaldúa 1987/2012:7). This new space is where Latinx develop their own sense of ethnic identity, creating a new culture where they fit in. Borderlands thus speak of people who constantly navigate and balance different cultures and the world, living between them (Elenes 1997:359). In essence, in this space, ethnic identities are constructed by both the individual and the society as a whole. This also means that Mexican Americans are simultaneously insiders and outsiders (Elenes 1997:363).

Borderlands theory was initially developed to describe and analyze the experience of individuals who lived in the border region between Mexico and the United States. (Anzaldúa 1987/2012:7). The experience of the people who live in the borderlands is considered as different than that of Mexicans, Spanish settlers, or Anglo Americans (Anzaldúa 1987/2012:7). This new group was referred to as *Chicano/as*. Because this group must navigate between two different cultures, authors such as Anzaldúa (1987/2012) named the space they occupied “the borderlands” to describe that physical and metaphorical border in order to capture her own experience growing up on the Mexico-Texas border.

When the United States created a geopolitical border with Mexico after colonizing Texas, it created a political and cultural space for Mexican Americans (Anzaldúa 1987/2012:6). This

space, the “borderlands,” is a hybrid space where cultural traditions and practices from the cultures of both countries are amalgamated. These borderlands then created a hybridity for those individuals. By the borderlands creating this space for hybridity, the individuals live inside a system while having the knowledge of an outsider (Anzaldúa 1987/2012:7). Thus, it created the “outsider within” status for Chicano/as, as one that shapes experiences of social and cultural marginalization as well as cultural pride.

### **Three Pillars of Identity Development**

People not only define their identity depending on how others view and define them, but also how they define their identity for themselves (Nagel 1994:154). Therefore, identity largely depends on three pillars: cultural interactions, personal experiences, and reconstruction.

#### ***Cultural Interactions***

Cultural interactions take form in the shape of social interactions with people who provide direct or indirect connection to their culture; thus, these are interactions Latinx have with their families, friends, and members of the Latinx group. These interactions are the ones that form the base of their identity as they are the first ones individuals encounter.

Interactions with family and friends can have profound effects on students’ ethnic identity. For example, Torres (2003:538) found that feelings around student ethnic identity largely depended on how the parents had taught them. If the parents taught positive feelings and thoughts around it, then how the student talked about it reflected that. The same is true if the reverse happened – ingrained negative feelings regarding cultural identity leads to self-imposed negative feelings. Parent’s socioeconomic status (SES) and SES in general also have an effect.

Waters (1996:74-75) found that the lower individuals were socioeconomically, the more they held onto the national origin identity. Middle-class participants identified with pan-ethnic terms more than any other socioeconomic class. Tienda and Ortiz (1986: 15-16), also found that socioeconomic class had an effect on expression/identification with ethnic identity. Specifically, higher class participants tended to assimilate more than those who were of a lower class.

For Latinx, the family represents emotional attachment and obligation to not only their immediate family, but also to extended family (Zinn 1982:224). Family is also, and perhaps the only source of emotional and physical fulfillment for the individual. The kinship ties within the immediate and extended family are what encourage cultural maintenance (Zinn 1982:235). Family and the community, therefore, help an individual obtain information on their culture so that they can construct their ethnic identity (Torres 1999:288).

In the case of friends, most studies focus on intermarriages rather than friendships between adults (Kao and Joyner 2006:974). This could, however, be irrelevant in this study since the participants will be unlikely to be married. When the focus is shifted to teenagers, there is a more robust literature studying the connection between ethnic identity and friendships. Friendship choices could signify how much they identify with their ethnicity (Kao and Joyner 2006:973). For example, Jiménez (2010) found that friendships can lead to the involvement of traditional events such as quinceañeras, which then not only presents teens with the opportunity to connect with their culture, but also to dive deep into what that means for their ethnic identity (110).

Just on the basis of choosing friends, Kao and Joyner (2006) found that first- and second-generation Hispanics tend to choose friends who fall into their same ethnic group (979). The authors hypothesize that one of the reasons this may be is because of the composition of the school's student body. The few studies done in college have found that changes in identity were

prompted by change in peer group demographics (Torres 2003:543). Students also use knowledge derived from classmates to understand their ethnic identity (Castillo-Montoya and Verduzco-Reyes 2018:9).

At the core of college students' interactions is their ethnic identity. As Latinx, they live between the worlds and cultures to which they belong (Anzaldúa 1987/2012). By doing so, they create a sense of identity unique to them, an identity caused by the balancing on the tightrope at the intersection of those worlds (Anzaldúa 1987/2012). The friends these students make and the interactions they have culturally and non-culturally are all guided by their identity; how comfortable they are, how they define their identity, who they talk to, what they do, and who they are at their core. The borderlands in which they live define even the minimal of things, such as their interactions and experiences.

### *Personal Experiences*

Whether it be making friends during college or interacting with family and friends, all are experiences that are personal to the student and their environment. Education is one example of a core environment for identity construction. Education is the primary environment individuals find themselves in from when they are a toddler until their mid-20s, which is when identity is thought to be finished developing (Phinney 1995). The environment encompasses the people they meet, the atmosphere of said environment, and all its physical and abstract components. Being introduced into a new environment, such as an educational institution, can have profound effects on how individuals define their identity. This is because the student is presented with new ideas and new people.

Students, from when they enter primary school to when they graduate from high school and continue to college, spend more time in classrooms than they do in their own houses. The time

spent in this environment makes campuses an ideal site for identity formation and re-evaluation for students (Torres et al. 2012). Not only because of the introduction to new people, new places, and new ideas, but because it is a space unexplored through their identity.

While identity formation is a continuous process from adolescence to young adulthood (Phinney 1993), some research has found that from young adulthood to middle adulthood, identity is in a cyclical process of being constructed and re-constructed due to new information, new experiences, and new environments (Torres et al. 2012:9). This process is also known as looping, where identity, specifically Latinx identity, is in a continuous process of being re-evaluated due to its socially constructed nature (Torres et al. 2012:10). As mentioned before, new experiences, information, ways of thinking, and environments – college campuses, classes, and programs within that college – could prompt this process.

Schools serve as institutions that let Latinx individuals access ethnic-linked symbols and practices through clubs and organizations that provide opportunities for them to learn about their culture and celebrate their origins (Jiménez 2010:121). Not all Latinx enter college with the same understanding of what it means to be Latinx (Torres 2003:544). College campuses, nevertheless, create specific multicultural ethnic climates, in which Latinx students construct meaning around what it means to be Latinx on their campus (Verduzco Reyes 2017:465).

Cultural Learning Centers Latinx Cultural Centers (LCC) construct a part of Latinx identity by giving students the tools to decide what their ethnicity means to them. Through the center's practices and values, Latinx students can explore what their ethnicity means to them. These centers also provide resources for the Latinx community (Castillo-Montoya and Verduzco Reyes 2018:3).

Research on LCCs is more limited than research on Black Cultural Centers (BCCs) (Patton 2006). However, it is research on BCCs that has made obvious the need for LCCs. LCCs offer support for Latinx students as their collegiate identity develops (Lozano 2010:12). The centers have an availability of resources to best serve their demographic. Students founded LCCs at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) during the 1960s and 1970s. LCCs served as “home bases” for Latinx students to coordinate and address issues important to them. Community and family outreach is generally important to LCCs (Lozano 2010:13). Today, LCCs struggle to survive due to lack of funding and limited resources (Lozano 2010:14).

Throughout history, cultural centers have emerged out of departments focused on them. For example, LCCs emerged out of Chicana/o Studies Departments (Garcia and Okhidio 2015). The creation of these departments occurs through institutionalization procedures, such as campus activities and classes. Once students are made aware of these departments, they actively participate in them (Garcia and Okhidio 2015:350). These departments, due to their growing numbers, then create LCCs to help manage student need. The departments, followed by centers, create classes and minors in which students may participate. Once Latinx students take these classes, they become more in touch with their ethnic identity and culture.

College classes in literature and social sciences introduce Latinx students to works by Latinx authors. When Latinx students read about their culture through literature, specifically Chicano literature, Vasquez (2005:907-908) found that it had a positive effect on their ethnic identity by encouraging them to apply the stories to their own family history, which allowed them to further connect to their Latinx culture and their ethnic identity. Reading the literature also provides a sense of belonging when students felt isolated at their university (Vasquez 2005:908).

LCCs are also known for spearheading the creation of student organizations for Latinx students. Involvement in Latinx student groups influences identity development by allowing students to learn and celebrate their heritage (Torres 2003:544).

Hispanic Serving Institutions Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) became recognized by the federal government in 1992 (Núñez et al. 2015:2). HSIs are part of minority-serving institutions (MSIs); though, they are the only ones that are defined by statistics rather than practice (Núñez et al. 2015:5). HSIs enroll a higher number of minority students than any other specialized MSI. HSIs are not given their title by what they do for Latinx students but by the number of enrolled Latinx students each year. HSIs do not “serve” only Hispanic students. On the contrary, they tend to be the most diverse institutions.

By the 1980s, there was some legislative discussion regarding “Hispanic Institutions” (Núñez et al. 2015:6). However, it was not until 1989 that those discussion expanded into contacting Hispanic institutions and organizations to create a federal designation for the institutions that enrolled high numbers of Latinx undergraduates (Núñez et al. 2015:7).

In 1990, President Bush signed the Hispanic Education executive order that allocated funds to these institutions. HSIs first fell under the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965. Most HSIs acquired this official designation later after reaching the established threshold of acquired Latinx students. Later, in 1998, HSIs were placed under Title V of the HEA, which is the Developing Hispanic-Serving Institutions program that allowed eligible institutions to apply for the title and funds.

For Latinx students, HSIs have benefits and opportunities after enrollment, a positive environment for all people of color, and they are welcoming in a way that feels personal (Garcia and Dwyer 2018:201). These institutions help Latinx students enhance their cultural identity and

education simultaneously (Garcia 2016:134). Programs such as TRIO SSS prove that HSIs make access to education accessible for the Latinx community (Garcia 2016:135). Having Latinx faculty they could relate to at a cultural level helped the students feel more valued and connected to their education and culture. HSIs, on the other hand, are not perfect because there are Latinx students who only feel validated in certain spaces of the campus (Garcia 2016).

Along with problems of cultural validation, Latinx students face cultural challenges at HSIs, such as their parents not understanding the process of college along with lowered expectations from other Latinx (Dayton et al. 2004:32). For Latinas, they encounter deeper cultural barriers because of gender expectations. A conflict between school and family due to *familismo* exists. Latinx students' professors may not understand the conflict, which makes it more arduous to balance school and family life (Dayton et al. 2004:33). The challenges are at times reinforced (due to the location of HSIs) because they are located where the Latinx population is high. The location may compromise academics for these students due to their families being close by, reinforcing that their family should be more important than their academics.

HSIs, on the other hand, are good at creating an environment where Latinx students feel at ease and understood. This aspect, though, may hurt the students in the long run. HSIs have the complicated task of making these students feel comfortable but also preparing them for a world where they are not easily accepted. A way to make them feel safe and accepted is diversity in faculty. Having faculty that can relate to Latinx students has been found to be helpful at retaining and recruiting these kind of students (Dayton et al. 2004:34)

HSIs worked to recruit and maintain these diverse faculty and staff. On some campuses, Latinx faculty are seen as the voices of reason and conscience, especially when it comes to



political issues affecting student organizations. They may understand the students and their needs better than other faculty and staff. Seeing faculty and staff that represented themselves ethnically brings Latinx students comfort and reassurance. Students feel at ease when they could further connect to these administrators since they spoke Spanish. For some, a faculty member speaking Spanish was not all that important (Dayton et al. 2004:35). What mattered is how these people treated and understand them, not their ethnic composition. While the title may not be that important, the feelings Latinx students have at the campus are.

Locally, HSIs touch the lives of Latinx students by providing a space and faculty that comfort these students. At the federal level, it is hard to understand what these campuses are doing for their Latinx students. Academically, the HSI title has been questioned because of the lack of definition and measurement of “serving.” Some measure it by academic outcomes such as GPA, retention, and graduation rates (Garcia et al. 2019). Others by non-academic outcomes, such as racial/ethnic identity salience and leadership development (Garcia et al. 2019). Overall, “serving” has no clear measure and this lack of consistency is why it is hard to understand the purpose of calling these institutions Hispanic Serving Institutions (Garcia et al. 2019:759).

Whether called HSIs or MSIs, environments have an influence on how an individual defines, responds, and makes meaning out of everyday life. Therefore, two individuals from two different groups will have different meanings and responses to objects and situations. In the same vein, environments are defined by the objects they contain and what those objects mean to the individuals (Blumer 1969:11). In theory, this means that two Latinas, though from the same abstract group, could have different meanings for the same thing.

### ***Reconstruction***

Once an individual is introduced to new people, new environments, and/or new ideas, a reconstruction of identity can occur. For Latinx, a reconstruction of identity takes the shape of using different identity labels. Therefore, as research has shown, 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Latinx can go from using national-origin labels to using pan-ethnic ones the more they are in environments with other Latinx (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). And with this label change is the new definition of what they would consider ethnic markers. Ethnic markers are the criteria members of a group use to identify other members (Evans et al. 1998; Jiménez 2010). The most common ethnic markers for Latinx, according to Jiménez (2010) are language, music, the celebration of traditional events and holidays, and the knowledge of immigrant origins/roots. These are not the *only* ethnic markers, or even the most important. Language and kinship ties, however, are the strongest amongst the Latinx community.

Language      Language is an important binding agent between members of a group. It serves as a boundary to identify group members (Portes and Rumbaut 2001:113). Spanish, specifically, is subordinated and racialized (Aparicio 2007:42), which explains why it has become a marker to define ethnic authenticity within Latinx.

It is also an ethnic marker due to language ideology, which assumes that if you speak a certain language, you belong to a particular ethnic group (Fought 2006:21). Language ideology is partly the result of U.S. society and the classification of Latinx. During the creation of the labels “Latino” and “Hispanic,” the U.S. used markers such as language, surnames, and national origin to identify someone of Latin origin (Hayes-Bautista and Chapa 1987:64-65).

Language is an important legacy left by older generations of a culture, but it is also the hardest to pass on because of the opposing force of the mainstream language (Portes and Rumbaut 2001:114). It is not necessarily lost if parents do not teach their children Spanish; instead, these

children may learn Spanish through casual interactions with immigrants and others in their culture (Jiménez 2010:105).

Ongoing Latinx immigration reduces the decline of the Spanish language, resulting in a higher percentage of those who are bilingual (Jiménez 2010:108). These interactions can also prompt the use of Spanglish, a dialect that intermixes Spanish and English. Spanglish usually results from code switching between the languages, usually starting off in Spanish then switching to English, and then using a combination of both (Ardila 2005:71). The use of the dialect could be a way of bridging both worlds and languages while also allowing a connection to both cultures, which can help communicate feelings that are hindered by either language (Gloria and Castellanos 2012:172). This way, those who do not speak the language are not reminded that they are not part of the group (Jiménez 2010:111).

Spanglish is a progressive shift for some as it can be used to speak to non-family Spanish speakers (Ardila 2005:61). It is categorized as a dialect since a lack of uniformity exists, which is because its words are customized to fit the specific social makeup of the people using it (Ardila 2005:63). A dialect is a variation in language understood by those in the same community who speak the same general language of which the dialect is a part (Ardila 2005:66). Spanglish could be a way of bridging both worlds and languages (Gloria and Castellanos 2012:172).

Studies conflict on how much Spanish the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation speaks. Ardila (2005) finds that the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation tend to speak Spanglish the most because while they are taught some semblance of Spanish at home, they speak English outside of it, so the best solution is to combine both languages (66). On the other hand, Rumbaut, Massey, and Bean (2006) argue that the 1.5 to 2.5 generations speak the most Spanish out of all generations, though they prefer to use English in their everyday life (454).

Portes and Rumbaut (2001) offer some explanation for why this happens by arguing that bilingualism is hard to acquire because of America's assimilative process, yet 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Latinx have the advantage of continuous immigration, the pop culture use of Spanish, as well as phonetic and grammatic similarities between English and Spanish (126-127). The aforementioned assimilation process in the U.S. means policies aimed at complete English fluency with few policies that promote the use of native languages (130). Even though Latinos are more likely to be completely bilingual, they need to be constantly socialized to speak their parental native language. If not, they will lose it over time (143). Whatever the answer is to 2<sup>nd</sup> generations preferring English, speaking Spanish, using slang, and aesthetic looks/image is important for the identity development of 2<sup>nd</sup> gen Latinos (Massey and Sánchez 2007:94).

Bilingualism is, for the most part, a stable part of the Latino identity (Linton and Jiménez 2009:985). Bilingualism is achieved by speaking Spanish at home and other places as it keeps Spanish alive in the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation (Tran 2010:278). It is also achieved by learning English, though studies have found that learning both does not decrease the fluency of the other (Tran 2010). Parents are a key part in the 2<sup>nd</sup> generations being bilingual. Rendón (1992) found that while parents do not grasp the English language fully, they do understand that the language is key for the success of their children. Therefore, parents enroll their students in bilingual, Hispanic-majority schools. Once the decision to go to college is made, 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Latinos have the personal choice on where to go.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> generation has the most language flexibility. According to Negrón (2011), linguistic flexibility includes the flexibility in not only molding language in order to fit the social context around the individual, such as code-switching, dialect switching, and slowing or accelerating speech patterns, but also in ways such as evoking or hiding an accent and playing

around with intonation. Language may be the strongest ethnic marker because it is one of the few that is learned – dialect, intonation, speed of speech, and accent (10). Language’s presence, or absence, has been used to determine the strength of their ethnic identification by insiders and outsiders. Being able to speak and understand the language, especially everything that it entails for that specific group, is to be a competent member of that group (11).

While bilingualism is prevalent, loss of fluency in Spanish is common. Spanish speakers may lose fluency due to their time in the U.S. (Fought 2006:78). Because of this, ethnic identity is being reinvented so that language is not such an important marker. As an ethnic marker, language’s importance diminishes within the group as later generations lose Spanish fluency (Rumbaut, Massey, and Bean 2006). This does not mean that it is not an ethnic marker, especially for non-Latinx, but its significance to later generations is not equal to those of the first or second generation. Generations 1.5 (immigrated during their teenage years) to 2.5 (born in the U.S. from a first gen parent and a non-Latinx parent) are much more fluent in Spanish than the third generation and after, when Spanish fluency starts to decrease (Rumbaut, Massey, and Bean 2006:454).

It is important to stress that Spanish loss may be due to the fact that those generations are further physically and emotionally from the first one, where ethnic raw materials such as language, are replenished due to continuous immigration in the area (Jiménez 2010). Because of this, it is crucial to understand how language may be an ethnic marker for some and not for others. As an ethnic marker, language’s importance varies because of the amount of interactions 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Latinx have with immigrants, their parents, and other members of the ethnic group.

Research has found another reason for the loss of fluency in Spanish – increased English use. Wong (2000) discusses how in the U.S. English is seen as the only acceptable language that

can be spoken (207). Spanish usage can be seen as an ideology, a rite of passage to be part of American society. Being unable to speak English, therefore, is seen as a denial of American values and culture. In school, children receive the social message that English is the only acceptable language. Language loss is both an internal and external process (208). The internal process works in a way that the individual would like to be socially accepted as well as to communicate with others. The external process works in the way of the sociopolitical climate in the U.S. and its consequences on education and other spaces.

For the Latinx community overall Spanish forms part of their identity as it can be used to communicate aspects of that identity (Bailey 2000:579). For this reason, language surpasses boundaries and then can create its own (Bailey 2000:578). Language also works as a blurred boundary because Spanish is largely taught in schools. Second generation Latinx students then have the opportunity to take Spanish classes and either reinforce it or learn it for the first time (Alba 2005:37). Research has found that Spanish is viewed as a tie to Latinx culture. As long as 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Latinx speak Spanish, Latinx culture lives within them (Delgado Bernal 2006:119). Because of this, language is essential for “cultural reproduction” (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000:432). Through language, Latinx show other members and non-Latinx their culture and can pass it on to younger generations. If the language, and especially the dialects, are kept alive, the culture itself is kept alive.

Because language serves as a boundary and an ethnic marker, the concept of authenticity surfaces. Latinx authenticity is a social construction of identity, but it does affect the internal workings of the group (Gaytán 2008:314). Authenticity is what marks your place in the world. Performing authenticity maintains stereotypical ideas about a group (Gaytán 2008:318). From when they are young, Latinx all fight with questions of authenticity (Bejarano 2006:49).

Due to language ideology, there is a common belief that if you do not speak Spanish, you cannot identify yourself as Latinx. Latinx have internalized this, which is why they believe and have defined language as part of their culture, their identity (Delgado Bernal 2001:629). Some studies have found that if they do not speak Spanish, Latinx have felt as if they were inauthentic because of their incomprehension of the language. For those who speak it, using their Spanish is a form of resistance to the social belief of anti-immigration/English preference (Delgado Bernal 2001:630).

Language, then, serves as not only an ethnic marker, but also as a boundary that defines who is and who is not Latinx. Language has been the longest serving boundary and ethnic marker, and though generations are changing, it remains as an important one. The dialect the individual speaks plays no part in the importance of Spanish being a boundary and marker. What is important is the ability to be able to communicate with members of the community and to show to non-Latinx that you are authentically Latinx.

Music For Latinx, music is used to preserve culture (Nowotny et al. 2010:47). It is also used to define authenticity between in-group members, especially among 2<sup>nd</sup> generation members (Warikoo 2009:397). If a member is not listening to the music that belongs to the group (e.g., Latinx music – mariachi, reggaetón, salsa, etc.), then group members consider that one member to be inauthentic and therefore crossing or blurring ethnic boundaries (Warikoo 2009:397).

In Houston, Nowotny et al. (2010) found that Latinx feel a sense of home and a connection to childhood once they hear the music from their native culture (39). The most common forms of Latinx music are conjunto, mariachi, salsa, reggaetón, and Latin Jazz (30). Each style of music has something that makes it *Latinx*, such as the *grito* (yell) in mariachi or the dancing in Salsa (37;43).

Conjunto, mariachi, salsa, reggaetón, and Latin Jazz are mostly played at traditional Latinx events or holidays where there is a large gathering of Latinx (34).

Music maintains culture through traditions and celebration as a community for musicians and listeners (O'Hagin and Hamish 2009:65). The community uses music to bond together as well as keep traditions alive. Latinx music is used as a tool to help others understand the culture. Music plays a part in ethnicity by allowing anyone who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx to embrace their culture through it.

Another aspect of music is popular culture. Popular culture is one more avenue through which 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Latinx can access ethnically linked symbols and practices to continuously reconstruct their identity (Jiménez 2010:119). Spanish-language media and demographic shifts have led to a more representative media experience (Jiménez 2010:124). Popular culture, then, becomes a way for Latinx to connect to their culture.

Food For Latinx, nothing is ever complete without food. It is a way to celebrate and interact with family members; it is how 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Latinx maintain a connection to their culture (Jiménez 2010:93). Food also connects members to their ancestry by forming a stronger connection to the culture and to their identity as a group (Jiménez 2010:122). In this way, food can serve as a boundary between members of the ethnic group and outsiders (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993:3).

Food is an easily accessible tool to connect one to ethnicity and culture. Immigrant owned establishments maintain attachment through food to ethnic identity. Immigrant-owned stores, shops, and chain supermarkets supply these generations with ingredients typical to the homeland so they may later home cook these ingredients into tradition cuisine (Jiménez 2010:122).



Food is connected to cultural celebrations, which is a measure of authenticity. Also, the collectivistic nature of Latinx culture is perceived to be an authentic measure of it, and that also translates to food (Gaytán 2008:324). Authenticity to food is also inherently tied to gender since women traditionally prepare it. Women prepping the food is how these restaurant owners described “authentic Mexican food,” by not only what was being made but by who made it.

Food is part of the immigrant experience as well as central to nation building (Pilcher 2014:442). Food is one factor that decides if immigrants are included or excluded from society (Pilcher 2014:444). Tamales are representative of the conquest, travel, and transculturation of Mexican cuisine. Tamales were originally an indigenous plate until conquistadores took it for a spin. Nation and food are “mestizo” because they blend Spanish and Indigenous culture and traditions.

Because native Latinx food is one of the few things that survived Spanish and English colonialism, food is the primary way newer generations express and experience symbolic ethnicity (Janer 2008). The ability to feel ethnic through objects, materials, and symbols is how ethnicity becomes symbolic (Gans 2017:1411). Food is accessible to all generations of the Latinx community and to non-Latinx. It is how Latinx and non-Latinx can experience a little of bit of the culture.

Food for Latinx is a direct result of the borderlands. In the borderlands, Latinx learned how to create different parts of their culture through food. It is also how Latinx reconstruct their identity and therefore create new and improved ethnic markers. The borderlands are physical and metaphorical boundaries that have defined Latinx identity to Latinx and outsiders. These boundaries are socially constructed patterns that define and maintain in-group members’ self-identification as well distinguish the group from outsiders (Sanders 2002:327). Members define

authenticity through these markers to define ethnic boundaries, which non-group members can do as well based on their ideas of recent immigration patterns and perceptions of Latinos as the ‘other’ (Jiménez 2010:170-71).

These boundaries are defined differently by in-group members and non-group members (Sanders 2002:327). Ethnic markers, therefore, keep ethnic boundaries salient, like language, because it distinguishes one group from another (Jiménez 2010; Calvillo and Bailey 2015). Intragroup boundaries have been found to influence ethnic self-identification (Tovar and Feliciano 2009:208). Because of this, the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation was more likely to reject their ethnic identity while the 1.5 generation were more likely to hold onto it (Tovar and Feliciano 2009:209-210). Ethnicity, therefore, is a self-ascription due to the changing nature of the social boundaries around the ethnic group (Negrón 2011:6).

While boundaries are meant to keep members in and non-members out, they have been changing due to newer generations and their definitions of these boundaries (Barth 1998). The borderlands, therefore, have been changing with the introduction of newer generations.

## METHODS

I used qualitative inquiry as the methodological approach for this study. Information for this project was generated by in-depth, semi-structured interviews with twelve Latinas as well as a focus group with four Latinas – two who had already had individual interviews and two who had not.

The study was conducted at a large, urban, public university with approximately 49,461 students studying on campus, 35,839 of whom are undergraduates. For the purposes of this study, the university will be referred to as Hispanic Serving University (HSU). HSU was chosen because it is a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). An HSI is a title granted by the federal government to universities where at least 25% of the undergraduate student body identifies as Hispanic (U.S. Department of Education 2021). HSU's demographic breakdown as of 2020 is 25.3% Hispanic, 15.8% African American, 10% Asian, with the rest identifying as White. As part of the HSI title, HSU has an academic unit, the Center for Mexican American Studies (CMAS) that provides a minor in Mexican American and Latino Studies and courses on Mexican American and Latino history and culture.

HSU was selected as the site for this study for several reasons. First, its location in North Texas has experienced a rapid demographic growth over the past two decades, largely driven by Hispanics. The DFW area is also the fastest-growing metro in the country for immigrants (New American Economy 2019). Second, the university has a large percentage of first-generation college students, thus offering an ideal population to explore issues related to the development of ethnic and cultural identity. In addition, HSU, as previously stated is an HSI; therefore, there are enough Latinas to interview. Finally, I had access to potential participants because I currently attend the university as a graduate student and work for a program in the university.

To recruit students for the study, I used both purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Snowball sampling is commonly used in qualitative research. It involves asking those close to the researcher, as well as interviewees, for referrals to others who might participate in the study or might know others who could be participants, i.e., those with the characteristics for which the researcher is looking (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981:141). I interviewed 14 Latinas. The criteria I used to recruit them included:

- a current undergraduate student attending HSU
- be between the ages of 18-25 years
- be 1.5-2<sup>nd</sup> generation
- self-identify as Latina

The breakdown for the respondents is as follows: the youngest are 19, while the two oldest are 24. In terms of their nationalities, eleven are Mexican/Mexican American ( $N = 11$ ), two are Salvadoran ( $N = 2$ ), and one is Honduran-Salvadoran ( $N = 1$ ). Because the study was conducted at a university, seven are seniors ( $N = 7$ ), four are juniors ( $N = 4$ ), and three are sophomores ( $N = 3$ ) as of summer 2020. All fourteen respondents are first-generation college students. Table 1 presents a more detailed view of the respondents' demographic information.

The sample was restricted to current students attending the university as they were involved in day-to-day life on the campus. The sample was also restricted to 1.5-2<sup>nd</sup> generation as their identities were likely to differ from their parents who were raised outside of the United States, i.e., Latin America, Central American, and the Caribbean (Rumbaut 2005). I restricted the age to be 18-25 because those are the years in which identity is constantly constructed and re-constructed due to interactions between social structures and individuals (Massey and Sanchez 2007). Latinas were chosen over Latinos because the intersection of gender, race, and ethnicity is an interesting

combination for Latinas because of how the culture views gender and how that translates to their lives as college students.

Table 1

*Respondent Demographic Information*

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Ethnic Identity</b>	<b>Generation</b>	<b>Classification</b>
Celestina	20	Mexican	1.5	Junior
Sara	22	Mexican American	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Senior
Gabriela	21	Mexican	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Junior
Rosabel	19	Hispanic/Salvadoran	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Sophomore
Alicia	20	Mexican	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Sophomore
Esmeralda	22	Hispanic	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Junior
Mariana	21	Hispanic	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Senior
Malena	24	Mexican American	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Senior
Kaleigh	21	Mexican American	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Junior
Lorelei	22	Central American	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Senior
Inés	24	Salvadoran	1.5	Senior
Ana	22	Hispanic	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Senior
Kiara	19	Hispanic	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Sophomore
Emma	24	Mexican American	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Senior

### ***Data Collection***

Respondents were recruited by reaching out via email to eleven Latinx student organizations as well as the TRIO Student Support Services program at the university (see Appendix A). The email contained a flyer describing the research as well as a short statement asking recipients to share the flyer among the members of their organization (see Appendix B). Due to the Coronavirus pandemic, this method proved to be the most effective as classes and events had moved online. Snowball sampling, in which respondents were asked to recommend other Latinas who might like to participate, was then used and adapted to gain virtual access to more respondents.

Four Latinas reached out through recruitment emails to student organization and initially agreed to participate; eight reached out through the recruitment email sent through TRIO Student Support Services; one was recommended by a professor; and one was recommended by another respondent.

Possible respondents were given a screener once they reached out to the researcher to confirm their eligibility (see Appendix C). The screener consisted of multiple-choice questions concerning the students' generational status, age, gender, if they were of Hispanic or Latinx origin, and if they attended HSU. Once they completed that and were confirmed to be eligible, the respondents were given a demographic sheet, which helped the researcher assess detailed information such as nationality, year of birth, college major, who they grew up with, and their parents' occupation (see Appendix D).

Respondents were aware of my ethnic identity as a Latina researcher and as an insider, which facilitated conversation. All twelve interviews and the focus group were conducted over Microsoft Teams due to the current pandemic. Though they were given the option of socially

distanced one-on-one, face-to-face interviews, all chose to hold the interviews virtually, as did the focus group. The individual interviews lasted between an hour and a half and two hours with the focus group also lasted two hours.

My identity played a larger part than anticipated. I used my identity as a Latina to create instantaneous bonds with the participants. By instantaneous bonds, I refer to the sort of kinship that forms when people of color, (or people in general) find each other and immediately feel that bit of comfort at having the other there. For the most part, that is exactly what happened. Recruiting became easy when I mentioned I was Latina, despite it being all virtual recruiting through emails. I recruited through Latinx organizations on HSU's campus. Recruiting was easy with some organizations as I had previous experience with them.

Because I had been at HSU for nearly seven years, I knew a lot of people, especially those who could help me. Being Latina and knowing a particular person worked to connect me to the participants. Within three days of sending the emails, I already had about half the participants I needed. A week after that, I had all the ones I needed. We emailed back and forth until it was time to interview.

The beginning of the interviews included an introduction of myself – who I was, what I was doing and why I was doing it. While explaining the reasoning for this thesis, almost every single participant smiled and said that this research was needed because at one point or another, they needed it as well. Identity is a tricky concept, so who better to explain it to them than a Latina who knows what she is talking about? The interviews ran more like a conversation than a formal interview, which is exactly what I wanted.

### *Data Gathering, Coding, and Analysis*

Data analysis in qualitative research is designed to reveal a deep, meaningful understanding of a particular phenomenon for those who are currently experiencing it or have experienced it (Esterberg 2002:152). It is a process in which the researcher reviews and interprets verbal data to determine the meaning of the phenomena under study from the perspective of those who are part of that world, including herself (Esterberg 2002:152). My qualitative study should not be generalized to the entire Hispanic college population. Instead, it is an exploratory study to provide important insights about the experiences of Latina college students in Texas and how they forge a sense of ethnic identity.

The 12 interviews and the focus group responses were transcribed by the researcher. Transcribing aided the researcher in developing a more intimate knowledge of the narratives provided by the respondents. Transcriptions ranged from twelve to twenty-five pages for the individual interviews, while the focus group was thirty-two pages long. The individual interviews proceeded with a series of open- and closed-ended questions about the respondents' ethnic identification, what they see as ethnic markers, and their experience as Latinas (see Appendix E). For example, I asked, "What do you think makes you a [insert identifier]?" For the focus group, I asked approximately nine questions with other follow-up questions based on response to original queries concerning what ethnicity meant to them, their thoughts on authenticity in the Latinx culture, and how different ethnic markers affected their identity (see Appendix F).

Fieldnotes were written during the interviews, and more in-depth notes were written afterwards. Fieldnotes were collected to interpret body language and tone, make connection to themes, and get an overall sense of what the participants were saying. Interviews were video recorded to then be converted to audio recordings. Outside of the focus group, in which I had to



analyze reactions, all individual interview videos were deleted. After the recording, the audio was then transcribed with all identifying data removed. Pseudonyms are used through this thesis to preserve confidentiality.

The transcriptions were coded using an open-coding approach using Atlas.ti, then analyzed with special attention to the process of reconstructing identity and identifying ethnic markers. To ensure reliability and the validity of coding, the researcher coded the transcriptions multiple times. First, I started noting common themes that were emerging while conducting the interviews. Second, I read the transcriptions individually, coding common themes using the highlight tool in Atlas.ti. Each code received a different color. The results were then grouped into different categories, which later became the themes that emerged. Some codes that emerged were *language*, which was used for both identity and ethnic markers; *family and friends*, which were coded due to their influence on identity; and *mestiza consciousness/biculturalism*, which is central to the respondents' identity.

Once I completed this first stage, I downloaded excel files of each code to ensure that they were all cohesive. During this stage I used a comparative analysis, which allows the researcher to go back to each of the transcripts to see if any new codes and/or ideas emerged (Fram 2013). While no new codes emerged, I renamed codes to make more sense of the data, such as the code *school* being divided into two codes – *K-12* and *university*.

After completing the coding process was finished, themes emerged that shed light on both how identity is reconstructed and what ethnic markers the respondents considered important to identity for other Latinx members. Some of these themes include *biculturalism*, *family*, and *education*. As for ethnic markers, the prevalent criteria identified by the participants included *kinship ties*, *language*, and *color*.

## *Limitations*

There are limitations to this study. While my status as a Puerto Rican migrant led to my interest in this topic and helped connect me with my respondents, I still hold a perspective and possible bias that may not be shared. The way that I transcribed the interviews and the themes that I found may have been different had my status as a simultaneous insider and outsider been different. While I do not feel that my status hurt the research, it is important to keep in mind that I am a Latina who has had similar experiences to my respondents.

Another limitation of this study is that the sample is not representative for two reasons – its size and the fact that the majority of the respondents are of Mexican descent. Because of this, the sample is not representative of the entire Latinx population, though it can be argued it is representative of the distribution of Latinx in Texas, which is mostly Mexican. Due to all of this, the conclusions made in this study cannot be seen as representative of the Latinx community. It can only be seen as representative of the current sample.

A third limitation is that though the study focuses on Latinas, gender cannot be understood or studied fully as there are no male respondents. To make conclusions about gender in the Latinx community, I would have had male respondents and compared and contrasted their gendered experiences inside the community. Because I did not do this, any conclusions about gender are solely based on the female respondents and their perspective of how they were treated, and the expectations set on them due to their gender.

A fourth limitation to this study is that because there are only two respondents who are 1.5 generation, not much can be said about that generation in particular. However, studying that population is a future direction research can take. A fifth limitation is that the families of the

respondents were not spoken to, so the conclusions related to parenting reflect only the respondents' perspectives of the parenting they received.

Finally, a last limitation is that because all the interviews and the focus group were conducted online, some cues in behavior and body language were lost that could have been seen while conducting in-person interviews. Over a quarter of the respondents chose not to show themselves while on video calls, which means I could not adequately judge their non-verbal cues, such as body language and facial expression.

## FINDINGS

Initially, the study focused on how the college experience modified identity in Latinas. However, it evolved to understanding how Latinas college students identify one another through their experience in that space. Identity formation for first-generation college students develops over time through their home experience and college experience. Through their home experience, gender, language, and community are important factors that aide in their identity. However, for their college experience, their primary and secondary education shapes their ideas of who they thought they were going to be.

To understand the influences of family and education, we first need to explore the impact of respondents' biculturalism. Living between two different, sometimes opposing worlds, posed challenges for many of the respondents, but most developed a sense of identity that reflected the different influences, becoming bicultural, or what I call Mestiza. Mestiza identity, outlined below in the discussion of biculturalism, reflects the influences of Anglo and Latino influences. I also assess what Mestiza identity means for the students through a borderland's perspective.

After explaining biculturalism among my respondents, I describe the role of parental socialization in affecting respondents' identities, primarily through gender, language and community. Finally, I address the role of education in shaping how they view their identity, their culture, and their interactions with inside and outside members of the group.

## **Identity Formation**

This section explores how college students reconstruct their sense of identity because of their college experience. Identity formation is the product of a complex process that develops over time. It is within the family that individuals have their first experience with their culture. For my respondents, this appeared in how their families defined gender and gender norms, and how it showed through their weak support for college and their own moving back and forth between college and home. The respondents found themselves in a bind – encouraged to seek higher education, but also to conform to behavioral gender-related behavioral expectations (See Dion and Dion 2001).

### ***Biculturalism***

Due to their 1.5-2<sup>nd</sup> generation status, respondents typically live between two, or even more, cultural worlds. In addition, biculturalism is not static but requires continual juggling of two disparate realities. However, all fourteen respondents have concluded that they are neither one nor the other. They are the product of a mixture of cultures, places, languages, beliefs, and foods. This is what Anzaldua (1987) called being a *mestiza*. A *mestiza* is a woman who balances opposing and diverse worlds (Delgado Bernal 2001:626). Respondents consistently report that being a *mestiza* in college is not easy.

It is important to note the way these identities were formed by what respondents' parents defined as their identity. Though the respondents are bicultural, i.e., they mix both cultures, parents tried to socialize them to prefer their Latinx side over their American side, even for the two 1.5 generation respondents. While respondents reported being influenced by both Latinx and American culture, over half the respondents said they identified more with their Latinx side than their American side.

Mariana, a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation self-identified Hispanic, talked about the ways that place and setting impacted how she felt about her identity and how she thought it had changed. She explained, “When I go to school, I feel more American just because everyone speaks English...but when I’m back home, I honestly feel more Hispanic.” Mariana’s experience shows how as a *mestiza*, these Latinas must deal with not only balancing diverse worlds for themselves, but also for other people. This creates a borderland experience, where they live on a tightrope of sometimes opposing cultures, values, and beliefs with their identities adaptable to the people around them. In this way, their social interactions determine how they feel, act, and even understand their identities.

Lorelei, a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation self-identified Central American, talked about something similar, but in the context of going back to her parents’ countries of origin. Her mother is Honduran and her father Salvadoran. She explained how she felt more Americanized, because though she loved her culture and still tried to keep the traditions and values alive, returning to either Honduras or El Salvador, others would immediately know she was not from there. She gave the examples of the way she dressed, her accent, or even how she conducted herself. Her *mestiza* identity is different from what is stereotypically believed because she believes herself to not be half Latina and half American. She is a mixture of all three (Honduran, Salvadoran, and American) cultures, but she leans more into the American culture. This means that although *mestizas* balance opposing cultures, or in Lorelei’s case three cultures, the way that translates into their identity is unique to them. There is an infinite number of ways their identities can be defined. For Lorelei, her identity is not split into three ways evenly; she is more American and less Latinx.

Unfortunately, being bicultural means not being a full member of either group. Due to this, the respondents created what is called their *mestiza* identity, i.e., the identity created from a midpoint. They expressed how much either side will not accept them by using phrases such as Lorelei saying, “I am too white to be Mexican, and I am too Mexican to be white,” and Gabriela confirming with, “*No soy ni de aqui, ni de alla*” (*I am not from here, nor there*) to convey such a feeling. They balance a tightrope of identity that is acceptable to either side.

However, the identities they have created, and others, like those their parents have helped foster, work for them now. All the respondents have either reached a point where they are comfortable enough to express their identity and all it entails or they are in the process of doing so. Their social interactions, the places they go, the people they meet, and the experiences they have all have had a profound effect on the identity they have formed through the meshing of opposing cultures.

Their families were also great influences on how they viewed language and their community, and how that in turn affected their identity. Due to the Latinx cultural value of *familismo*, they were expected to be family-oriented and self-sacrificial. This translated into how they largely served as language brokers for their immigrant parents, even when they were young and still learning the languages themselves. This affected how they came to understand language and how it became an ethnic marker of their Latinx identity and their biculturalism. They also felt obligated to take care of their community, to represent it and fight for it, which they did while at the university.

### ***Family***

Interactions with family are central to the development of respondents’ identities primarily through gender, language, and community. Through gender, Latinx cultural values

taught by the family require women to be family oriented and follow stereotypical gender roles, such as staying home with their parents until they are married and taking care of the home.

Families then lacked support in terms of college due to the belief that their daughters should have an education, but that because they are women, they still need to be protected. This lack of total support for moving away from the family and attending college caused what I am calling a moving boomerang where the respondents moved back and forth between living and not living at home with their parents.

All the respondents, in some capacity, worked as language brokers for their family. Due to their biculturalism, the respondents are fluently bilingual. This was very important to their families because it meant their parents could use them to translate for them. The act of translating for their parents influenced how they saw themselves, their community, and how they viewed speaking Spanish.

This act of language brokering led some of the respondents to want to help and invest in their Latinx community. Some chose college as the place where they would earn their degrees and prepare to give back to their community. Others used current jobs to try their best to not only represent their culture and community, but to help it. As Latinx culture is collectivistic, i.e., all for one and one for all type of thinking, the idea of giving back and being part of the community in this way defined their Latinx identity. Helping their parents was the gateway to helping their community.

When asked if there was a difference between being a man or a woman in Latinx culture, all respondents gave a similar version of the same answer: yes, and it frustrated them. While they accepted that their parents came from different countries and were part of a different generation, their parents' beliefs about gender enraged them to the point where they wanted to disobey them.



This appeared in different ways. Some respondents refused to cook and clean, some moved away from home or went to college, others simply stood up to their parents.

Gender is a significant factor in the social construction of race and ethnicity (Ochoa 2000:102). The respondents' gender and how it was navigated throughout their lives by their parents contributed to how they defined their identity as Latinas. Being part of a culture that emphasizes the family, Latinx tend to view women as in need of protection and praise men. This did not sit well with many respondents. A family-oriented view, which is part of the Latinx Catholic cultural value of *marianismo* (Cammarota 2004:63), teaches women that they need to be submissive, be quiet, clean and cook, and serve men. While the respondents grew up with these expectations and values, they resisted them. Therefore, the respondents were raised under typical gender roles that they all, at some point, used to define what they did *not* want to become.

Latinx families commonly hold and teach traditional gender roles where men are the breadwinners and women are the caregivers (*see* Zinn 1982). These gender expectations require women to be family-oriented and family sacrificial, which meant these college student Latinas were told they had to put their family before their education, if they chose to pursue one. Once they did, their families were supportive of their decisions; however, caveats existed for them. For some, their parents believed that acquiring a degree would disconnect them from their culture.

Celestina's family lives quite a bit away from the university. When she made the decision to attend Hispanic Serving University (HSU), her family was proud of her, though they were unsure about her moving so far away. Her mother, specifically, told her, "We have college here, one hour away from here, like you could stay home, you could go here." Her mother wanted her to stay not only due to her protectiveness, but because being at home was what Celestina knew.

Her connection to her culture was there. After much assurance from her part, her parents let her move away from home, though they check up on her multiple times a week.

For others, such as Esmeralda, their parents wanted them to continue to help with the family, especially the financial side. Esmeralda, a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation self-identified Hispanic, was expected to hold a part-time job and consider a major that would be most beneficial for the family's financial future. Yes, she explained, they were supportive, but she was still their daughter and still lived under their roof; therefore, she had to follow their rules.

Another way families expressed their lack of full support was by asking the respondents to live at home while they attended college. While this worked to guilt some of the respondents into living at home, it did not have that effect on all the respondents. Ana, a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation self-identified Hispanic, chose to live with her mother after she banned her from attending any other college than the ones close to home, but family pressure did not have that effect on all respondents. Ana is a good example of the moving boomerang. While she attended community college, her mother let her live with her aunt for some of the time. However, when it came time to transfer to a four-year university, her mother strongly suggested it should be close to home. Ana agreed and decided on HSU, which is just an hour from her house. While she got to experience some freedom, she still went back to live with her mother for the rest of the academic year and into the foreseeable future.

Through family interdependence created by the collectivistic nature of Latinx culture, respondents explained that their parents were convinced that living at home was the best solution (*see* Tseng 2004). This was also due to economic reasons as it made more sense for them to live at home as most respondents came from working-class families. While living at home gave respondents a stronger sense of ethnic identity because they were surrounded by their cultural

values, symbols, and practices, it also made balancing work and school difficult for the respondents (*see* Dayton et al. 2004).

Over half of the respondents moved back and forth between home and closer to the university. This reflects two patterns – a gender one and a bicultural one. In terms of gender, there is a cultural expectation that women will stay at home until they marry due to their obligation to serve their family, specifically their parents. Though it is the twenty-first century, this still holds true. There is also fear on behalf of the parents that their daughters will not fare well in the world without their protection. This also reflects a bicultural pattern as the respondents feel, due to the American culture, that they must assert their independence as soon as they turn 18 and get accepted into college. However, they also battle with the cultural expectation that they stay home close to their parents.

Gabriela, a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation self-identified Mexican, displays this bicultural pattern as she decided to attend a community college before the four-year university, just like many other respondents, against her mother's wishes. She explained, "She didn't talk to me for three months." As close as they previously were, her mother's half-hearted support of college created a wedge between them. Though she eventually transferred to a four-year university, and her mother eventually came to accept her decision, this is an example of how parents view and then influence how their children think. Gabriela doubted her connection to her culture, her connection to her identity, because her mother would not talk to her. Parents serve as a conduit to culture as they offer the first experience their children receive in terms of their culture. Parents introduce them to food, teach them the language, play typical music around the house, and constantly remind them what it means to be Latinx. Having that connection cut off made the respondents rethink everything they were doing with their lives, and even who they were.

Due to either being born in the U.S. or spending around half their lifetime in the U.S. as well as having fully Spanish-speaking parents, all the respondents are bilingual. Their ability to speak both English and Spanish fluently is important to their identity and important to their families. Because of their bilingualism, they largely serve as language brokers for their families (immediate and non-immediate). It was not always easy to be a language broker; however, many were expected to play the role of a language broker when they were young and still learning both languages themselves. By being language brokers, respondents established themselves as bicultural and bilingual and inadvertently established their parents as not.

Ana recalls a time during her childhood when her parents wanted her to translate legal documents for them. She was young and yet had to translate and interpret the legal documents when she did not understand them herself. She would have to Google translate them to get a full understanding. When she asked her dad why she had to do this, his response to her was, “Well, you go to school. You need to learn this.” This dependence her father created on her impacted the way she viewed language and therefore viewed herself as a Latina. It was her duty to help her parents and eventually her community.

Latinas are the ones who serve mostly as language brokers and advocates for their parents (Valenzuela 1999:728). Most do not even know they are language brokers until it is pointed out to them. This shows how embedded into the culture the responsibility of taking care of their parents is. However, eventually many respondents tired of the role of family translator, particularly when one or both parents understood English too.

Mariana did not even realize she had worked her entire life as a language broker for her parents until it was pointed out in a class she was taking at HSU. While she had older siblings who could have fulfilled the role of language broker, she was required to be the one who

translated all her parents' documents, including medical documents because she was one of the few to be born in the states. She explained how she came to this knowledge,

The research, it said that a lot of [children] felt so stressed about it. They were more stressed when it came to school than what it was- They were more stressed translating in a school setting because they felt like- They felt so much pressure because they didn't want to upset their parents, because they were going to school, and like in conferences and stuff. It was a whole like having to translate [from English to Spanish] in hospitals and that kind of stuff.

She performed this duty unknowingly and only realized how common her experience was when she started college. This changed how she viewed herself and her ability to speak Spanish and translate.

For many of the respondents, being able to speak Spanish fluently and translate for their parents established them as both outsiders and insiders as well as language and cultural brokers. Their parents proved their insider and outsider status by demanding they translate legal documents and day-to-day conversations. Their outsider status was established when they had to translate English to Spanish for their parents. This created a pattern where the respondents would try to demonstrate how exactly they managed to be both insiders and outsiders simultaneously.

Their concurrent insider and outsider status was visible throughout their day-to-day lives. These statuses are a consequence of their biculturalism because they thought they *had* to belong to both cultures, while believing they did not belong to either. The respondents' insider and outsider status happened in both cultures. For the Latinx culture, they were insiders because they knew the language, participated in the culture, and knew the customs. However, they became outsiders because of their knowledge and use of the English language, being born in the U.S., and actively participating in American culture. For these same reasons, they were insiders and outsiders of the American culture. Being

part of these cultures had them straddling a fine line, never being fully a member of either group.

Women are intimately involved in activities concerning the Hispanic and Latino communities, which gives them a point of contact most men do not have (Ochoa 2000:12). It puts Latinas in positions to help immigrants by creating safe spaces for them. When they accept their Latinx side and identity, they inevitably learn that community is most important due to the collectivistic nature of Latinx culture.

Growing up bicultural made them realize how certain ideas in Latinx culture are distorted, such as the idea that mental health is not an issue in the community, or that to be hardworking is more valuable than being mentally well. Many respondents chose majors that would allow them to help their families' financial situation rather than choosing a major because it was interesting. They saw a need and wanted to help. They wanted to give back to the community and culture that had helped them and that they loved very much (see Delgado Bernal 2001).

Malena, a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation self-identified Mexican American, first decided to major in glass blowing. However, this decision was met with pushback from her family, saying that she would not be able to support herself through her glass blowing. Through this disagreement, she then added a major in psychology with the career of being an art therapist in mind. Psychology made the most sense because of her own experience with mental health in the Latinx community and how psychological problems were sometimes seen as excuses rather than as illnesses. She spoke about the belief that, "Oh this is a community where you're expected to wake up early and do all this work," and how debilitating that is to those who suffer from mental illness. By growing up

in the United States and being bicultural, she understood that it does not have to be that way. She wanted to help her community out of a stressful way of thinking.

All the respondents, in some shape or form, wanted to help their community, wanted to represent it, wanted more for it. They were all aware of how their community was seen and what they would have to do to fix it. Their Latinx identity would strengthen during this time.

Sometimes, for the respondents, there were times where they felt like they belonged to one side of their identity more than the other. Helping their Latinx community made them feel closer to their Latinx identity.

While I expected that a reconstruction of identity would occur among Latinas at HSU, based on the academic literature (see Torres 2003), my findings revealed a more complex and nuanced process than expected. Most participants experienced an enhancement of their ethnic and cultural identity. When describing their time at the university, they refer to friends they have connected to, cultures they have learned, and foods they have tried, so being at the university has both expanded and reinforced their sense of identity. Nevertheless, this was not the situation everyone faced. If they were not involved on campus, particularly for commuter students, they did not feel any sort of enhancement at all.

Therefore, what occurred for some, was not only an enhancement but a confirmation and validation of identity. The respondents chose a university in a setting in which they mostly felt comfortable, one that was similar enough to their lives before university to make them comfortable, but different enough they would have unexpected and challenging experiences. The enhancement occurred for the respondents who were involved on campus. It was a similar environment that not only validated the identity they came in with but helped them expand it. For

the respondents who had barely arrived on campus or spent little time there due to living at home, their identities did not really change.

The campus itself is a space that has much more influence than I expected. However, whether their identities shifted or were already established, the respondents were aware of their Latinx status and how it affected them and their future, studies, home life, and friends. The respondents, in a sense, had always been aware of their identity. For this reason, some of the respondents reconstructed their identity while others enhanced it.

Identity enhancement occurred to the respondents who already entered the university with a previous sense of ethnic identity. Respondents knew how they identified and why but being in a new environment and having different social interactions assured them of their identity and made them prouder to be Latinx. The interactions with other Latinx of different nationalities confirmed their sense of ethnic and cultural identity. They developed more respect and love for their culture, enhancing the sense of ethnic consciousness and pride. Through their families and the cultural practices and values they taught them, their use of Spanish and English and role as language brokers, their love for their community, and their primary, secondary, and university education, the respondents constructed, re-constructed, and enhanced their individual identities as Latinx.

### ***Education***

Students need social and discursive spaces that let them explore their ethnic identity to be able to expand their knowledge and their identities for themselves (Delgado, Bernal, Alemán, and Garavito 2009:572). For all the respondents, school is that social and discursive space that not only let them explore their identity, but also let them push it aside to be better accepted by



other students. The respondents' experiences with these spaces can be divided into two sections: K-12 and university. Each space had a different effect on their identity formation.

Over half of the respondents attended predominantly white (PW) schools sometime during their primary and secondary education. Attending and living a predominantly white life affects minorities by making them uncomfortable around other minorities. It can make them fall into a colonial mindset in which they internalize anti-Latinx thought (Delgado Bernal, Alemán, and Garavito 2009:572). This colonial mindset can keep them from learning about their heritage, their language, and even their culture, no matter how enforced it is at home.

As mentioned before, students spend more time at school than they do at home. When they attend predominantly white schools throughout their childhood, they can fall into this mindset. Examples of this are that they did not know how to interact with people of their ethnicity. They did not grow up with traditional music or mannerisms and behaviors or really anything that would be indicative of Latino culture.

Lorelei talked about this when she spoke about her primary and secondary school years. She said,

...later on, I went to a predominantly white school. So, I would say like growing up most of my childhood, I felt very, very American, in the sense of like because I was trying to really assimilate to the culture.

As shown by her experience, attending this PW school fosters assimilation, often resulting in a loss of contact with Latinx culture. They come to view themselves as solely American, which means that most respondents assimilated to some extent. This is not a bad thing, per se, as their bicultural identities are rarely 50/50, but having more contact with their American side cannot only disconnect them from their culture but from the people inside that culture such as their family and other members.

Latinx friends serve as a conduit that leads Latinas to further connect to their culture. Friendships can lead to involvement in traditional events such as quinceañeras, which then not only present them with the opportunity to connect with their culture, but to dive deep into what that means for their ethnic identity (Jiménez 2010:110). Therefore, it was their connection to people like them, that were part of their ethnic group, that allowed them to explore and accept more of their identity.

Kaleigh attended a PW school all the way to high school. While she acknowledges how disconnected from her culture she is and how that has affected her identity, she defends her attendance at PW schools. She received a better education, she explained, and made tons of friends, no matter how American/white they were. Assimilating to these PW schools was helped by the fact that she had only American/white friends. Respondents would befriend them through interactions, adapt their behaviors, mannerisms, and thoughts. Therefore, if you are surrounded by only individuals who speak English and have no connection to the culture you grew up in, you will eventually assimilate to be able to survive.

Rosabel had a similar experience, though hers was a little different. She attended high school where Latinx students were comfortable with their identities. When she attended elementary and middle school, however, Latinx students were made fun of due to their ability to speak Spanish. Now, she explained, it seemed like people were more comfortable with their identity, with speaking Spanish and listening to Latinx music. She made friends who were Mexican or Salvadoran and was not ashamed anymore to be Latinx, which is what she had experienced during primary school. Having friends she could relate to re-constructed her identity to one where she felt most connected to her culture and most like herself.

Most people do not understand how the experiences one has as a child into their teenage years affect them. Attending PW schools and having primarily American/white friends shifted their identity to one where at times they were against their own culture, their family, and the members of their community. When they encountered people who eventually became their friends and were the opposite of what they had been exposed to, it created a cultural dissonance within them.

Cultural dissonance is the phenomenon that arises when someone's current thinking is disrupted when introduced to another way of thinking (Harmon-Jones and Mills 2019). In terms of the respondents, this meant that they met different people that eventually changed their thinking. However, at one point this caused conflict within them until eventually they settled into new ways of thinking. Due to experiencing a new type of environment and interacting with other members, respondents combined their previous identity with the new one that was forming. Thus, by combining both identities, they started to define their bicultural status.

Being a first-generation college student is challenging (Gloria and Castellanos 2012:87). You have parents who try hard to understand you, to help you in this process, but who do not know anything about college. *You* do not know anything. Most Latinx undergraduate students are first generation college students and have weak K-12 college preparation (Delgado Bernal, Alemán, Garavito 2009:562). It is hard to find which resources you need and where they are located. Every single one of the fourteen respondents is a first-generation college student who had to figure it out on their own. All their schools had inadequate resources and people unwilling to help them prepare for college.

Latinx first-generation students, specifically, enter with a low level of college-readiness (*see* Heisdorf 2019). While attending predominantly white primary and secondary schools,

Latinx students go through a cultural dissonance between the culture they were socialized with and their identity, and the white school norms, which affects their college-readiness (Boykin et al. 2005:243). This cultural dissonance is more pervasive in predominantly white schools due to white school norms, lack of social support, and language barriers. Therefore, when they start college as not only Latinx but as first-generation, their readiness is significantly lower compared to white first-generation students.

Ana talked about her experience a little bit, saying, “You gotta figure that out, because no one else will help you, and even if they do, they have a completely different experience.” She, as well as other respondents, used their first-generation status to help others but also knew that it was this master status that kept others from their community out of college. This status played heavily on their overall identity because it was one more thing to think about.

The realization that they would have to decipher the college admission process themselves was a real turning point in their identities. Before, it was ‘I am a Latina because of this, this, and that.’ Now, it was, ‘I am a Latina *and* a minority.’ For some respondents, the idea that they would be the first person in their family to attend college was the first encounter with their minority status at such a large scale. They became cognizant that their lives were not going to be easy due to their ethnicity and how the world views it.

They had no help in applying to college. To make the process easier, some attended community college where they learned how college worked. It also allowed them to understand themselves a little bit as well. For Inés, she used community college to gain knowledge she was not previously afforded. It was cheaper and closer to home, where she could keep that connection to her parents and her culture. It is where she met some of her closest Latinx friends and where she got to explore her identity in a comfortable place.

When they finally got to attend a four-year university, most respondents chose HSU because of its diversity. The diversity was a selling point because they wanted a space where they could feel comfortable enough to be themselves. While diversity was important, having a college campus that culturally matched them and provided an accepting environment was more impactful (*see* Hudley and Daoud 2008). For example, Gabriela spoke about the university's Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) status and how that coupled with the diversity on campus helps her feel more connected to her culture and lowers the risk of being discriminated against. She felt that if she had attended a non-HSI, she would have felt more detached from her culture and would have been at a greater risk for discrimination.

Sara recounted the time she attended orientation with her parents and how she could physically *see* the diversity on campus. Because she was a transfer student, her orientation was small and intimate. With the orientation being this small, she and her parents had the chance to talk to the orientation leaders who spoke Spanish. When they spoke Spanish, she explained, a sense of security and comfort surrounded her and her parents. She felt, like Gabriela, that she could be connected to her culture as well as explore what her identity meant to her in a space separate from her parents.

Identity formation and re-construction is helped through experiencing diverse spaces, diverse staff and faculty, Latinx student organizations, and academic programs. Mariana spoke about the staff and faculty, specifically, explaining that seeing that representation among faculty and staff made her and others like her feel as if their dreams were not all that impossible. The staff and faculty, in this sense, work as mentors in which they show Latinx students what the professional world looks like and how it operates, specifically when their parents cannot provide that information. This not only helps them enter the professional world, but also teaches them

that they do not have to sacrifice their ethnic identity for their professional one (Rendon 1992:59).

Programs such as TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) that provide resources for first-generation, low-income, and mostly Latinx students refute the belief that they must assimilate in order to succeed. SSS has been known to serve underrepresented minorities well at the higher education level (Garcia and Okhidio 2015:353). It is also known to be intentionally diverse in order to better help minorities graduate from college (Chaney et al. 1998:198). Attending programs such as these can affirm and re-construct identities such as it did for some of the respondents. Lorelei is part of the TRIO program at HSU. Through this program, she gained a Latinx mentor who made sure she had a safe space to explore her identity. Participating in the TRIO program helped her see her identity in a new light since it was her ethnic identity that facilitated her entry into the program. She explained, “By being Latin, it actually benefited me at [HSU] because now I have all this success and all these academic resources to help me.” The program not only helped her identity but also gave her access to resources she would not have had otherwise.

In other diverse settings, such as Hispanic student organizations, respondents met other Latinx students like themselves. They got to explore other nationalities within the Latinx culture that eventually changed how they viewed their culture and themselves. Kaleigh spoke about how before attending meetings for Latinx student organization, she had never been that exposed to Latinx culture. Everything from the music to the slang they used, and even the way they behaved was all new to her. Though it was different, it allowed her to connect to others like her. She said, “It’s like, I’m not alone. I’m not alone in this. I’m not the only one who thinks like this. I’m not

the only one who has lived through certain experiences because they have too.” This level of relation to others is what helped cement her identity as a Latina, a Mexican American.

Having Latinx friends on campus helped the respondents connect more to their culture and learn about others. While most of them say it is a subconscious habit to befriend Latinx, first- and second-generation Hispanics do tend to choose friends who fall into their same ethnic group (Kao and Joyner 2006:979). They generally have the same values, such as family ties, their food is incredibly similar, and they share a “common struggle” all Latinx tend to face.

When they talked about their friends and meeting other Latinx students on campus, all the respondents spoke about how they could connect with them more than they could to students from other cultures. For example, Celestina described what it felt like to speak with someone from another culture, “You kind of tend to be more careful with what you’re trying to say because you don’t want to offend anyone.” This means she did not feel she could be her authentic Latina self around them because they would not understand where she was coming from. However, with other Latinx students, they could mutually understand each other and “relax more.”

Friends can connect an individual to their culture. Alicia, a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation self-identified Mexican, talked about her experience with Mexican friends. They all had the same values, beliefs, and pride, which made her feel safe and comfortable around them such as cheering on the Mexican team in soccer matches. Having a sense of comfort and security is important for minorities as it lets them express themselves in a way that feels true to them. For students such as Alicia and Celestina, having friends from their own culture is the equivalent of having family on campus. These are the people they speak Spanish with, can laugh at the same jokes with, and have an innumerable amount of experiences that they would not be able to share with anyone

else. Friends are an essential part of identity formation because unknowingly their interactions help construct their identity.

### **Ethnic Markers**

In this section, I first discuss language as an important marker, in spite of respondents' differing views on the importance of language. Second, I outline how kinship ties are the result of the collectivistic nature of Latinx culture, primarily through food and Catholic influenced traditions. Finally, I address the silent role skin tone has played in shaping how the respondents view others in their community through the concepts of white passing and whitewashing.

#### ***Language***

Language is what identifies members of the group to other members and even to outsiders. According to the respondents, it is what ties members to each other. Humans need to feel a sense of belonging, of a community, to help shape their identity (Fox 1996:2). In the case of Latinx, speaking and understanding Spanish is part of what shapes their identities of Latinx and bonds to others Latinx.

Spanish is known as a heritage language, which is a language that is tied to a race and/or ethnicity (Bailey 2000:556). In the case of Spanish, it is largely associated with the Latinx culture. This is also known as a language ideology, which stipulates that if you speak a certain language, you belong to a particular ethnic group (Fought 2006:21). In the case of Latinx, the language associated the most with them is Spanish, though there are a variety of other languages spoken, such as Portuguese and native languages. This belief is due to the amount of Spanish-speaking Latinx in the United States. Historically, three main groups have been present throughout much of U.S. history – Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans – and all three group



predominantly speak Spanish (Mora 2014:64). Their presence in the U.S. led Americans and even themselves to assume that all Latinx speak mostly Spanish, which is not the case.

The most important ethnic marker for the Latina participants included in this study is Spanish language. Not learning Spanish equates to actively denying part of yourself and your identity because it is a tie to your culture. Language is how people experience the world. It is how you learn what things are, how to express your emotions, and how you connect to people that you may not have anything in common with other than the language. Nonetheless, the respondents are defining new ways in which language can and could not be seen as an identifier. While it may be important individually to connect to older generations, it is not necessary for newer generations to speak it. As a result, this generation of Latinx are redefining what it means to be Latinx, and for some that does not include a language requirement.

The Spanish language is rooted in the Hispanic/Latinx community. Due to the respondents being 1.5-2<sup>nd</sup> generation, they all carry some knowledge of the language, which they learned through their interactions at school, with friends, and at home with their parents and extended family. Language works as a blurred boundary because the Spanish language is largely taught in schools where 2<sup>nd</sup> generation students have the chance to take the language and either reinforce it or learn it for the first time (Alba 2005:37).

When talking about language, the respondents are conflicted on where they stand on it being an identifier. On the one hand, language is a uniting force. Language unites different nationalities under the same ethnicity. It connects generations of family members to one another. Language helps Spanish speaking individuals connect to others who are bilingual and can professionally help them. For this same reason, the respondents share the belief that language is important. It is important to their identity and to be able to communicate with older generations.

Language identifies members of the group to other members and even to outsiders. It is what separates them as an ethnicity.

The respondents deny language is essential to identify others as Latinx, but speaking Spanish is important to their own identity as Latinas. This belief can be attributed to the higher amount of education they have compared to their parents; the higher amount of socialization with others who are outside of their ethnic group; and for some, their own loss of fluency. The respondents spoke about how they understood that not everybody, especially the younger generations, were going to speak Spanish. Therefore, why would it be used against them? The respondents also questioned why they were the gatekeepers of who could and could not identify as Latinx.

This contradiction exhibited itself in multiple ways, such as when the respondents identified someone who spoke Spanish as Latinx/Hispanic. They created friend groups based on the language first and then on shared experiences and mutual understanding. For example, Sara spoke about how if she heard someone speak Spanish, she leaned towards them more because, “Oh, they relate to me in some way.” Language, therefore, signifies understanding for minority members.

However, immigrants largely create communities together due to shared language and experiences (Fox 1996:5). For Hispanic/Latinx, language signals membership as well as a source of pride. It also serves as a tool to unite those who speak it for better access (Fox 1996:7). Some respondents believe it is imperative to members of the Latinx community to try to learn the language so they can be able to communicate with older generations. Alicia explained this by saying, “If there is no interest [in learning Spanish], then there is no connection to the older

generations.” For Alicia, speaking Spanish is how members should keep their tie to the culture. If they spoke Spanish, then there would be no disconnect.

While Ana had originally agreed with Alicia’s belief at the beginning of her interview, she quickly came to the conclusion that language is paramount to not only the identification of other Latinx but the survival of the culture. She said, “You don’t necessarily have to know everything about the culture or know the language necessarily, but I feel like it's one of the big things that identifies us.” She spoke about this in terms of her family, how her cousins have helped her learn slang that is contemporary to Mexico, and how her grandmother would ban her grandchildren from speaking English in her house.

Though language was important to them and their identity, the respondents did not view it as the way to identify other members of the group. In a way, they understood that Spanish is hard to learn and there are outside circumstances that can affect the individual’s knowledge of it. As long as they are proud and respectful of the culture, what language they speak is not as important. In other words, among the respondents, Spanish is considered a sufficient but not necessary marker of Latinx identity.

This is a continuing trend among not only the respondents, but throughout the community as well. When asked, over 71% of self-identifying Hispanics believed that Spanish was not a requirement to be considered Latinx. However, 90% answered that it was important that future generation learn the language (Pew Research Center 2017).

The respondents also exhibited this trend, as a few did express worry that the language will get lost after their generation. Their fear is that it will get “watered down,” as explained by Emma, to the point where they cannot pass it down to their children and future generations. This fear is not irrational as by the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation, language proficiency does significantly decrease,

and culture becomes largely symbolic (Alba et al. 2002:480). Therefore, while the respondents will deny the importance of language as an identifier individually, socially it is important to them so they can identify who is and who is not Latinx.

However, the respondents still maintained language was not an important identifier. They used their education and increased social exposure to explain why they believed it. For example, Mariana described a time when she took a class and learned “that sometimes people aren’t proud of where they come from.” She explained that when the parents are not comfortable with their ethnicity and its markers, such as language, they decide not to pass it on to their children. Therefore, these children lack the knowledge of what others will use to identify them as Latinx, such as speaking Spanish. This is a result of acculturation, where Latinx exchange their cultural practices, norms, values and markers in favor of the dominant culture (Berry 1998:117).

Another aspect of denial was shown through the loss of fluency in Spanish. Due to how much time they are surrounded by American culture and the English language, some respondents no longer consider themselves fluent in Spanish (see Portes and Hao 1998). This affected their sense of identity and how they defined language as an ethnic marker. Their loss of fluency determined that speaking Spanish should not be an identifier because the respondents did not consider it their first language.

Inés explained that while she is fluent in Spanish and considers it to be her first language, there are times when she forgets words. She spoke about the last time she went to El Salvador and how there were certain words that she had to process and translate in her head in order to speak them out loud. She was also hesitant to speak to family members because she thought she would not know the words. While her Spanish is acceptable here in the U.S. to the point where she has worked as a volunteer translator, there are different standards in countries like El

Salvador where Spanish is the primary language. She could have been mocked or reprimanded for not knowing key words.

Inés experienced what is known as “language insecurity,” in which mostly 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Latinx have a fear that their level of fluency in the language is not enough or that they are saying it wrong due to the past disapproval of others within the community (Tseng 2021:124). In this way, language serves as a boundary for members of the community. Sara used her siblings as an example of not only her internalization of language insecurity but her entire family’s internalization. She explained this by saying that her younger sister’s Spanish is “really bad” and that their family points out regularly that their Spanish is not what it used to be. Therefore, this reminder that their Spanish is not up to certain standards leads to the insecurity.

The respondents view language as an important part of their identity. Language connects them to their family, community, and their culture. Language is also a projector of identity. Therefore, it can reflect ethnicity (Zentella 2002:321). Language holds a strong position within families, cultures, and religions.

In terms of their ethnicity, language works as a vehicle that transmits culture to insiders and outsiders (see Zentella 2002). For example, Kaleigh works at a hospital and occupies the title of a casual translator due to the lack of Spanish-speaking nurses. There are communication barriers between Spanish-speaking patients and non-Spanish-speaking nurses. Having one nurse who speaks Spanish helps the patients as it brings them a sort of comfort to have someone who can understand them. This way, language works as not only a way to identify someone as Latinx but also to connect individuals through the knowledge of language and therefore culture. It can comfort Latinx to know there is somebody there that will understand them language-wise and culture-wise; someone they can relate to.

However, the respondents have defined a new way language can transmit culture and therefore reflect ethnicity: Spanglish. Spanglish is the mixing of Spanish and English, which is common in second generation Latinx as their bilingual and bicultural status affords them social interaction and learning from both cultures (Zentella 2002:322). Speaking Spanglish is a form of code-switching, as they alternate between both languages in the same sentence and/or conversation (Montes-Alcalá 2019:324).

For example, Gabriela spoke a mixture of Spanglish throughout her interview and the focus group. When she could not think of a word in English, she would say it in Spanish because we understood her. She mentioned multiple times that she does speak Spanglish with her friends as the code-switching made it easier for her brain to pick up words and respond back appropriately. During the focus group, all the respondents bonded over the fact that they had to speak Spanglish because they forgot words occasionally, and/or because Spanish is their first language and sometimes their brains just defaulted to it. Speaking Spanglish is how the respondents as second generation Latinx identified other Latinx. It is how they defined their ethnicity because they grew up being part of both cultures.

### ***Kinship Ties***

Family has more influence in how their children will decide what ethnic markers to use, and how those ethnic markers decide who is in and who is out than what is commonly believed. As a result, their family itself is considered an ethnic marker. If they were born in their home country or not, the respondents believe that their blood ties to the culture (i.e., their parents being born in their country of origin) and the cultural value of *familismo* are what make them Latinx. Their kinship ties connect Latinx to the culture in other ways such as through traditions and traditional

events, like the *quinceañera*, and through food, which is a way for them to transmit their culture to non-members.

The collectivistic nature of Latinx culture places an emphasis on family and community. This is the cultural value of *familismo*, in which family, community, and blood must come first (Vega 1990:1019). Family, for the respondents, became the pinnacle of their culture and identity (see Delgado Bernal 2001). Their family tied them to their culture, to other members of the ethnic group, and most importantly to their identity. These ties then became the way the respondents identified other members in the Latinx community.

Respondents explained that if you and/or your parents came from any Latin American country, you were Hispanic/Latinx. If your parents are from Mexico, you are Mexican. If your parents are from El Salvador, you are Salvadoran. Kaleigh explained that it was through her parents that she was reminded where her roots were; having her parents reminded her what they had to do to immigrate to the U.S. and why they came to the country in the first place. Therefore, these kinship ties remind the respondents of the sacrifices their immigrant parents had to make for them to be in the position they are right now.

For others, such as Esmeralda, her kinship ties, while tied to blood and her roots, were a reminder of where her parents came from and where her family currently is. Having these kinship ties encouraged her to get in touch with her culture and visit Mexico as much as she possibly could. Being in contact with her Mexican culture this way is how she identified others as Latinx – because they were as connected as she was. It was not just about the food or the language or the traditions. It was having that connection to their family, going back to their or their parents' home country and experiencing what life is like there instead of being a tourist that did it for the respondents. That is how they identified others.

This connection to their culture through their parents and family brought out another controversial but popular opinion. The respondents were clear about the contrast between the collectivistic nature of Latinx culture and the individualistic nature of American culture. Respondents brought up examples of how they grew up very close to their immediate and extended families, which they contrasted with American culture.

Lorelei spoke about her cousins and how they grew up being her friends. She said, “I didn't know being friends with your cousins was weird until I went to school.” Latinx tend to rely on their kin for emotional support, childcare, finances, and many other reasons (Gerstel 2011:4). Because of this, Latinx have the mentality that it takes a village to raise their children. For this reason, the immediate and extended families grow close to one another, creating these kinship ties, which Americans typically do not have (Gerstel 2011).

Respondents also brought up examples of the long stereotype of how Americans “kick” their kids out as soon as they turn 18. This example was a result of the animosity that existed when the respondents talked about being “American” versus being “Hispanic/Latinx.” Gabriela spoke about how her culture, the Latinx/Mexican culture, was much more embracing while Americans are colder. She used examples such as spending holidays with her immediate and extended family, wanting to spend time with her family and being “home-y,” and always feeling welcome when surrounded by other Latinx. However, when she thought of Americans, she thought of how unwelcoming they were and how they treated her and others like her. This treatment was negative and full of racist remarks and behaviors.

The stereotype of Americans being cold is one that even I, a Puerto Rican, grew up with. The stereotype is born out of the belief that Latinx culture, because it is collectivistic, is much more touch-based and saturated in familiarity while American culture is individualistic, distant,



and uncommunicative (Scientific American 2020). The respondents maintained that Americans do not have the same cultural value of *familismo*, as mentioned previously, which is why they tend to be colder and individualistic. While not every single Latinx and American believes it, most of the respondents do, which could be due to their own personal experiences with both cultures because of their bicultural status.

### ***Food***

Along with kinship ties, food was one of the most important parts of the respondents' sense of cultural identity. In the Latinx culture, food is what connects people. Food is one way through which members can express their ancestry when there is a strong ethnic identity (Jiménez 2010:122). Because native Latinx food is one of the few things that survived Spanish and English colonialism, food is the primary way newer generations express and experience symbolic ethnicity (Janer 2008).

Every single respondent could name, off the top of their head, their favorite dish their mothers made, favorite drink, and even their favorite memory associated with their favorite dish. Food, as they explained it, was their way to taste a little of bit of their culture. It is what they looked forward to when they went back home to their parents or back to their home country. The enthusiasm the respondents had when they talked about food said everything they needed to convey.

Food is a principal identifier because food carries a lot of memories for Latinx. Food is associated with good times and celebrations. Not only does food carry memories, but it can be a representation of culture. It can be made and served to friends to share a little piece of culture.

Through the sale of food, it then becomes more accessible and a greater indicator of culture. For Latinx, food is a way to stay connected to Latinx culture through learning how to

make it. Lorelei finds food to be the way to relate to other Latinx because even though their names for these dishes and recipes may not be the exact same, what they are trying to make is very similar. Food, in this way, opens a conversation and makes the environment much more comfortable to be in.

Respondents spoke about how food was a way for newer generations of Latinx and outside members to experience the respondents' Latinx culture. The ability to feel ethnic through objects, materials, and symbols is how ethnicity becomes symbolic (Gans 2017:1411). By, for example, Inés offering her Latinx friends and non-Latinx friends *pupusas* she gets to offer them a little insight into her culture and the life she grew up with. Because she is 1.5 generation, it is important for her to keep that tie to her culture through food and share it with the people she cares about the most. Sharing food keeps the Latinx culture alive for her.

Food is also inherently tied to gender, as traditionally women prepare it and serve it. It is how some described “authentic Mexican food,” by not only what was being made but who made it (Gaytán 2008:324). As women, the respondents did not like the idea that their gender defined their roles. While some liked to cook, they had reservations about the fact that they were *expected* as women to cook and serve the food, just as their mothers did. However, their mothers kept cooking and serving the food, while advising their daughters not to fall into the same role.

When asked about food, every single respondent spoke about their mothers and their role in establishing a connection to their culture. The respondents explained how they grew up with their mother's cooking and how much of an impact it had on them. Rosabel learned how to make *pupusas* with her mom, since she sells them. She has vivid memories of buying all the ingredients, learning to make the *masa* in El Salvador with her family. She believes she enjoys them so much because of how she learned to make them. Having this tie through their mothers to

food and to the culture made the respondents associate them with how they identify other members of the community.

### ***Religion***

As part of kinship ties, religion, specifically Catholicism, played a part in the respondents' ethnic identity. Latinx are more likely to not only be religious, but to participate fully within that religion. Over 55% of Latinx in the U.S. are Catholic, and of that percentage, 61% are Mexican (Pew Research Center 2014). For the respondents, being Catholic and being Latina are intertwined. One cannot happen without the other, which is why they will subconsciously look for it when talking to other Latinx.

Catholicism is tied to traditions and holidays in Latinx culture. For example, Easter and Christmas are celebrated with going to mass in a church before the actual festivities begin. For the respondents, being raised Catholic influenced them to the point where most believe that their religion is what connects them to their culture and therefore their identity.

This is the case for Inés, who explained that when she lived in El Salvador, there were certain activities that happened before major holidays that were Catholic in nature. She described some of them by saying that for Easter and holy week, “[El Salvador has] this tradition where they take salt, or wood or whatnot, but they form carpets or rugs, and they make different images of the virgin Mary, Jesus, and just different painting out of salt.” Having traditions such as these shaped how she viewed religion and her culture. If she were to see this happen anywhere in Texas, she would know immediately that it was a Latinx-held event due to the religious composition.

As part of kinship ties, rites of passage, such as *quinceañeras*, connected the respondents further to their Latinx culture. The *quinceañera* is also religious in nature, further deepening that

tie to religion. A *quinceañera* is held at the Latina's 15<sup>th</sup> birthday where, culturally, she has transformed from a little girl to a young woman. This is symbolized in the changing of a shoe, where she goes from a flat shoe to a *tacón*. There are *damas* and *chambelanes*, who compose your *corte de honor*, comparable to bridesmaids and grooms for a wedding. Typically, there is a princess cupcake dress and a tiara that the birthday girl wears. The religious component starts in a church where a priest will perform the service. After, the event moves to a *salón* where the dance with the father happens as well as the shoe ceremony.

This tradition is significant in Latinx culture, which makes it significant for the members of the community. Without it, it is believed that a girl cannot become a young woman, which is why not all the respondents had the grandiose experience of one, but they all had some version of it. For example, Mariana had the experience of a large and traditional *quinceañera* and while she does not regret having it, she did not necessarily want it. She felt like it was part of a tradition she needed to uphold.

*Quinceañeras* are a cultural tradition that can connect family members. Ana's *quinceañera* was held in Mexico where most of her family reside. It was a bonding experience for her family: who brought what, who did what, and who played what part. Ana had the *quinceañera* because it was a tradition and because her mom never had one due to lack of money, so she wanted to give her mom that as well as have the experience because it was expected in Mexico. These traditions, for the members, keep the culture alive and are a way to interact with inside members.

### ***Skin Tone and Colorism***

While not anticipated, skin tone was identified as an ethnic marker. Skin tone presented itself in two different forms: white-passing Latinx and the concept of whitewashing. According

to the respondents, being white passing due to light skin coloring allows Latinx to deny parts of their culture, such as language, to blend in with the mainstream culture. Whitewashing relates more to behavior than to physical appearance. However, whitewashing is connected to skin tone because those who are most whitewashed are also white passing.

The Latina's idea of skin tone, colorism, white-passing and whitewashing are all derived from a combination of cultural and parental teachings, in other words, the way they are socialized. Who they define as Latinx not only comes from what their parents have taught them, but the environments they find themselves in and the people with whom they interact.

When talking about tone, half the respondents explained that their families, friends, and outside members of the community pointed out their lack of authenticity due to their skin tone. Other respondents, however, were told they were too dark. This is not uncommon as Latinx tend to be racially ambiguous because of the ancestral racial mixing caused by colonialism (Quiros and Dawson 2013:291). For the respondents, skin tone is relevant in two ways: the white passing nature of racially Caucasian Latinx and the socialization of white washing Latinx.

Skin tone was seen in conflicting ways. On one hand, darker skin was seen as an ethnic marker. This could be due to the "othering" of Mexicans and the long history of the U.S. demonizing the culture, fairly similar to how they demonize the black culture. On the other hand, skin tone had little to do with identifying Latinx; their behavior towards skin tone did. This is how the respondents defined white washing – when Latinx assimilate to the dominant culture to fit in more. In this sense, the respondents believed that white washing was an individual choice and due to external forces.

For Anglo-appearing respondents, skin tone is an ethnic marker because of how their families, friends, and outsiders pointed out their lack of Latina authenticity due to their skin tone

and/or hair. Esmeralda spoke about how her family has told her she is not Hispanic enough due to her light skin tone and the fact that she was born in the U.S. This later affected how she viewed herself and others whom she decided were Latinx based on skin tone.

Family and others tend to gatekeep by placing a boundary regarding who is and who is not Latinx based on their skin tone. According to the respondents, speaking English, being born in the U.S., and having light skin made you less Latinx. However, it was the idea that having lighter skin that seemed odd to some of the respondents. This is due to the fact that as a culture, in general, Latinx see darker skin as inferior when compared to lighter skin, so, why would lighter skin make the respondents less Latinx?

Alicia explained why this idea was weird to her. She said, “I feel like now-a-days this is with every country where the white-washed are the epitome of beauty, and then, we have a lot of phrases like, “*Mejora la raza! [Better the race!]*” Like, make sure you date somebody [lighter] *para mejorar la raza [to better the race].*” The phrase “*Mejora la raza,*” is a controversial one for the respondents and for others within the culture. It implies that the Latinx race needs to be cleaned up by being mixed with individuals who have a lighter skin tone. The idea is that light skin is pure while dark skin is dirty. It is a phrase that has been repeated to me by my own family multiple times.

Latinx, specifically Mexicans, tend to prefer lighter skin and more European-like features (Villareal 2010:671). This idea is rooted in colorism, which is the idea that having light skin makes you superior to those who have darker skin. Part of this can be blamed on the media and how they portray Latinx in *telenovelas* – the protagonist is always light skinned, colored eyes, light hair, while the maids are always dark skinned/dark toned. The media always portrays the actors to be Mexican, to “pass them off” as that when they are not. These portrayals then more

into the Latinx community outside of the media where these stereotypes and racist beliefs affect them.

While discussing skin tone, the respondents brought up the concept of “white passing” Latinx and how race and ethnicity were defined. The be white passing is to be perceived as white/Caucasian though you belong to an ethnic and/or racial group. The term has been used in literature as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century with books such as *The Slave* (1836) by Richard Hildreth and *The President’s Daughter* (1853) by William Wells Brown being written about this concept (Fikes 2014). While historically white passing has been used to describe biracial Americans, for Latinx, the term refers to those individuals who physically appear white. This term excludes, for the most part, speech and behavior. The respondents, however, include both speech and behavior to describe white passing Latinx.

White passing Latinx have competing dynamics with race and ethnicity because of how they are viewed within and outside of the Latinx community – as one instead of two different phenomena. Non-white passing Latinx, on the other hand, have a different dynamic with race and ethnicity – one gets erased in favor of the other.

White passing, or white assumed, is defined by the respondents as people who are lighter in skin tone but can still claim the Latinx ethnic identity due to other markers such as language and kinship ties. Having a lighter skin tone offers these Latinx a “pass” on discrimination and other prejudices and stereotypes because no one will know just by looking at them that they are Latinx. For the respondents, having a lighter skin tone comes with a privilege darker skin toned Latinx do not have.

Within the respondents, some were white passing and others were not. For those who are white passing, it has given some of them the experience of privilege through their white skin.

However, they view themselves as white and did not use it as their racial identity. Their racial identities were commonly pan-ethnic labels such as Latina and Hispanic (see Quiros and Dawson 2013). Because of this, they were not always aware of the privilege associated with light skin in the U.S., meaning they did not internalize the privilege though they did benefit from it.

The respondents became aware of how their racial identity was perceived by others and how it affected their interactions. It became obvious to themselves when they had to fill out forms deciding what they racially identified as. The respondents must negotiate their ethnic and racial identities. For some, identities were fluid and complex to discuss outside of their community due to the social construction of race and ethnicity, while for others it was complex because the distinctness of being darker was a reminder through playful nicknames and disregarding remarks about their skin tone.

White passing respondents could have different ethnic markers than the darker/brown respondents. For example, to the Anglo-appearing Hispanics, language is more of a uniting force than it is for brown/darker Hispanics. For brown/darker Latinx, skin tone is their first identifier. Mariana, who sees herself as darker, stated, “First appearances if I ever saw you, I would think you’re Hispanic if you’re not obviously white. Like, you’re darker.” Kaleigh, who is also darker, agreed with her by saying, “I automatically assume someone is Hispanic/Latino/Latina by their skin tone, by the way they look.... Some people who look- who are very pale, sometimes I assume that they're Caucasian.”

Having lighter skin tones within the community is a result of colonization and voluntary racial mixing (Hunter 2002:187). However, for the respondents, skin tone is important to them. Skin tone is how they identify if someone is Latinx. They can question someone’s membership just because they do not have the right skin tone. While they believe darker skin tones are an



ethnic marker, dark skin tones have been stigmatized and villainized within the community (Hunter 2002:188).

Skin tone is important, but it plays out differently among others. Whitewashing is the idea of taking something (or someone) that is inherently culturally ethnic (i.e., last names, language, cultural symbols) and making it “whiter” to the point where it cannot be tied to its origin. As the respondents spoke, another term came to mind – ethnic disidentification. Ethnic disidentification, like whitewashing, is the act of distancing from one group (). White whitewashing can be involuntary, such as parents teaching their children to not speak Spanish or participate in cultural events, ethnic disidentification is typically voluntary. Meaning, individuals choose to disidentify with their ethnic group.

Whitewashing, white passing, and ethnic disidentification make sense within the community as light skin has always been seen as desirable, preferable, and beautiful while dark skin has been seen as dirty and constantly stigmatized. Women have been found to identify more as white and desire white skin more, which is an internalization of the culture’s beliefs on race and ethnicity (Hunter 2005:102).

According to the respondents, the lack of spoken Spanish, the lack of interest in learning or even trying to learn anything about the culture and being uncomfortable or embarrassed by members of your own community is what makes someone whitewashed. Therefore, the respondents used behavior more than physical appearance to define how a Latinx could be whitewashed.

For many of the respondents, their parents play an important part in the whitewashing of their children. Giving them “Americanized” names and discouraging Spanish in the home are two such ways they did this. Kaleigh’s parents gave her and her two siblings Americanized

names. She believes it is because of how much her parents had struggled in the U.S. before they were born and understood the power a name could hold. Therefore, they gave all three of their children American names to make their lives a little easier.

Gabriela spoke about how her older sister recently had a baby, her nephew, and instead of giving him a traditional Mexican name such as hers and her siblings, her sister chose not to, with the explanation of, "...if they gave the baby an English name, he would be perceived differently." When parents, siblings, or any other Latinx consider naming their children, there is an understanding of how the child will be perceived just on the basis of their name. Emma's family exemplifies this, and they did think about the implications of naming her baby brother with an American sounding name when all their family is from Mexico. She said, "I guess we kind of whitewashed his name a little bit... because we wanted it to be pronounced at school and still have it [be] appropriate when he goes to Mexico with us for visits."

Names hold so much power within society. It is the first thing most people find out about you and how they form assumptions about you. Research has found that society relates certain names with Hispanics depending on their first and last names, the gender presented, and the assumed social class. Specifically, Hispanics tend to have no middle name and two surnames. Names can signify race, ethnicity, gender, and class (Gaddis 2017:6). According to the respondents, by their parents giving them and their siblings white-passing names, it disconnected them from their culture and their community.

To the respondents, being whitewashed means that there is a disconnection from the culture, which can affect how one practices the culture, perceives their identity, and how they identify others in the community. Kaleigh used herself as an example for this as she grew up not participating in her culture and primarily interacting with white people from birth. Because her

parents believed that being surrounded by minorities was going to steer their children onto the wrong path, Kaleigh internalized that and believes that if she had lived her life any other way, she would not be where she is. She carries the belief that “[predominantly-minority school students] think that they can just work and have it all and not think anything. A lot of them become pregnant and then they end up dropping out of school and then a lot of them end up doing drugs and end up going down a path that is not the best.”

Using Kaleigh’s example, being whitewashed is the adaptation of a colonial mindset, which is the internalization of an oppressive hierarchy that can lead to a performative white identity, denial of heritage, refusal to speak the language, and taking on behaviors that are anti-Latino (Delgado Bernal, Alemán, and Garavito 2009:571). Having this colonial mindset can manifest in stereotyping their own ethno-racial community. This mindset is comparable to having internalized racism where in the beliefs of the mainstream culture about a minority group are internalized by members of the group.

## CONCLUSION

This research aimed to answer two questions: What are the ethnic markers among Latina undergraduates? How is ethnic identity reconstructed in 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Latina undergraduates at a Hispanic Serving Institution?

### *Ethnic Markers*

Based on qualitative analysis of respondent interviews, I identified three major ethnic markers. The first was language, because it connects Latinx to their culture, older generations, and other members of the Latinx community. Language identifies them to non-Latinx as well. However, language is controversial among the respondents as some do not view it as important for the overall community; even though, it is important for themselves. In this way, my respondents are redefining what it means to be Latinx, both for themselves and possibly for others. For some, that includes language and for some it does not. However, language is the first thing they mention whether they consider it an identifier or not. Research shows that language is essential for “culture production,” which means that culture is transmitted through language (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000:432). Therefore, it is an essential ethnic marker.

The second ethnic marker was kinship ties, which the respondents described as where they and their parents came from. The respondents viewed their family as the center of everything they and their culture were. Latinx culture teaches the value of *familismo*, which places family over the individual (Vega 1990:1019). This cultural value makes the family the fountain of all knowledge concerning the family itself but also the culture. The respondents’ kinship ties connect them to the culture through other ways such as traditions, often enacted within the family. These are also ways in which culture is transmitted to non-members, which makes kinship ties an identifier to non-Latinx.

The third and last ethnic marker was skin tone. While language was the most mentioned identifier, skin tone was talked about casually and as an afterthought. Respondents spoke about skin tone in two ways: white-passing Latinx and the concept of whitewashing. What the respondents were describing was the concept of whitewashing, which is the assimilation of minorities to the dominant culture. This is also known as carrying a colonial mindset, in which minorities adopt colonial thinking (Delgado Bernal et al. 2009:571). When asked who they did not consider Latinx, white-passing Latinx who were also whitewashed were mentioned most. Respondents explained their view by saying that white-passing Latinx who deny their culture and actively are prejudiced against members of their culture should not carry the Latinx/Hispanic label. Whitewashing presents itself as denial of culture, making the culture and its members a joke, and many more actions and behaviors.

### ***Identity Formation***

My second question regarding identity formation is the product of a complex process that is not the same for everyone. For the respondents, over half went through a reconstruction of identity while the other half enhanced their identity even though they went through similar experiences. The similar experiences these respondents had traced back to their families. According to the respondents, their families defined gender and gender norms in a traditional way that later the respondents would rebel against. Their families also viewed language, community, and their children attending college similarly as well.

Families are the first introduction respondents had to their culture and, for many, one of the only ties to their culture. The way respondents' families defined their roles as language brokers due the respondents' fluency in English. This role influenced how respondents viewed

the language. For some, being a language broker taught them that English was the only acceptable language, while for others, their experiences led them to become translators.

As a group, the respondents had a difficult time defining their biculturalism.

Biculturalism is not defined the same for every single individual. For example, some define it as 50-50 while others define it as a 70-30. In other words, some respondents leaned into their Latinx identity while others did not. Some defined their identities as split through the middle, so they identified with both identities equally. Their families, environments, and people they interacted with, such as friends, all played a part in how they eventually came to define their identity. Most of the respondents identified using pan-ethnic labels such as Latina or Hispanic. Few defined their identities using national-origin terms, such as Mexican or Salvadorian, even though some research suggests that there is an emergence of pan-ethnic identity labeling due to later generations identifying more with mainstream society (Alba and Islam 2009:119).

Identity reconstruction occurred in those respondents who did not have an established Latinx identity entering HSU. These are the respondents who grew up with a conflicted sense of identity because at home they lived with Latinx parents but then attended predominately white (PW) schools and had primarily white friends. When they attended HSU, a diverse university with the HSI title, they were challenged. A cultural dissonance happened within them in which they then had to decide who they were going to be. Through Latinx staff and faculty, Latinx friends, Latinx organizations and programs, they were able to find the identity in which they felt most comfortable. And not only an identity they were more comfortable in, but social bonds with other Latinx students that formed resilience among the population.

Identity enhancement occurred for those respondents who already had an established Latinx identity entering HSU. They grew up in Latinx families, attended diverse schools,

attended Latinx cultural events, visited their parents' country of origin, ate typical Latinx foods, and had primarily Latinx friends. HSU was a similar environment to the one the respondents had grown up in; therefore, it was familiar to them. However, they were exposed to different nationalities at HSU, which helped them learn about different cultures, foods, and people.

The social interactions, environments, and people these Latinas are surrounded with influence their identity and therefore what they view as ethnic markers of their culture. Due to the way this generation balances the two worlds they grew up in, their identity is always shifting into a new direction with different definitions. While a reconstruction may not happen for everyone, it will happen to some because of the new situations and people with which they interact. For others, their identities will enhance because of how similar the environment, atmosphere, and people are.

### ***Implications***

Findings from this study highlight how identity is reconstructed and enhanced in 2<sup>nd</sup> generation undergraduate Latinx at an HSI. The findings also highlight the ethnic markers this generation have defined for themselves as well as other Latinx. These findings suggest implications that higher education administrators, faculty, and staff should consider as they advise and work with 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Latinx, both at HSIs and non-HSI campuses.

While similar to findings of other researchers (Dayton et al. 2004; Garcia 2016; Guardia and Evans 2008), this study concluded new findings on how 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Latinx identity developed at an HSI. This study explained how attending an HSI with a diverse campus with many Latinx students, Latinx staff and faculty, and Latinx student organizations helped reconstruct and/or enhance their identity. Identity reconstruction occurred in respondents who did not have a solid sense of identity before attending college due to growing up assimilated to

the dominant culture. Once they were exposed to a different environment and people, one where their culture was celebrated instead of shamed, they began to embrace their culture, their language, and their ethnic identities. An example of this is how through the K-12 system, they predominantly had white friends and listened to pop music. Then when they attended HSU, they had predominantly Latinx friends and listened to music in Spanish. They no longer were embarrassed to speak Spanish.

Identity enhancement occurred in those who had a secure sense of identity established before attending HSU. These respondents had heavy cultural ties back home where they spoke Spanish 50% of the time, had predominantly Latinx friends, and attended predominantly minority k-12 schools. These early social interactions with members of their culture kept their tie to the culture itself and therefore their ethnic identities. These respondents also visited their country of origin the most.

These findings suggest how higher education, especially HSIs, should understand the experiences of 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Latinas and how it affects them academically. HSIs should focus less on statistics and numbers and more on serving the population that helps them acquire and maintain the HSI title. Different ways they could serve this population are by using a portion of the funding they receive from the federal government to better help this population. This could be done by giving Latinx departments and Latino Cultural Centers (LCCs) more resources to be able to reach more students. HSIs could also hire more Latinx faculty – faculty that has been found to help Latinx students feel more comfortable (Dayton et al. 2004).

In terms of other policy changes, HSIs should seek intercollegiate funding from Title V grants, which have been designed specifically for Hispanic Serving Institutions (Department of Education 2021). This funding should not capitalize on Hispanic students, but instead use the



money to better help them. When putting the funding into areas that help Latinx students, such as the Learning Cultural Centers, there is a strengthening in ethnic identity because of the social links formed at these places. The strengthening of their identity and social links has been found in this study to foster resilience, i.e., they are more likely to stay and finish college. By the institution investing into their Latinx/Hispanic students, they are investing in a higher graduation rate and higher attendance number.

This study also contributes new findings concerning ethnic markers within the Latinx population. While other studies (Jiménez 2010; Lopez and Espiritu 1990; Negrón 2011) concluded that language, religion, and others were predominant ethnic markers, this study illustrates how that is changing for the newer generations. The change happens due to an increase in education. As a result, respondents spoke about how language, kinship ties, and skin tone were the ethnic markers they used to identify Latinx members. However, language is a controversial ethnic marker because while it may be an ethnic marker for the respondent, they do not find it necessary in the context of the ethnic group (see Zentella 2002). This is similar to previous research (Zentella 2002) that concluded that new generations of Latinx are redefining ethnic markers. This could be due to increased education and/or social exposure.

This study found that skin tone is an emerging ethnic marker for the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation. While race is controversial topic within the Latinx community due to the variety of races and racial tones (Chavez-Dueñas et al. 2014; Golash-Boza and Darity 2008; Vaquera and Kao 2006), few studies have identified skin tone as an ethnic marker (Negrón 2011; Rinderle and Montoya 2008). However, according to this study, the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation is defining skin tone as a marker due to parental and societal narratives about race. Falling away from the black/white dichotomy, Latinx have been more present in the news. There are more studies researching what race means

to the culture and the impacts of those thoughts on newer generations and society (Bueno-Hansen and Montes 2019; Hunter 2019).

Understanding how the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation defines ethnic markers provides clearer insight into how the Latinx group identify and how they are changing and adapting. This creates a better understanding of the Latinx culture, which keeps growing in numbers, and which researchers should better understand.

### ***Future Directions***

Due to this study combining multiple topics that have not been combined before such as identity, the Latinx community, gender, generation, and HSIs, there are multiple directions this research may take moving forward. For example, because gender was touched upon lightly, including male respondents could produce better conclusions about gender, especially since the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation a newer generation with different perspectives on gender. As shown by the respondents, they are showing a more modern view on gender and how it affects them and their siblings.

This study should foster more research on Hispanic Serving Institutions. This is just one study on such a diverse campus that has the HSI title, which means that more studies should use them as sites, because they are now becoming the majority of campuses Latinx and other minorities of color attend. Not a lot of research is conducted about or on HSI campuses, which means researchers missing are an opportunities to study emerging sites.

Due to this study focusing on 18–25-year olds, there should be more research on respondents who are older, probably the 26-45 range. Although their identities are more concrete, they still face identity centered dilemmas, which are then complicated by marriage,

careers, and even children. Studying older respondents who are married and have children could yield a better understanding about how Latinx identity is taught to younger generations.

The dichotomy between minority identity and higher education should be studied more, especially at the MA and PhD level. Because this study only focuses on undergraduates who have a certain amount of liberty and can disconnect from being college students, the respondents do not feel the overall tension between their Latinx identity and their academic one. MA and PhD students have been shown to feel the tension more due to being heavily active in their academic careers (Díaz de Sebatés 2007:24). Studying Latinx MA and PhD students and their known conflict between those two identities could provide a better understanding about Latinx in academia and in or within various other fields.

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## APPENDIX A: SCREENER QUESTIONS FOR PARTICIPANTS

1. What is your age?
  - a. 17 or under
  - b. 18 to 25
  - c. 26 to 44
  - d. 45 to 64
  - e. 65 to 74
  - f. 75 or older
2. Gender
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Are you of Hispanic or Latino origin?
  - a. No, not of Hispanic or Latino origin
  - b. Yes, Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano
  - c. Yes, Puerto Rican
  - d. Yes, Cuban
  - e. Yes, other Hispanic or Latino origin (Please specify)
    - i.
4. What is your generational status?
  - a. 1<sup>st</sup> generation (born outside of the US & arrived at the U.S. after turned 18)
  - b. 1.5 generation (born outside of the US & arrived at the U.S. after age 5)
  - c. 2<sup>nd</sup> generation (born in the U.S. from immigrant/first generation parents)
  - d. 3<sup>rd</sup> generation (born in the U.S. from parents also born in the U.S.)
  - e. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
5. Are both of your parents immigrants?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
6. Do you attend the University of Texas at Arlington (UTA)?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No

7. What is your classification at UTA? If you are unsure, try to estimate.
- a. Freshman
  - b. Sophomore
  - c. Junior
  - d. Senior
8. Are you willing to be interviewed?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
9. How can we contact you? Please select all that may apply.
- a. By phone: \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. By email: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE

### **Ethnic Markers**

1. How do you identify ethnically?
2. What does your ethnicity mean to you?
  - What do you feel more of: American or [insert ethnicity]?
3. What do you think makes you [insert ethnicity]?
4. How fluent are you in Spanish?
  - When did you learn it?
  - [If not fluent] have you wondered why? Did your parents refuse to teach you? Or was it something else?
5. [If they do speak Spanish] Where do you speak Spanish?
  - Work?
  - Social Settings?
  - School?
6. [If they do speak Spanish] Who do you speak Spanish with?
  - Family?
  - Friends?
  - Coworkers?
7. [If they do not speak Spanish] Have people ever said that you're not Latina because you don't speak the language?
  - [If yes] How does that make you feel? What happened exactly?
  - [If no] Is the language important to you?
8. What do you think of someone who doesn't speak Spanish but claims to be Latino??
9. What would you say makes people *Latino*?
  - How did you come to this belief?
10. What would say does not make people *Latino*?
  - How did you learn this?
11. Did your family celebrate holidays/events of Latino culture growing up?
  - [If yes] Which ones? What do you do? What's the first memory you associated with those holidays?
  - [If no] Why? Is it different now?
12. Did you have a quinceañera?
  - [If yes] How do you feel about it?
  - [If no] Did you want one?
13. Do you eat typical Latino foods from your particular country?
  - [If yes] What's the first memory you associate with those foods?
  - [If not] Why?

### **Ethnic Identity & Reconstruction**

14. Is being of [insert ethnicity] generally important to you? Explain.



15. What was school like for you as [insert ethnicity]?
  - In elementary?
  - In middle school?
  - In high school?
16. What role has family played a part in your identity as [insert ethnicity]?
17. Can you tell me a bit about how gender was handled in your family?
18. Can you tell me a bit about your family's immigration story?
19. Do you know the history of your people specifically? For example: Mexicans, Cubans, etc.
  - [If yes] How did you learn it?
  - [If no] Are you interested in learning it? Explain.
20. Is it important to you to put an effort into paying attention to Latino popular culture? Explain.
21. Has social media played a part in connecting you to your ethnic identity? Explain.
22. Have you ever been discriminated against because you're [insert ethnicity]? Explain.
23. Have you ever been told you're not [insert ethnicity] enough? Explain.
24. Do you like at home with your parents? Explain.
25. How did your family take you attending college?
  - Do you struggle with their expectations?

### ***Switching gears to UTA***

26. Why did you choose to attend UTA?
27. Did you know that UTA is a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI)?
  - [If yes] What are your thoughts on that?
  - [If no] What do you think it means to be an HSI?
    - Does it change the way you view UTA?
28. Did you know that UTA has a Center for Mexican American Studies (CMAS)?
  - [If yes] What has been your experience with the center? Has it helped you in any way?
  - [If no] Is this the first time you're hearing about it? What are your thoughts on UTA having it?
29. Do you believe UTA serves the Hispanic/Latino community? Explain.
30. Have you taken any classes on race/ethnicity and/or gender?
  - [If yes] Which ones?
    - Is there anything that you learned that caught your attention about your culture?
  - [If not] Do you want to take those classes? Has something stopped you from taking them?
    - Why?
31. Is it important to see yourself ethnically represented among your professors?

- Explain.
32. Do you tend to be friends with other Latinos? Explain.
33. Are you part of any student organizations for Latino students?
- [If they are] Have you learned anything new about Latino culture?
- If so, what?
  - Do you have ties to Latino culture after being part of this student organization?
    - Such as attending more Latino festivals/holidays, speaking more Spanish, having more Latino friends?
- [If they are not] Do you have any interest in joining them? Explain.
34. Now that you're attending college, do you feel a disconnect from your culture? Explain.
35. Can you tell me a bit about your experience at UTA as a Latina?
36. Do you think UTA has helped you connect with your culture?
- Why or Why not?

**End**

37. Is there anything you would like to add about your experience that the questions didn't cover?
38. Would you like to ask me anything before we finish?

## APPENDIX C: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. What does the word “ethnicity” mean to you?
2. Is your ethnicity important to you?
  - a. Has its importance, or lack thereof, changed since you’ve been at UTA?
3. What do you think is an “authentic” Latina?
4. Has anyone every told you that you’re not “Latina” enough?
  - a. What happened?
5. Do you agree with the following statement?
  - a. Being able to speak Spanish is important to me.
    - i. Why or why not?
6. Do you agree with the following statement?
  - a. Being involved with my Latino culture is important to me.
    - i. Why or why not?
7. Do you agree with the following statement?
  - a. My ethnic identity affects my success at UTA.
    - i. Why or why not?
8. What has been your experience at UTA as a Latina?
9. Of all the things all of you have talked about, what is most important?