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The role of social media in second-generation Central American youth's perception of belonging  
and citizenship: A Southern California case study

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

by

Christian Antonio Reyes

2021

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The role of social media in second-generation Central American youth's perception of belonging and citizenship: A Southern California case study

by

Christian Antonio Reyes

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2021

Professor Edith S Omwami, Chair

This study explored how U.S.-born children of Central American immigrants develop a sense of belonging through their engagement on social media. With young people already using technology as a tool for individual expression and political engagement (Jenkins et al., 2009; Kahne et al., 2016), this study sought to understand how belonging is developed and maintained within online spaces. The need to belong fulfills a basic desire to maintain attachments and relationships, but its absence can lead to a number of negative physical and psychological effects (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Understanding the factors that encourage or hinder feelings of belonging for children of Central American parents is necessary as their community has been routinely vilified, particularly on social media. With more young people likely to be exposed to divisive anti-immigrant rhetoric online as more people flee violence and corruption in Central America, this study focused on how participants perceive of themselves and shape their sense of belonging from these online experiences at a time of rising nationalism and xenophobia.

This study addressed the following research questions: 1) What types of immigration-related content do children of Central American parents confront on social media, 2) how do they respond and engage with this content, and 3) how do these interactions shape their sense of belonging as U.S. citizens and members of an ethnic community. These questions were guided by Nira Yuval-Davis's politics of belonging framework (2006) which identifies the social locations, personal identifications, and attachments where belonging is constructed and maintained. My study diverged from her framework by including online spaces as locations where belonging is also constructed. I also drew on James Banks's failed citizenship framework (2015) to understand how participants' sense of belonging or exclusion can produce different conceptions of citizenship. While fully recognized and accepted citizens develop strong attachments with the nation-state, those who experience failed citizenship feel alienation if they are excluded based on their race or culture. These feelings can however lead to different actions such as the pursuit of social justice and equality through civic action (2015).

Interviews were conducted with 10 participants, five male and five female, over the age of 18 who were born in the United States to two foreign-born parents of Central American heritage. Participants were recruited from organizations serving the Central American community in the Southern California area and from student-led college clubs. The findings show that participants' engagement on social media has had an impact on their sense of belonging, helping them maintain stronger ties to their ethnic communities while negatively affecting their identification with the nation. While this suggests an example of failed citizenship, participants are using social media to engage in acts of transformative citizenship, solidarity, and activism to counter common narratives within the immigration debate and increase the visibility of the Central American community.

The dissertation of Christian Antonio Reyes is approved.

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2021

**DEDICATION PAGE**

In loving memory of Rubén Darío Reyes

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Finally, to my two sons: I love you more than anything in the world. I want you to know that you are members of proud and unique cultures. Inside of each of you lives on the memory of those who came before you: Marianne Alpert, Leo Alpert, Marie Martin, Rubén Darío Reyes, Blanca Estela Reyes Ortíz, Maria Concepción Ortíz, Oscar Rene Ortíz, and Israel Zayas. Remember that you are special. Remember that you are loved. And that you belong.

Christian A. Reyes

July 2021

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Reyes, Christian (May, 2016). *Internet and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Usage in the Somali Diaspora*. Poster presented at UCLA International Institute Going Global Conference, Los Angeles, CA.

Reyes, Christian (April 2016). *How Online Sexual Harassment Affects Women Offline*. Poster presented at UCLA Center for the Study of Women Thinking Gender Conference, Los Angeles, CA.

## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

One theme of modern life in America, documented in video after video, is that if you are Black or brown, the assumption is that you do not get to belong...you do not belong here, you do not belong anywhere. You belong someplace other (Lithwick, 2020).

The chapter discusses how I came to be interested in the topic of how children of Central American immigrants construct and maintain a sense of belonging through their engagements on social media. I show how identity construction and developing a sense of belonging is something I may share in common with people of the same background, however the introduction of social media into the daily lives of young people today has changed the way these processes play out. Amid increased migration from countries like Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras and a hostile anti-immigrant discourse happening online in response, I wanted to know how children with families from this region are responding to these debates and the impact this has on their sense of belonging. From here I developed a statement of research by providing background to the situation happening in the country that has led to an increase vitriol and resentment towards immigrants and argued that understanding how young people are responding is an important field of study. I concluded by sharing the three research questions that guided the study.

### **My journey to the project**

I came to this topic based on my own background as the U.S.-born child of immigrant heritage. I was born and raised in Chicago, Illinois to a Guatemalan father and Puerto Rican mother, and like many children of immigrant parents I grew up navigating between different cultures and expectations. While I was aware of discrimination that existed against immigrant communities, I was fortunate to have been shielded from such overt hatred directed towards me or my family. For example, I never witnessed the same level of vitriol and open hostility against immigrants that was rampant during the 2016 U.S. Presidential campaign and that became a

defining aspect of the Trump presidency, nor did I hear elected officials or media pundits openly express anti-immigrant sentiment on television.

Also protecting me from this hostility was my limited access to digital media and information and communication technologies (ICTs) which were not as ubiquitous as they are today. The internet during the early 1990s seemed like a privilege that few enjoyed; accessing the “information superhighway” was only possible if one could afford a large desktop computer that connected to the internet through a dial up modem, and connection speeds were often slow and unreliable. Social media sites like Facebook and Twitter were either in their infancy or years away from existence. Young people today on the other hand have grown up surrounded by these technologies, with access to tablets, phones, and wearables devices that are always connected to high-speed internet. These devices deliver lightning-fast information and multimedia content at the touch of a button (or more commonly with a voice command), and they give opportunities to participate in online virtual communities and potentially engage with hundreds of individuals and groups around the world.

Young people with a similar background to mine are also likely to engage with issues of identity and national belonging online. My own journey towards a developing a sense of identity and finding communities of belonging has been a long and sometimes complicated process that still continues today, yet this journey would have been profoundly different had I grown up surrounded by these technologies, or if I had been exposed to an environment as toxic as the one today. For example, young people can be inundated with information that can be inaccurate, hateful, or harmful, particularly when it relates to politically charged issues such as immigration. Seeing this within the current context of nationalism and the bitter public debate taking place about who gets to belong or not, I became interested in the changing nature of belonging for

children of immigrants within these online spaces. I especially wanted to focus on children of Central American immigrant parents, in part because of my own background, but more importantly because of the many struggles the community has faced and continues to. A period of migration as a result of civil wars during the 1980's forced many families to flee their homes; today they continue to seek refuge due to natural disasters, a lack of economic opportunities, political corruption and instability, and increased violence due to organized crime (O'Connor et al., 2019). The latest wave that began in October 2018 (the so-called immigrant caravan made up of people mostly from the Northern Triangle countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras) was also the result of increased violence, lack of educational opportunities, and poverty (Rodas, 2021). Former President Trump routinely attacked and vilified these migrants, cruelly exploiting the plight of families seeking better opportunities. This issue continues to take on great importance as immigration discourses around invasion and cultural replacement have increased in mainstream media (Peters et al., 2019). As U.S.-born children of Central American immigrants are likely to be engaging with these issues in a much different way than what my generation may have experienced, I wanted to understand how this population is dealing with issues of identity and belonging in the age of information and within the context of the current political climate. The focus of this study therefore was to understand what role if any social media plays in shaping their sense of belonging, and whether this belonging impacts their conception of citizenship.

## **Introduction**

The United States is gripped in a state of anger and resentment towards the government and institutions by citizens from all sides of the political spectrum. Hostilities between America's two main political parties have worsened over the past two presidential election (Pew Research



Center, 2019). Trust in government has reached such an historic low—only 24% of Americans in a recent Pew Research Center survey saying they trust the federal government as opposed to over 75% during the 1970’s (2021)—that it threatens democratic stability which can lead to increases in inequality, corruption, and human rights violations (Vallier, 2020). The promise that globalization and free and open markets would usher in sweeping economic, political, and social changes that would grow wealth and improve the quality of life for all has failed to materialize for many (Mishra, 2017). Instead, there has been a steady rise in inequality both in the United States and around the world, as wages for middle- and lower-income households and workers have declined while those for upper-class households and CEOs have increased (Mishel & Davis, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2015). More specifically, information and communication technologies such as the internet (previously touted as empowering people and spreading democratic ideas) have often exacerbated existing inequalities. While some have benefitted from ICTs for wealth creation, others have experienced inequality to access to the technology (Carnoy, 2004).

Of particular interest is access to the technology and its usage in democratic societies. While the internet has long been touted as a tool to help liberate information for all and spread democratic ideas, what we have seen instead is a rise of nationalism and authoritarianism in developed countries. Its use by authoritarian strongman to rise to power through the dissemination of fake news and possible attempts at meddling in elections (Persily, 2017) has the potential to greatly affect how young people perceive of democracy. Yet even as technology becomes more distrusted as it displaces more people from the workforce through advances in automation (Manyika et al., 2017), paradoxically people remain largely dependent on technology in their daily lives (Chakravorti, 2018).

Decades of declining quality of life outcomes as a result of free-market economic policies has resulted in more Americans increasing distrustful in government institutions, community organizations, schools, and the media (Bishop, 2017), and in each other. For example, a rejection of free trade and globalization in favor of anti-globalist discourses (Mărginean, 2018) has given rise to economic nationalism and stoked white working-class fears about cultural displacement (Jones et al., 2017). Donald Trump’s populist movement sought to exploit these fears by vowing to restore the country’s long-held belief of guaranteed upward mobility into the middle class through the nativist promise to “Make America Great Again” (Sides et al., 2017; Young, 2017). Extremist voices, emboldened by the administration’s platform of nationalism, isolationism, and xenophobia, have gone mainstream (Anderson-Nathe & Gharabaghi, 2017). Many who have espoused this new nationalism are redefining citizenship as pre-dominantly anti-immigrant, with outsiders viewed as existential threats to American culture. Yet this trend did not begin with the election of Donald Trump, nor is it likely to end now that he is out of office. This ugly strain of politics that relies on demonizing ethnic and racial minorities as a threat to the stability of the nation has long been embedded in our national politics, a concept author Adam Serwer calls “liberty and democracy premised on exclusion” (2021).

Immigrants are routinely scapegoated with openly hostile language, as narratives about sanctuary cities, chain migration, and roving gangs stoke distrust and fear, which risks further increasing the exclusion of immigrant communities and their children from the public square. The 2016 Trump presidential election campaign capitalized on these fears as evidenced in its attempts to construct a wall along the U.S./Mexico border and to ban citizens from Muslim-majority countries (Stack, 2017). The administration even went so far as to remove language from federal agencies describing the United States as a “nation of immigrants” (Jordan, 2018). In

response to these measures, massive public protests took place at airports and along the southern border with Mexico (Grinberg & McLaughlin, 2017; Watson, 2018). These protests were part of a larger resistance movement against the Trump administration, though they only strengthened the president's base whose members continue to organize their own counter-protests in support of Trumpism, prolonging this cycle of nationalistic hostilities over issues of American identity and belonging.

Those demonstrations reflect a larger debate happening today in the United States about issues of nationality, identity and citizenship, and shared history and its meaning. The protests over Confederate statues being removed from public spaces, the debate about banning curriculum like the 1619 Project and critical race theory in schools, and the recent January 6, 2021 insurrection at the U.S. capitol are all attempts to define history and to decide who belongs (and of course, who should be excluded). I argue that children of immigrants provide a unique insight into these questions as people who live between multiple nations and cultures and regularly participate in online spaces. This study therefore sought to understand how U.S.-born immigrant youth are engaging with these issues of citizenship and what it means for young people of immigrant heritage to belong in an environment of increased hostility and nationalism through their engagement with social media.

### **Statement of research**

This study focused on children of immigrants' perception of belonging within the current political climate through their engagement on social media. Children of immigrants represent a wide range of cultural, socioeconomic, linguistic, and political backgrounds, therefore their insights into issues of belonging as they themselves navigate between multiple identities is relevant as a research topic. I focused specifically on children of Central American heritage

given my own background, but also because this community has been so central to discussions about immigration yet paradoxically their voices are not heard (Agrelo, 2018). More and more young people with access to ICTs and social media accounts will likely be exposed to divisive anti-immigrant rhetoric, but they are also more likely to engage with these issues through their use of social media and participate in forms of resistance, which will in turn shape how they perceive themselves and their sense of belonging to a nation. This study focused more specifically on the role that new media and ICTs play in how this community engages with issues of belonging to a nation at a time of rising nationalism and the ongoing debate about American identity that has only intensified since the election of Donald Trump. People between the ages of 15-24 are most likely to be online compared to other age groups (UNICEF, 2017), and many use technology as a tool to organize around issues related to immigration, and greater individual expression and civic engagement (Jenkins et al., 2009). They are also utilizing digital tools alongside traditional media to become agents of change in their communities (Hodgin & Kahne, 2018); citizen activists and DREAMers are examples of collaborative practices and participatory politics that help young people “exert both voice and influence on issues” (Kahne et al., 2015).

These young people are engaged in organizing around immigration and conflict and engaging in debates regarding American identity, as well as the exchange of differing perspectives and opinions through their engagement with ICTs. This study examined how youth of immigrant heritage engaged in citizenship themed discourse make sense of their belonging in these online spaces, and within the broader context of rising nationalism in the country. The implications for this study can help us understand the factors that produce feelings of belonging

or exclusion for this community, and how to increase their visibility in discussions affecting them and their families.

### **Research Questions**

My research was guided by the following questions:

- What types of immigration-related content do U.S.-children of Central American parents encounter on social media?
- How do they respond and engage with this content?
- How do they see these interactions as shaping their sense of belonging and citizenship?

By content I was referring to news events related to immigration at the local, national, or international level, as well as any content they came across related to their own ethnic culture and identity. By respond and engage, I meant any type of reaction to what they saw online, whether it was a personal response to more physical interactions like reading, responding with a comment, or sharing it with others. I also considered ignoring certain content or purposeful non-clicking as a type of response. And in defining belonging and citizenship, I asked participants to define those terms themselves rather than imposing my own definition. While these questions focused on very specific interactions on social media platforms related to immigration related content, responses often went beyond their experiences within online spaces. This led to a richer discussion about how participants have been engaged in the construction of belonging from a young age, and the multiple ways that they express this belonging publicly and through their relationships with others.

### **Dissertation Structure**

My dissertation is comprised of seven chapters. The first three chapters highlight my journey to the project based on my own background and experiences, a review of the relevant

literature, and a description of the methods used to complete the study. Chapter 4-6 summarize the major findings based on my analysis of my interviews with participants. I summarize the major themes that emerged about participants' understanding and construction of belonging and how it intersects with their engagements on social media, and how these experiences affect their sense of belonging. In the final chapter I discuss the implications of my study as well as future suggestions for research.

Chapter 1 begins with my journey to the project as the son of a Guatemalan immigrant. I discuss how I wanted to understand how other young people with a similar background make sense of their belonging at a time when being on social media has become ubiquitous, and when the Central American community has been put front and center of the immigration debate. I connect this to my statement of research, which centers these questions about belonging within the current hostilities against immigrant communities taking place online and in person, and to the research questions that guided my study. I conclude by briefly discussing the implications of this study and how the findings can contribute to our understanding about the lives of children of Central American immigrants.

Chapter 2 introduces the conceptual framework for this study. It first summarizes the literature on belonging and its importance for individuals, as well as the detrimental effects of exclusion. I also look at the literature on belonging for immigrants and its relationship with technology for maintaining connections. I show how children of immigrants can often experience feelings of exclusion, even if they are culturally assimilated to their birth country. I then connect this literature with the media and social media and show how it can be used to exclude by reproducing harmful stereotypes. The next section looks at the literature on second-generation youth, showing their importance to the American economy and their influence on

politics. I review past literature on second-generation assimilation pathways and the factors that determine whether groups will experience upward or downward mobility. I also recount how outcomes for second-generation youth vary by race and ethnic group, leading to different outcomes in education and the labor market, and on how their families are received by the state. The last section reviews that literature and children of immigrants and their usage of information and communication technologies (ICTs). I show how ICTs can help children of immigrants in their acculturation process and to learn more about their parents' culture, while helping them build the necessary skills needed to navigate between both worlds. I next show how these tools can be used for greater political participation and civic engagement in acts of mediated mobilization that according to Lievrouw create a "sense of belonging, solidarity, and collective identity" (2011). These tools are specifically being used to advocate on immigrant right issues, and on challenging common myths and narratives about migrants. I conclude by reviewing the broader literature on the affordances of the internet and other ICTs and their important in the new information economy, but which can exacerbate inequalities if not implemented with care for the people they are meant to serve.

The second half of the chapter looks at the two theoretical base that guided my study. The first framework was on belonging the politics of belonging, which looks at the spaces where belonging is constructed, maintained, and contested in everyday life. This framework allowed me to consider the spaces where participants experience belonging the most, as well as the spaces where they feel a greater sense of exclusion. I deviate from this framework by isolating social media as a separate location. The second framework look at different outcomes of citizenship and attachments to the state. Some forms of citizenship produce a strong sense of identification with the state and in its values, while failed forms of citizenship lead to weak

identification and ambivalent attitudes towards the state in favor of stronger attachments to one's racial or ethnic community, and low levels of civic and political engagement. But by seeking out transformative acts based on social justice and human rights, those who experience failed citizenship can become informed and engaged citizens and create new interpretations of citizenship engagement. These two frameworks provided me with the lens to understand participants' engagement with immigration content within these online spaces and the impact it has on their sense of belonging, and how feelings impact their sense of citizenship.

Chapter 3 reviews the methods that allowed me to carry out the study. I begin with my own positionality as a researcher and as the child of a parent from Central America. My background allowed me to be viewed as a group insider and outsider, both of which affected the relationship between myself and the study participants. I also suggest that the lockdown orders due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which required interviews to be conducted by phone or Zoom chat, did have an impact the data collection process. I then show the process of recruiting participants, conducting interviews, and analyzing the data into themes and categories which occurred simultaneously during data collection.

Chapter 4 introduces the responses from participants. I begin with their definition of what belonging means to them. Rather than impose my own meaning, I asked each participant to define belonging in their own words. The rest of the chapter looks at how participants express their belonging in everyday spaces, which has been organized into two themes based on my analysis of the data: expressions of belonging, and relationships of belonging. The first theme looks at how belonging is constructed and maintained individually in two categories, language, and cultural markers. The second theme looks at belonging through ongoing relationships with parents and college and university peers. Both themes showed the importance of belonging for



participants, but also revealed how they experience exclusion and discrimination. While participants showed how these expressions intersect and engage with social media, most of discussions emphasized physical spaces and face-to-face encounters. This suggests that belonging is a process that participants have been grappling with from a young age, and which informs their experiences and attitudes with regards to immigration and social media.

Chapter 5 address the first two research questions about the kinds of immigration-related content participants encounter online and how they engage with this content. Responses covered a wide range of interactions from liking and sharing content with mutual followers, directly engaging with people online, to actively ignoring some content completely. But the reasoning behind their choices revealed that all their interactions, even when they engage in “non-clicking,” are all meaningful social practices meant to challenge stereotypes, prevent the spread of misinformation, and respect the dignity and humanity of migrants.

In Chapter 6 I show how these types of engagements have impacted their sense of belonging. Participants overwhelmingly felt a stronger sense of connection to their local communities and the Central American community. They also developed strong feelings of solidarity with other marginalized groups regardless of race and ethnicity due to a sense of shared struggle, which has been directed in forms of activism either online or through their work. Social media was credited with helping them maintain current relationships and create new ones, and to stay informed about issues facing the community. At the same time, participants have felt a decreased sense of belonging and identification with the nation. The recent discourse around immigration has reignited old fears about losing their families and participants and led to fresh concerns about their communities; angered by the treatment of migrants, they have developed a sense of shame about the country and identify with it less. Yet they are also engaged in

transformative acts of citizenship through their activism that is reinterpreting new concepts of engaged citizenship, which together with social media, attempts to increase visibility within the Central American community.

Finally in Chapter 7 I conclude by restating the importance of understanding the online experiences of children of Central American immigrants. Participants are engaging in meaningful acts of visibility and resistance through their engagements with others, which is important for a community that is often silenced or ignored. Yet I also show that this story is one that goes beyond social media, as children of immigrants have been engaged in an ongoing journey about the meaning of belonging and staying connected to their cultural heritage, as well as addressing discrimination and threats of exclusion. I argue that the implications of these findings highlight the need for improving access and effective ICT usage for Latino youth, especially those of Central American heritage, and increasing opportunities for children of immigrants to learn more about their culture in school curriculum.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In the first part of this chapter, I will summarize the literature relevant to the research topic. I cover the literature on the importance of belonging and the negative effects of exclusion, the role that media plays in producing these feelings, and how this applies to children of immigrants. I will then transition to the literature on the second-generation and specifically in assimilation patterns based on factors such as race, ethnicity, and context of reception. I will then conclude the section on literature by looking at the affordances of social media for political and civic participation and other forms of activism. The next section will cover the theoretical base of my conceptual framework. I first look at the belonging and politics of belonging framework (Yuval-Davis, 2011) to see how belonging is constructed in everyday situations and in relationships, and then look at the failed citizenship framework as part of Banks's (2017) typology of citizenship. I will conclude the chapter by showing how the literature and theoretical framework provide understanding on the research questions for this study, as well to contextualize participants' responses.

### **Literature Review**

The literature review will draw on the research on the psychology of belonging. I will then move on to the literature on the incorporation of children of immigrants, the obstacles that prevent their successful integration, and the consequences these may have on their inclusion and belonging. Reviewing the literature on assimilation and acculturation of second-generation youth is helpful in understanding how previous generations of immigrants and their children have successfully or unsuccessfully been integrated into the United States. It is also useful to understand how past examples of discrimination and hostility towards certain immigrant communities that led to social exclusion might inform us about the situation facing the children

of Central American immigrants today. I will then show the role of media in framing issues of immigration, and how children of immigrants are adopting these new technologies in response. I will also briefly include some of the literature on technology's impact on society, but also how certain segments of the population such as the poor and communities of color still face barriers to access and usage. The literature will be organized thematically to capture my research questions related to second-generation youth, social media engagement, and development of belonging.

### **Belonging**

Belonging is a fundamental and necessary human need (Callaghan, 1998; Crisp, 2010). Baumeister and Leary (1995) define belonging as the need for stable and ongoing personal relationships with others that display affective concern; put in simpler terms, a person will feel a sense of belonging if they believe that the other person cares for them and their well-being. They also state that belonging is more than merely identifying with or enjoying the rights of group membership, but rather experience ongoing feelings of “attachment, intimacy, and commitment” that is possible through ongoing contact. When these relationships are at their strongest, they can produce feelings of happiness and calm. Bauman (2001) notes how being in a community conjures up positive feelings “of warmth and comfort and free[dom] from dangers,” where “we all understand each other well” and “we are never strangers.” Anthias (2006) differentiates belonging from identity by stating that one can identify with a particular group but not feel fully accepted as a member; or, that one may belong in spite of not identifying with a community or having multiple competing allegiances. As she states, to belong is to feel acceptance within a community, to share its values and practices, and to have a stake in its future, yet as Sennett states, one needs to belong not to an abstract concept like “society” but to particular places (1997).

For immigrants in particular, Crisp (2010) argues that making connections or “connectedness” is an important precursor for belonging within immigrant communities by helping members retain their cultural identity through social and cultural ties which can then be passed on to future generations. Online spaces can provide opportunities for those seeking connections with others, particularly for those individuals who are unable to be public for risk of physical harm (Cheng, 2006). According to Benítez (2006), immigrant communities use mass media to maintain and reinforce transnational relationships, reproduce collective identities, and participate in a transnational public sphere. Jensen and Arnett (2012) show how social media can help immigrant to develop local identities based on the cultural practices and language of where they grew up, as well as global identities that help them feel belonging to a culture by exposing them to information and people worldwide. Yet as psychologist Brendan Callaghan warns, despite the ability to keep in touch with friends and family thanks to modern technology, “...it is possible to have a place in community, to have work, to be in contact with those who are loved and with those others who are also important in life, and yet to feel a stranger, not to belong” (1998).

But while feelings of social inclusion can produce a sense of calm, security, and shared fate with others, those who experience social exclusion and rejection from social groups can feel an increased sense of anxiety (Baumeister & Tice, 1990). Crisp (2010) warns however that participation alone in social networks and organization can still leave people without a sense of belonging if organizations fail to address the particular needs of members within a community. Walton and Cohen (2007) describe how stigmatized groups in academic and professional environments can begin to question the quality of their connections and social belongings,

producing a state of *belonging uncertainty* that can lead to a decrease in their sense of ability and potential.

Even as legal citizens, children of immigrants are not guaranteed societal inclusion. Pakulski (1997) wrote about how citizen rights may be universal but are in fact restricted to what the state labels “insiders.” Beaman offers a useful example of how a population can be legal citizens of a state and assimilated yet are excluded from the popular imagination. Her research shows how children of North African heritage in France are granted citizenship by virtue of their birth but are not given full societal inclusion because they are not perceived as French; she too has found that media images in France often portray blacks and Maghrébins in negative ways; this population are thus “citizen outsiders” who live on the margins of French society because of their racial and ethnic status despite being full citizens (Beaman, 2017). Rosaldo’s framework of cultural citizenship (1994) argues that one’s right to belong to the nation-state should not come at the expense of one’s race or ethnicity; for those denied cultural citizenship, the process of demanding legal, political, and economic rights becomes a way for marginalized groups to renegotiate the basic social contract and create a reimagining of the state.

The role of the media can play a tremendous role in making children of immigrant parents experience exclusion. Negative images of Latinos across television news, talk radio, and the internet have developed into a threatening narrative that portrays the community as one that refuses to integrate to the larger culture, that drains social services, and brings crime and instability (Chavez, 2001, 2008; Chavez et al., 2019). Donald Trump frequently relied on such imagery, referring to immigrants crossing the southern border as an “invasion,” an infestation” of violence, and suggested that so-called sanctuary cities would be crime infested and breeding concept” (Zimmer, 2019). At a rally in Minneapolis, the former President slammed the Somali

community leading to approval from the crowd in the form of boos. In response, the writer Elad Nehorai tweeted, “Can you imagine being Somali-American and watching this? This is the kind of hate rally seen in authoritarian and fascist countries” (2019). The impact of this type of discrimination and racism can shape how children of immigrants see themselves, and the reflections mirrored back to them in the media and everyday life can lead to psychological devastation (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Children react to this negative social mirroring through different pathways; some experience a sense of hopelessness that can lead to depression, acting out, and lowered expectations, while others resist to seek social justice. Only those that maintain a sense of hope about the future and a higher sense of self-esteem can best prosper.

Young people today are more likely to use the media to understand current events, yet they risk a number of potential dangers. As young people become more dependent on media during times of crisis and conflict for information and understanding, they can encounter misinformation or conflicting pieces of information, as well as uncensored and disturbing images that can contribute to their anxiety and unease (Lemish & Götz, 2007). The news therefore has been met with more and more suspicion; a 2016 study of young people between the ages of 14 and 24 revealed high levels of skepticism and distrust in the news (Madden et al., 2017), while an article in *The Atlantic* showed how some young people, in response to the Trump’s tweets about the media and fake news, have influenced their mistrust in certain mainstream outlets (Lorenz, 2018).

As we have seen, belonging is a basic human need that when felt can lead to positive outcomes but can cause stress and anxiety when one feels exclusion. The current political climate represents numerous opportunities for immigrant communities and their children to be

exposed to the types of social mirroring that can lead to what Suárez-Orozco call psychological devastation, with much of it coming from the news and the internet. In the next section I look previous research on second-generation youth, and how previous generations of children of immigrant also experienced racism and discrimination and the effect it had on their ability to successfully integrate, or even be accepted, as welcome and valued citizens of the United States.

### **The children of immigrants**

The children of immigrants are an essential part of the American experience (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001) who have come to define “the character of American social, cultural, and political life” (Kasinitz et al., 2009). The number of second-generation children under the age of 18 rose dramatically from 6.3 million in 1990 to nearly 16 million in 2017, accounting for 88 percent of all children in the United States with immigrant parents (Zong et al., 2019); in California alone, the increase was from 2.06 million in 1990 to 3.9 million in in 2014 (Migration Policy Institute, 2014). The population’s median age of 21 reflects the recent waves of migration to the United States. Second-generation Latinos in particular have the potential to affect all aspects of American society, and have already made their presence felt in public schools and the job market, as well as growing into a vital voting block for future elections (Rumbaut, 2002; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). By every metric, second-generation youth outperform foreign-born immigrants in terms of college graduation rates (Dixon, 2006), income, and homeownership (Pew Research Center, 2013) (Pew Research Center, 2013), and are among the strongest contributors to the national economy (National Academies of Sciences, 2017). While children of immigrants often have better outcomes than their foreign-born peers, second-generation youth outcomes can vary wildly by ethnic group. Understanding whether second-generation youth are achieving upward mobility or moving downward to an ethnic



underclass (Farley & Alba, 2002; Portes, 1996) therefore provides necessary answers for policy makers seeking solutions (Waldinger & Reichl, 2006).

As Portes and Rumbaut (2001) state, it is not in doubt that the second-generation will assimilate to American culture, but rather what segment they will assimilate to that is important. Past studies have focused on various models of assimilation that can lead children of immigrants into different pathways of integration into the host society. Classic “straight line” models of assimilation theories envisioned that immigrants would be absorbed into their host societies over time by adopting its language, culture, and values (Brown & Bean, 2006). Rather than experiencing a straight line towards assimilation however, scholars began to emphasize the number of factors that could delay or block a group’s successful path towards assimilation. These newer models argued that racial and ethnic disadvantages and barriers to opportunities actually lead to a “bumpy” path towards assimilation (Gans, 1992) or even block it for certain groups —barriers which can be acutely felt by future generations. Today, pathways to assimilation remain dependent on a number of factors such as “national origin, socioeconomic status, contexts of reception in the United States, and [social and financial] family resources” (Brown & Bean, 2006). Data from The Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS) found that respondents faced different outcomes in education, language proficiency, family incomes, and employment; both second-generation Mexican youth in Southern California and Nicaraguans in South Florida had higher high school dropout rates compared to their ethnic peers, with Mexican youth also having higher rates of incarceration, particularly for males (Portes & Rumbaut, 2014). Portes and Zhou’s segmented assimilation framework shows how these structural barriers in education and employment can actually lead to downward forms of assimilation (1993). Children of immigrants experience downward assimilation may join

“reactive subculture” and choose to identify with the language and values of their parent’s culture to protect their sense of self-worth, or even take on oppositional behaviors and attitudes, such as joining a street gang (Brown & Bean, 2006).

Observing previous waves of immigration highlights how certain ethnic groups faced discrimination and barrier towards upward progress and mobility. During the early 20th century, racial discrimination against “non-white” or those viewed as racially inferior immigrants from southern and eastern Europe led to both physical and systematic acts of violence (Guglielmo, 2004), and government policies sought to restrict immigrants from certain undesirable countries (Dillingham, 1910). Immigration from Italy dropped from 200,000 a year during the 1920s to 15,000, and the outbreak of World War II, leading many Italians to be subjected to government surveillance, institutional barriers and in some instances, internment (Alba & Foner, 2006). The effects of these barriers were evident in their low educational achievement compared to other groups (Perlmann, 1989) and taking on what Child called an apathetic form of identity between their American and Italian sense of self (1943). While Italian immigrants and their children for example were ultimately able to climb the socioeconomic ladder, they did so at a much slower pace compared to other European ethnic groups (Alba & Foner, 2006).

How immigrants are integrated today into a new society is dependent not only on the skills and human capital they bring with them, but also how they are received by the host country (Alba & Foner, 2006). At the individual and group level, integration can be measured in terms of economic and educational opportunities, and social and cultural adaptation to the new host country, and through educational, religious, and cultural institutions that serve immigrant communities (Penninx, 2003). Immigrant parents are integrated into their communities through three modes of incorporation defined as the “policies of the host government, the values and

prejudices of the receiving society, and the characteristics of co-ethnic community” (Portes & Zhou, 1993). These modes can positively and negatively impact immigrant integration with impact on future generations—some immigrant groups for example receive legal entry and are generally well-received, with some having access to resettlement assistance to assist in their arrival, while other groups regarded as illegal immigrants experience high levels of racial discrimination and hostility (Portes & Rumbaut, 2014). Such racialized forms of discrimination and the economic conditions of the receiving society also affect immigrant incorporation if new immigrants are seen as taking jobs (N. Hamilton & Chinchilla, 2001).

The literature on assimilation of immigrants and future generation Americans reveals how pathways to integration are dependent on a number of factors that affect different ethnic groups, which challenges past assumptions that future generations of immigrants would naturally assimilate into American society over time. Indeed, certain ethnic groups today are presumed to be incapable or unwilling to assimilate. In the current political climate, assimilation has become a term meant to exclude specific immigrants because they do not share “our” values. While the Trump administration may have claimed to be in favor of immigration when done legally, its emphasis on attracting only high-skilled immigrants unlike those from “shithole countries,” has become a not-so-subtle dog whistle to paint non-White immigrants as a drain on the American economy, bringing unwanted crime and purposefully undermining American values. Past literature tells us that within this context of reception, specific ethnic Latino groups and future generations are likely to experience downward forms of assimilation. This hostility against American citizens threatens to exclude children of immigrants from a sense of belonging as well as educational or economic opportunities. From here it is now necessary to understand how this

hateful rhetoric is being perpetuated on social media, and how it is being used to address these issues and its impact on belongingness.

### **Technology Usage Among Children of Immigrants**

For many children of immigrants, the internet and social media can be tools to support their parents' integration and to connect to their own cultural heritage. According to Bacigalupe and Parker, children of immigrants can serve as technology brokers, helping their parents navigate society in the United States and virtually connect to families back in their countries of origin (2015). They show how information and communication technologies can also help children of immigrants learn multiple literacies by communicating in languages other than English, develop empathy and critical thinking skills, and allow for the creation of individual and group identity construction. ICTs can also allow them to explore and negotiate their worlds and their families culture, impacting the way they experience and connect with relatives in distant lands, but also let them be politically aware of events in their countries of heritage. They also play a key role in an immigrant child's agency by actively giving them a voice to rewrite narratives surrounding their relationship between with their native and host culture. Finally, technology can give opportunities for children of immigrants to engage in their own process of selective acculturation, letting them decide how to communicate with their parents' culture and under what circumstances (Bacigalupe & Parker, 2015). Plaza (2010) observed how second-generation Caribbean college students created and maintained web pages to connect to cultural values and practices as a way to maintain a high sense of self-esteem and self-agency, and to create a symbolic connection to their ethnic origins. ICTs can present a number of challenges specific for children of immigrants however by presenting highly romanticized or false images of their parents' homeland, increasing the sense of distance with their ethnic culture, and

exacerbating intergenerational tensions between parents and children (Bacigalupe & Parker, 2015).

Another way young people are employing digital technologies is to pursue social justice and engage in democratic participation. One survey from the Pew Research Center found that a majority of respondents felt that social media was an important space to connect with like-minded friends and exposed them to greater diverse views (2018). But another study on European youth found that the web was an important tool for youth already engaged in political activities, while those who lacked access, particularly due to socioeconomic reasons, were less likely to use the internet as a tool of civic participation and engagement (Banaji, 2013). Newer forms of media can let young people, disillusioned from traditional institutions, engage in participatory politics, affording greater opportunity to shape discourse, communicate with political leaders, and exert great agency and influence (Cohen et al., 2012). The Oakland-based Youth Radio offers courses in media production, radio and online journalism for high school students, and produces content on issues related to politics and identity (Hodgin & Kahne, 2018). Youth-led movements like the Never Again campaign and the March For Our Lives school walk-out were promoted across social media in response to frustrations over government inaction following the school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School (Witt, 2019). Such acts are what Lievrouw describes as mediated mobilization, a collaborative effort that “creates a sense of belonging, solidarity, and collective identity among participants” (2011).

More and more youth activists are also using newer forms of media to engage with immigration issues. For marginalized communities, the internet can be a platform for preserving cultural traditions and mobilizing for greater recognition and visibility (Lim et al., 2014; Prins, 2001). The Media, Activism, and Participatory Politics (MAPP) Project highlights how Muslim-

Americans create online media to share their own personal stories about constructing identities amidst discrimination and exclusion in a post-9/11 America (Shresthova, 2016). Campaigns like “Coming Out” from the non-profit group Define American (founded by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, and undocumented immigrant, Jose Antonio Vargas) encourage young people to share videos of themselves declaring their immigration status so as to not be defined by a piece of paper (Define American, 2015). As Cristina Beltrán argues (2015), these online campaigns give young people the agency over their stories create first-person narratives that challenge anti-immigrant rhetoric, but they also help to challenge government failures to address decisions that affect them, even at the risk of coming out publicly. These movements also emphasize critical engagement with media production allows young people to address real-world problems such as challenging dominant myths and stereotypes and promoting social justice (Share et al., 2016).

These examples of technology usage among second-generation youth are part of the broader literature about the affordances of technology for young people but also the obstacles in accessing and utilizing them effectively. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) can be transformative tools critical for political participation, community engagement, and the democratization of knowledge production (Castells, 2009; Ginsburg, 2008; Warschauer, 2004), yet access remains highly stratified by race, socioeconomic status, English proficiency, and educational level, all of which can disproportionately affect immigrant communities (File & Ryan, 2014; Ono & Zavodny, 2008; Warf, 2013). Ginsburg defines this digital divide as “the circumstances of inequality that characterize access (or lack of access) to resources, technological and otherwise” (2008). Without the necessary technical and literacy skills to handle and utilize information effectively, individuals and communities can find themselves excluded from the information economy (Castells, 2009; INSINC, 1997; Muddiman, 2000;

Warschauer, 2004). Unfortunately, efforts to close the digital divide in schools have either ended in failure or produced minimal increases in student engagement or learning (Margolin, 2014).

Margolis (2008) uncovered examples of “virtual segregation” in Los Angeles schools with predominantly Black and Latino students having only limited access to basic computing courses, or lower enrollment rates in schools offering a wide range of advanced computing classes.

Warschauer (2004) found that a disproportionate number of Latinos and Students of Color were given computers for remedial drills, while their white counterparts were encouraged to use them more for critical thinking exercises.

Unfortunately increased internet and device access often maintains power rather than redistributing it equally (Agre, 2002; Castells, 2009, 2011; Toyama, 2011). In education, ICT usage can exacerbate existing inequalities if factors that limit a student’s ability to utilize these tools effectively (English-only content, uneven access to Wi-Fi, a lack of necessary literacy skills) are overlooked (Carnoy, 2004; Ginsburg, 2008). Rather than simply providing devices for marginalized communities as a solution towards solving complex social problems like poverty and education (Srinivasan, 2017), efforts should instead focus on how individuals and communities can use ICTs to engage in meaningful social practices and transformative acts of resistance. Warschauer has argued that effective use of ICTs should promote social inclusion, which he defines as “the extent that individuals, families, and communities are able to fully participate in society and control their own destinies, taking into account a variety of factors related to economic resources, employment, health, education, housing, recreation, culture, and civic engagement” (2004). He calls on understanding the literacies socially excluded communities have, identifying those they lack, and integrating ICTs with existing community support structures.

This literature on technology usage demonstrates how for second-generation youth, the internet and other ICTs can be valuable tools to assist them and their families in the integration process. And as we have seen, when implemented properly, these digital tools can be effective for increasing social inclusion among youth. But problematic discourses around the digital divide and unequal access and learning for poor students or communities of color can exacerbate existing inequalities. The issue of access and usage become important therefore when asking how study participants are engaging with issues of immigration online, and how well this is being supported by schools.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was informed by Nira Yuval-Davis's framework on belonging and the politics of belonging. This model has previously been applied to understand how various religious or political projects of belonging are challenging nationalism in the twenty-first century. Yuval-Davis identifies three levels where belonging is constructed: *social locations* related to one's gender race, class, or nation, as well as particular age or kinship group, or profession; *identifications and social attachments*, which refer to the personal narratives that identify who they are (as well as who they are not), which reflect their emotional investment of wanting to belong; and *ethical and political values*, which refers to how these social locations and identities and attachments are valued and judged (2006). The politics of belonging therefore refers to how these levels of belonging are maintained and reproduced by individuals and political communities into competing entities of us versus them. I will look to understand participants sense of belonging within these three levels, but as Yuval-Davis's framework emphasizes face-to-face interactions, my study will diverge by using *online spaces* as an equal space of interaction.



While Yuval-Davis positions her framework around various debates over belonging by examining immigration and its relationship with two different theories of citizenship within the British context, this framework is relevant to the purposes of this study as the immigration context remains similar amidst the rise of nationalist rhetoric, and with how the U.S. also embrace liberal theories of citizenship. In liberal models of citizenship, there is a reciprocal relationship between the citizen and the state. Citizenship is a legal status, protected by law, that emphasizes individual freedom and equality under the law, with citizens only required to be obedient to the state's laws, pay taxes, and respect the freedom of fellow members (Thun, 2016). Communitarian models of citizenship critique this notion of individualism and instead see the nation-state as one element of citizenship, alongside ethnic, religious, and political communities (Delanty, 2002) . For this study, I examine how participants experience belonging between these two social spaces of liberal versus communitarian forms of citizenship—whether their online experiences help them feel like equal citizens under the law that embrace the values of the nation, or if they see themselves as belonging first and foremost to a separate community, whether it be ethnic, cultural, or otherwise.

I also drew on James Banks's (2015, 2017) failed citizenship framework to understand how one's understanding of belonging leads to different outcomes for the lived experiences of participants. Banks's typology of citizenship demonstrates how different groups are either structurally integrated or excluded within a nation-state. Recognized citizens are accepted as legal and valued members with opportunities to participate fully in the nation-state; participatory citizens exercise their civic privileges and rights such as voting in varying degrees; and transformative citizens go beyond civic participation to pursue justice, equality, and human rights (2017). Individuals who experience recognized or participatory citizenship are structurally

integrated and recognized and therefore develop strong attachments with the nation-state.

Citizens who experience failed citizenship on the other hand may be structurally excluded from the nation-state and the rights and privileges of citizenship based on their race or culture, and rather than internalizing the values and ethos of the nation-state, instead feel ambivalence and alienation (Banks, 2015, 2017). While citizens from different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic background can experience failed citizenship, Banks suggests that indigenous and immigrant groups often experience failed citizenship because they are made to abandon their cultural heritage in order to be accepted as citizens; their civic and political participation is minimal, and they identify less with the nation-state and see themselves and their interests aligned with their own ethnic, racial, or religious group; failed citizens may even be more likely to engage in protests or acts of civil disobedience,. However, as Banks notes, those who experience failed citizenship can still take actions to pursue social justice and equality through engaged forms of civic action (2015). This opens the possibility that resistance to existing models of citizenship which fail to include certain citizens, can in fact be forms of resistance by citizens seeking to reaffirm their conception of citizenship.

## **Chapter Summary**

This chapter reviewed the relevant literature and the theoretical foundation of this study. In the first section I discussed the importance of belonging for individuals and the harmful effects of exclusion, the literature on the second generation and how pathways to assimilation and acceptance are often blocked for certain groups, and how young people are utilizing information and communication technologies for civic and political participation and acts of resistance. The theoretical framework showed how belonging is constructed and maintained in every life and how these contribute to different outcomes of citizenship and attachments to the

state and other ethnic groups. By referencing the literature on youth and media, I could see how these feelings and outcomes might intersect with social media. This conceptual framework gave me the tools to understand how participants experience belonging in different contexts and situations, and how those feelings shape their conception of citizenship. Therefore, I chose to ask participants how they define belonging in their own words. I discuss more about how my understanding of the literature and theoretical constructs helped me develop the research questions and guided my methodology, data collection, analysis of the data in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS**

In this chapter I discuss the methodological approach I undertook for this study. This study specifically employed a qualitative, phenomenological methodology. Creswell and Poth (2017) define phenomenological studies as those that describe the common meaning for participants as they experience a phenomenon. Merriam (2009) states that researchers who rely on phenomenological studies are tasked with depicting the “essence or basic structure of experience,” and how that experience is transformed into consciousness. This lived experience becomes the unit by which the researcher seeks to illustrate its universal essence (Van Manen, 2018). I then discuss my own positionality and how this influenced how I approached the study, as well as my relationship with participants as both an outsider and an insider. I then discuss the procedures I took to recruit participants, conduct 1:1 interviews that addressed the research questions as well as broader themes from the literature like belonging and citizenship, and my process for analyzing the interview data.

### **Positionality**

I came to this study as a child of a Central American immigrant. But while I shared this in common with participants, I sought to not use my background to make assumptions about the beliefs held by participants, or to impose my own understanding of the Latino and/or Central American experience on theirs. For this reason, I sought to examine my own positionality and the role that played in the research process, as well as how my social identities of class, citizenship, age/generation, and race might affect my interactions with participants (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). Through this ongoing process of reflexivity, I could understand how my own personal history and social locations might shape the power dynamics between myself and participants, and to acknowledge this dynamic in my role as researcher (Gringeri et al., 2013).

One way I addressed this power dynamic was my acknowledging my dual insider/outsider status. I share similar cultural experiences as participants; as someone born in the United States to a Guatemalan father, who grew up speaking Spanish and engaging with the Guatemalan diaspora in my hometown of Chicago, and regularly visiting the region to visit extended family, I could have been perceived by participants as an insider. There were moments during the interviews when I chose to reveal my background to participants. For example, if a participant casually used the *voseo* form of “you” and its conjugated verb tenses commonly used in Central America (as opposed to the more common *tuteo* in Mexican Spanish), or referenced traditional Guatemalan foods or cultural events like *Semana Santa* (Holy Week), I would respond by quickly acknowledging my familiarity with those same cultural markers. While I did not reveal my ethnicity when recruiting participants or during interviews (unless it was asked of me), I did feel it was appropriate to share my personal background with others. I felt it was important to let participants know that I valued our shared language and culture, especially since I wanted to use this study as a way to amplify the voice of a community often ignored or devalued. Acknowledging our shared linguistic similarities, cultural markers, and common experiences led to a much more relaxed and engaging conversation and positioned me as a fellow member of the community, rather than a neutral researcher looking to exploit their experiences.

Yet I could also have been viewed as an outsider. The age range of participants was between 19-26 years old, or about half my own age. While this difference did not come up during our discussions, I was quickly made aware of the 20-year age gap. The most obvious example was in discussions around social media, as I am a casual user while the majority of participants reported being active on far more platforms with greater frequency. They used slang

terms like “mutuals” to describe their friends on Twitter and Facebook, a phrase I was not familiar with. I am relatively new to social media and can choose to ignore it if I wish, but for most participants it seemed to play a far more ubiquitous role in their lives. Also, while all participants had both parents from a Central America, I am only connected to the region through my Guatemalan father. My mother was born in Puerto Rico and is a U.S. citizen, although Puerto Ricans are often considered “colonial immigrants” because they were forced to leave the island for better wages but work in low-paying jobs, historically attended poorer schools, and experienced discrimination because of their cultural differences with the mainland (Duany, 2010). While I was primarily raised by my father and identify much more with my Guatemalan culture, I still acknowledge my Puerto Rican heritage which makes my experience far different than if I had been raised by two Central Americans. And because both my parents were U.S. citizens, neither they or any immediate friends or family lived under the threat of deportation. Many participants expressed their concerns about the possibility of a parent or family member being deported, a reminder of the stress, fear and trauma that affect can affect the mental health of U.S. citizen children with undocumented parents (L. Zayas, 2015; L. H. Zayas & Heffron, 2016). Finally, unlike my participants, I was not raised in the Southern California area but rather in Chicago, IL. Chicago does have a substantial Central American population that is often overshadowed by the larger Mexican community, and I too grew up feeling underrepresented as a Guatemalan/Puerto Rican. Yet Southern California is historically and culturally very different than the Midwest. The origins of the Chicano movement in Southern California and the physical proximity to Mexico certainly has played a larger role in the social and political makeup of the region. The diaspora was also shaped by civil wars that broke out in in the 1970’s and 80’s, leading to an influx of persons fleeing violence and settling in Los Angeles (Tobar, 1989).

While I was able to share so much in common with participants, I was careful to avoid essentializing the Central American experience. I could not presume that my understanding of Guatemalan culture would be the same for participants, even those with parents born in Guatemala. I was also aware that while participation was open to participants from any Central American heritage, the majority of participants had parents from El Salvador or Guatemala, with one participant with a Nicaraguan father. I could not assume therefore that all of Central America was being represented. I was careful then to not assume that the Salvadoran experience was similar to the Guatemalan or Nicaraguan, as all three countries have their own unique histories. I was reminded about the importance of not making these assumptions as participants shared their frustrations about the lack of representation in the news media, or how their culture was often absorbed into phrases like Latino/x or Chicano.

Finally, it is important to recognize my positionality as an interviewer doing fieldwork in 2020. Due to safety restrictions as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews took place over Zoom or by phone call. For those interviews over Zoom, participants were not asked to turn their cameras on and in most cases, they chose not to. I would follow their lead and only turn my camera on when participants did, and as a result a majority of participants never saw my face and I never saw theirs. I do not know how our discussions would have been different had they been conducted in person, but the situation most certainly had an impact on how participants viewed me and shared their life history.

### **Study Participants**

The data collection for this study took place between April and July 2020. The final study collected interviews from ten participants, five male and five female, between the ages of 19-26. My first step in recruiting participants was to work with an administrator at a civil rights

organization that works on behalf of the Central American community in Los Angeles, who then shared my contact information with members. I also reached out personally to student groups and Central American-themed groups on Facebook and Instagram, a few of whom either agreed to share my contact information with their members or allowed me to post an online flier with information on the study. Those interested then contacted me directly by email or direct message. After confirming that all interested persons were U.S. citizens and active on social media, I then scheduled a 1:1 interview with each person over Zoom or phone call. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, and the audio was recorded. All participants were paid \$20. After conducting 17 interviews, I selected 5 female and 5 male participants for the purposes of this study. While I had originally sought participants under the age of 30, I selected the final participants by narrowing down those between the ages of 19-26 who were still in college or university or had recently graduated. I also selected those who spent the majority of their youth in the Southern California, which eliminated some who had spent time in other parts of the U.S. The below table offers lists the names of the final participants chosen this study, as well as their parents' country of birth and their age at the time of the interview. All names are pseudonyms.

<b>Study Participants</b>			
<i>Name</i>	<i>Parents' country of origin</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Description</i>
Andres	El Salvador/Nicaragua	22	From the Westlake, MacArthur Park area of L.A. Currently attending college. Also identifies as LGBTQ. Works with community organizations and immigration nonprofits that serve Central Americans
Diego	Guatemala/Guatemala	23	Grew up in the San Gabriel. Briefly lived in Oregon before returning to L.A. Was a Central American Studies major. Mother is undocumented
Lucas	Guatemala/Guatemala	24	From Westlake, MacArthur Park area. Was active in Guatemalan community until college, now trying to reconnect. Works with organization to help students with college applications. Closest family is his undocumented brother



Emma	Guatemala/Guatemala	22	Live in South Gate area. Currently attends a UC school. Participates in a WhatsApp group with extended family. Very active on Instagram for her church and social injustice
Victoria	Guatemala/Guatemala	26	From the Koreatown/Historical Wes Adams area. Currently works as school counselor in public schools to give back to her community
David	Guatemala/Guatemala	20	Majoring in economics. Grew up near Normandie and Adams/USC. Discovered a large Guatemalan community at his current school. Follows Guatemalan media for immigration news.
Carmen	El Salvador/Guatemala	23	Family fled civil war and domestic violence. Majored in international studies and anthropology. Works with organization that serves refugees
Daniela	El Salvador/El Salvador	26	Grew up in San Fernando Valley. Majoring in Chicano/Latino Studies. Works at nonprofit for people with developmental disabilities
Isabel	El Salvador/El Salvador	19	Also from San Fernando Valley. Studying psychological science and criminology. Raised by single mother who fled domestic violence in El Salvador
Miguel	Guatemala/Guatemala	26	Born in L.A. Lived in Guatemala from ages 2-5. Majoring in English literature and language. Works at nonprofit that serves mostly household workers and day laborers

## Methods Overview

The data collection process was an emotional experience for both me and participants. As a child of a Central American immigrant, it was touching to hear others express the same sense of pride in our shared culture while also being heartbreaking to listen to their encounters with discrimination. Participants also shared concerns for their families and their communities living under then-President Trump’s America and his disastrous and nativist immigration policies. It is also important to note that the interviews took place just after the beginning of the COVID-19 lockdown across the country, when schools, businesses, and workplaces closed indefinitely, and many people were told to stay indoors. There were concerns about what would happen if someone contacted the virus, or how the rent would be paid if someone lost their job. In this new reality, everyday acts like buying groceries meant long lines and shortages, and people did not

know when they might see their loved ones again. My wife was pregnant with our second child at the time, and we were concerned about the baby's health, or what would happen if one of us got sick. Then on May 25<sup>th</sup>, a sickening video of the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer went viral; the international outcry and protest that followed weighed heavily on my mind, and certainly on the minds of participants, throughout our discussions.

The primary tool of data collection was the in-depth interview, to understand what Seidman (2012) calls "the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience." The in-depth interview was the best way to get at the heart of their feelings and perspectives of participants and how they made sense of their engagement on social media and its impact on their sense of belonging. The interviews were semi-formal in structure with open-ended questions that addressed the research questions, while allowing space for participants to speak beyond the scope of those questions if they chose (though within the broader topics of belonging and social media). While interviews were conducted in English, as a bilingual speaker I was able to understand any Spanish code-switching by participants without having to ask them to translate. By keeping the questions open-ended and establishing a welcome environment for participants to share their thoughts and feelings, I was able to collect rich and descriptive data from the interview even with the limitations of anonymous Zoom video chats.

The structure of the interviews was modeled on Seidman's 3-series interview approach (2012) though condensed into one, 60-minute session. The first series of questions focused on the life history of each participant such as background information, their parents' country of origin, the communities they most identify with, and the social media sites they regularly visit. The second series of questions focused on the details of their experiences growing up as children of immigrants, how they define and experience belonging or exclusion, and what kinds of

immigration-related content they see online. The third section asked participants to reflect on the meanings of their interactions online and how it impacts their sense of belonging to their communities and to the country. While this approach gave me some structure throughout the interviews, it also allowed the discussions to be as fluid as possible in case participants wanted to focus on other topics. As I conducted each interview I took field notes within my research journal, and at the conclusion of each interview I would return to the journal to write down any further thoughts and observations. The journal became what Olson (2011) refers to as a “private space” to explore my own thoughts and reflect on my emotional responses.

All interviews were conducted in my apartment in Los Angeles, CA due to the Covid-19 lockdown. This presented some challenges to ensuring privacy and providing a relaxed environment for discussion. With my wife also working remotely and my son home from school, I had to conduct interviews from my bedroom with my laptop, research journal, and headphones at hand. At times I had to interrupt the interview if my son happened to walk in or if I had to turn the noise down in the other room. Thankfully participants were very sympathetic as many were also working from home. After the conclusion of each interview, I immediately sent each participant \$20 using Venmo or Apple Pay.

The audio from each interview was recorded using the QuickTime player app on my MacBook Pro. I did not record the videos of the interviews since most participants mostly left their Zoom cameras off and I chose to respect their decision. After each interview concluded and each audio file was saved and backed up to an external hard drive, I began transcribing interviews concurrently with the research process. I would then listen to the QuickTime files on my headphones while manually transcribing the interviews into a Word document. There were some minor technical glitches during the recording that made some small sections of the audio

unclear, but not enough to obscure the meaning of each participant's answers. Any Spanish that was spoken by participants was included in the transcript untranslated.

### **Data Analysis**

Analyses of the interview data occurred simultaneously during the interview process. During each discussion with participants, I would take down notes in my research journal and create descriptive codes highlight any words or phrases that stood out which answered the main questions of the study (Saldaña, 2012) It was during this initial stage of coding that themes like language would begin to emerge. Once the interview was complete, I would look over my notes and jot down my overall reflections on participants' comments. As I conducted more interviews, I would compare each interview and look for any emerging themes. The next step was to transcribe each interview by hand using Microsoft Word, which I would then print out each to continue the manual coding process of reading the transcripts annotating the text to generate ideas. Here I created in vivo codes based on participants' own words to capture the essence from their responses (Bazeley, 2013). From here I compiled a list of codes that shared common characteristics and placed them into categories and sub-categories and themes that provided answers to my research questions (Merriam, 2009; Saldaña, 2012). I would then cross reference these themes with my literature, theoretical framework, and research questions.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter outlined the methodological approach for this study. I discussed why I employed a employed a qualitative, phenomenological study to understand the experiences of participants within these online spaces. The interview was used as the main tool of analysis, and by using open-ended questions I could understand participants' life history, the details of their experiences, and how they have reflected on the meaning of those experiences. By collecting

rich, descriptive data I could uncover the meaning that participants make of their interactions online, and as members of a community that is often ignored or silenced. I discussed how I went about recruiting participants to address my research questions. I then discussed how the literature and theoretical framework presented in the chapter 2 informed my analysis. In the next chapter I discuss how participants define belonging in their own words and how they express this belonging daily.

## **CHAPTER 4: DEFINING AND EXPRESSING BELONGING**

This chapter begins with an overview of how participants define belonging in their own words. Rather than impose my own definition, I posed open-ended questions to participants about their understanding of the term belonging and what it means to them, and how they construct and maintain this belonging in their daily lives. Responses reflected the importance of being accepted as members of a community while also retaining their own individuality. Participants were then asked to discuss where and how they experience belonging the most. The structure of this chapter follows the themes based on my coding and qualitative analysis. These experiences of belonging fell within two categories. The first included acts of individual expression, from the way they communicate in Spanish, to the food they eat and their participation in local cultural events. The second category referred to how belonging is maintained through ongoing relationships with others, beginning at an early age with their parents and later with fellow peers in college and university in Central American-themed courses and student-led campus groups. Both of these categories helped participants to maintain strong connections to their ethnic heritage and differentiate them from other Latino ethnic groups. Participants also shared how these individual expressions and mutual relationships could lead to feelings of discrimination and exclusion, both within their ethnic community and from non-Central American Latinos. While most of these discussions centered on in-person interactions, participants did share how these expressions would intersect to their experiences on social media. Overall, their responses were helpful in shedding light on topics like the importance of voice and representation, two factors which would go on to play a large role in later discussions on immigration and social media.

### **Defining Belonging**

While participants gave a wide variety of answers to what belonging means to them, there were certain common themes that were consistent across all responses. First, belonging was defined as an unspoken bond that binds participants to a community. Emma is a 22-year-old who was raised mostly in South Gate and Santa Fe Springs just to the south of Los Angeles. She says that belonging means being accepted, whether it's to a family or another group of people and being able to understand and relate to them. Andres, also 22 with a mother from El Salvador and a father from Nicaragua, feels that belonging is a sense of connection with people even if you don't know them. For Victoria aged 26, it means you're a part of something and not feeling alone; this was exactly how she felt when she attended high school near the El Salvador Corridor area of Los Angeles and the teachers, counselors, and even the principals looked like her. In her current work as a counselor, she feels it is very important thing to make others feel comfortable and to let them know that they too are not alone. Carmen, aged 23, feels that it is the strength of these bonds within a group, rather than the size of the group itself, that defines belonging. "It can just be a few [people] and you just feel like you belong because you can talk to them about anything, and you know they're there for you." Isabel, a 19-year-old and one of eight siblings, feels that one should be able to fully immerse themselves in a community and not feel ashamed; rather, it should feel like being home.

For others, belonging had a more complex meaning. There was a strong desire to be a member of a group but not at the expense of one's independence. Twenty-year-old David for example defines belonging as having a place in a community that allows one to be an individual. "I think belonging is more of like knowing that people understand where you come from and what your challenges and what your success has been and being able to support one another." Daniela, 26, likewise feels that a community should accept one's differences as much as their

similarities. “I think I would define belonging as I guess feeling accepted or feeling like you have a role in the community, and just not feeling singled out or feeling like, despite you know, having a connection or friendship or some sort of relationship. That you're not seen for what makes you different.” For Lucas, belonging was a bit more complicated. The 24-year-old thought long about the question before answering, “I guess I like to be very independent and never really thought about belonging somewhere.” He went on to add that he was trying to strengthen that bond with the Guatemalan community, yet he doesn't feel he can fully belong having not lived through the same experiences as his parents who migrated to the United States. But as he admits, “I want to belong somewhere, but I feel like I never really belong anywhere.” Miguel, 26, also expanded on this sentiment by explaining how belonging comes from a place deep inside many children of immigrants who simply want to be accepted. “It's like in your soul or whatever it may be. It's just like this feeling within you that you just don't fit in, or you're just not accepted. And it feels like if the world were just to go quiet and all you could feel was like “you,” it's like that emotion within you. Like I have my family, I know who I am but at the end like, we're social beings you know, so we want to be accepted. We want to belong to group.” Miguel suggests that what's needed is to find one's individuality and their need to belong to a group, which for children of immigrants can be difficult when dealing with expectations. “You gotta figure that out for your own and be comfortable in like the grey areas of your culture. And so it's very much like having to mold yourself, and like belonging I guess to yourself or wherever it is that you may be.”

Finally, some participants noted that belonging for them is distinct from identity. As Victoria noted, “I think that just because I might identify with one thing doesn't necessarily mean I might belong there, you know.” She described feeling out of place as an L.A. native when she



joined an association of Latinx students at a university in San Diego. Lucas as mentioned previously doesn't feel like he fully belongs to that community despite identifying as a Guatemalan American. As he stated, "it'd be nice to come back and like feel like home, you know?" Daniela thought it was a tough question to answer. She argued that one can belong amongst a group of people who don't share the same identity. But when one's identity is under attack (even when it is not personally direct at them), it's difficult to feel fully belonging with such a group. Andres sees identity as more about one's personal interests rather than the collective's interests. He gives the example of his love for electronic dance music which is less known among the Salvadoran community like bachata or another genre of Latin music. Diego spoke about how his belonging to the Guatemalan community is where he engages with the cultural traits with his family, while his identity reflects how he expresses that culture publicly. "Basically, I can go out and show to everyone that this is who I am," he explained.

These responses on identity and belonging would become a constant theme in our conversations, as participants acknowledged that merely identifying as part of group was often not enough to attain membership. This would be true not only in regard to the state, but for ethnic categories like Central American or Latino/a/x. Overall the responses showed that belonging was defined by maintaining ongoing relationships based on mutual care and respect, and acceptance of one's unique traits. After sharing their own definition of belonging, respondents next shared the ways they feel belonging the most.

## **Language**

The importance of the Spanish language and its relationship to participants' sense of belonging came up several times over the course of the interviews. While there was some discussion about language within online spaces, most participants focused exclusively on face-

to-face interactions. They cited numerous examples of how particular vocabulary words, accents, and linguistic traits unique to countries like Guatemala or El Salvador helped them establish a sense of belonging to the Central American community. For Andres, communicating in a shared Spanish is an opportunity to initiate conversation when meeting someone with a similar background for the first time. As he put it, “I have never seen you before, I don’t know who you are, but yet just that one piece of information has somehow bridged any gap.” Emma viewed language as a way to make her feel like a welcomed member of a community, and in doing so, making that community feel larger. “When it comes to *guatemaltecos* here I feel a little bit more accepted because if I meet someone and they recognize my accent and the way that I talk in Spanish, automatically they’ll be like, ‘*de donde eres?*’ “Where are you from? I can hear that accent, are you from El Salvador? Are you from Honduras?’ It’s exciting for me and I think for others to meet other Central Americans because there’s not a lot of us here, or that we get to meet. It feels a little bit bigger of a community.”

Language was also an important factor with how participants chose to self-identify. Emma and Victoria both specifically identify as *Chapinas*, the nickname for Guatemalans. In both instances, the decision to self-identify as *chapina* originated from the culture handed down from their parents. As Emma explained, “Something that really pushed me towards identifying as a *chapina* is that both my parents have such strong passion for their country. Not that they haven’t let me identify as an American, but they’ve instilled that love for their land that I’ve been able to adopt it as my own.” Victoria also noted that “Now I like to just say that I’m *chapina* and I’m American. I don’t know anything else besides being an American, but I do carry like the heritage of my parents, which over the years I’ve taken a lot more seriously.”

Participants also discussed the importance of using specific Spanish words or phrases common in Central America in everyday conversation. For some, this was important as popular slang words they would hear from their Mexican American peers held little meaning for them. “There was a lot of slang they used that I didn’t use growing up like *chingona* and *Chicana*,” recalled Carmen. “I don’t identify as *Chicana* so I didn’t feel comfortable [with] things like that. I didn’t grow up with that kind of slang and so I guess I just felt like I didn’t belong.” Instead, their language became a way for participants to differentiate themselves from other Latino ethnic groups. Miguel demonstrated how words with one meaning in Mexico have a completely different meaning in Guatemala. “*Culiche* I know in Mexico it’s used to describe someone from Culiacán but in Guatemala it means like ass or butt. *Chucho* for us refers to a dog or *un tamal pequeño*, but I think in Mexico it’s like a nickname for someone. A straw I think the common term in Mexico is *popote*, but in Guatemala *se le dice pajilla*. *Hacer cola* like to make a line *se le dice fila* in Guatemala.”

Participants also spoke fondly of the unique linguistic difference in the Spanish they grew up hearing and speaking. There were a number of references to the *voseo*, or the second person singular, and its subject pronoun *vos*. Common in many Central American countries as well as in Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay, the *voseo* differs from the more common *tuteo* form spoken in Mexico or the Caribbean which uses the subject pronoun *tú*. Each subject pronoun requires a different conjugated verb; for example, the phrase ‘you are’ in the *tuteo* translates to *tú eres*, while the *voseo* is *vos sos*. While the *voseo* declined in Spain in the 17<sup>th</sup> century it remained in use in the Spanish Americas, where the invading conquistadors used it to address Indians and mestizos in a display of superiority over them (Torrejón, 1986; Villegas, 1963). Over time countries that maintained a close relationship with Spain though the presence

of viceroyalties like Mexico preserved the Spanish grammar like the *tuteo*, while those countries isolated from the crown like those in the Central American isthmus retained the *voseo* (Benavides, 2003). Today the *tuteo* is still the predominant form of Spanish heard and spoken in the Los Angeles; in most American Spanish classes, the *tuteo* is taught while the *voseo* is ignored almost entirely (Ramsey, 2019). But the *voseo* has become a distinct trait of Central American identity and solidarity in the United States (Rivera-Mills, 2011; Woods & Rivera-Mills, 2012), and its continued practice represents “an immediate connection to people [and] an affirmation of space” (Alvarenga, 2016b). The love of the *voseo* by many members of the community can be seen in one viral video shared on Twitter and Instagram under the #centralamericantwitter hashtag. Wearing an El Salvador soccer jersey, the journalist Daniel Alvarenga filmed himself reading a list of common conjugated verbs using the *voseo* and invited other Central Americans to do likewise (2020).

The spoken *voseo* is easily recognizable according to Andres. “Sometimes when I’m in public or I hear somebody talking and I’ll hear them on the phone, you can kind of tell how like when they use specific words like *vos* and then you can tell they’re Salvadorian<sup>1</sup>.” He also described its unique sound that features a high-pitched, rising accent at the end of each verb. As Miguel explained: “... *se le pone* emphasis on like the ending of the word, even if it doesn't carry the accent at the end. They just put the emphasis, like *vení*. There's an emphasis towards the end, it sounds a little high pitched, like *vení pa' aca*, or *mirá*, you know.” Miguel argued that the continued use of the *voseo* today is more than just a grammatical or linguistic difference between Central America and the rest of Latin America. Rather it has become “...a point of pride for a lot

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<sup>1</sup> Participants would use Salvadorian, Salvadorean and Salvadoran interchangeably (Alvarenga, 2016a)

of people because that's the way that you communicate and that's the way that you establish your identity.”

Language can also be a way to navigate between different communities. Andres is a member of the LGBTQ community in addition to identifying as Salvadoran and has experienced homophobia and feelings of being ostracized among other Central Americans who view homosexuality as something wrong or immoral. To navigate between these two identities he will often code-switch, acting and speaking a certain way when he’s around other Central Americans versus a different way around members of the LGBTQ community. Like other gay men who code-switch to pass as heterosexual, Andres can reduce the risk of harm to himself without having to reject his identity as a member of the LGBTQ community (Kanuha, 1999). Andres does credit social media with helping him meet other Queer Latinos of Salvadoran ethnicity. “Sometimes on some social media apps that I use you know I’ll see somebody who is maybe like bisexual or gay and they [are] are Salvadorian right? So when I meet with those people or when I connect with those people there’s a sense of connection.”

For others, there was an acknowledgement that speaking Central American Spanish alone was not enough to gain full acceptance within their communities. Participants shared how their accents would mark them as non-native speakers when visiting Central America, which leads them to feeling that they don’t quite belong. David explained the conflict based on his visits to Guatemala. “...When I’ve travelled to Guatemala I have full-on conversations with strangers in public, and they instantly tell my Spanish isn’t native. And for that reason I do kind of feel like, yes, I'm Guatemalan, but I don't [belong].” Carmen feels a stronger sense of belonging visiting family in El Salvador, but she also feels that they do not fully accept her.” I do think that because they know that I was born in the U.S., they know there's that difference. Like they might make

fun of me for my Spanish sometimes. I mean there's certain words that maybe are a little difficult to pronounce or I mispronounce it, so in that sense I guess like I know I'm still not one of them 100%." Miguel, who was born in East Los Angeles but was actually raised in Guatemala from ages 2-5, has become aware not only about how much his Spanish has changed, but also how native Guatemalans and U.S.-born children of immigrants view each other:

Having gone to Guatemala 9-10 years ago and it just felt that my Spanish wasn't as good. I didn't have the accent anymore. I carried myself differently you know, like being socialized here in the U.S. And it was like my personalities, or who I've become clashed with my idea of Guatemala and the people there. And their ideas and their interpretations of what you know, U.S.- born Latinos are or should be clashed with their preconceptions. This is not something that's said out loud, but it's just like OK, you feel it. These are your family but at the same time they just look at you differently. They have like different expectations, and it seems like what you say isn't really being heard.

Isabel manages to capture the sentiment of not feeling fully belonging to either culture in a very succinct way. Despite telling her siblings who were raised in El Salvador that she identifies as Salvadorian American, she finds they don't see her as one of them. "I'm not Salvadorian enough for them, and then I obviously here I'm not the typical white American enough. So I feel like I'm kind of stuck in the middle." The feeling of being stuck between cultures reflects the tension that many children of immigrants face who struggle to feel accepted in their birth country and in their parents' culture. Growing up in the United States they will often assimilate out of a desperate need to be accepted, yet may be accused of "becoming American" by their parents' culture (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Yet factors like their race or ethnicity may block them from being accepted as American, leaving them feeling

unaccepted by either culture. Kao and Huang use the phrase bicultural straddling to describe the ongoing process by children of immigrants to balance between these two cultures (2015). But this process can produce stress for children of immigrants, including a chronic sense of guilt for letting their parents down for being too American (Kohli, 2021).

While language was a way for participants to express their own cultural identity and to forge connections and a sense of belonging with others in the community, it also led to feelings of exclusion here in the U.S. For many participants, their own language was often used against them by their non-Central American school peers, particularly those of Mexican heritage, to bully, insult, and otherwise make them feel othered. As Isabel recalled, “Being at school a lot of the times I had people tell me... ‘oh you’re Salvadorian. So are you a *cerota*?’” The word *cerote* or *cerota*, which literally translates to excrement or more colloquially, shit or piece of shit, can be used playfully among friends in countries like Guatemala and Honduras (Sánchez Rodríguez & Rivera Garay, 2019), but is often used in a derogatory manner when said by non-Central Americans. Carmen also recalled being called a *cerota* in school as part of an ongoing tension between Mexican and Salvadoran students. Miguel recalled being made fun of in school because of his Guatemalan accent, and over time lost that accent in favor of a Mexican one:

Back then I had the little *chapín* accent, so I would go to school and I only spoke Spanish. So yeah, it was kind of difficult getting along with other kids as they would make fun of me, because although there's a heavy Central American presence in MacArthur Park, there's a lot of Mexican culture and heritage and descendants. And although kids are from Central American descent, they don't develop the little speech accent, and then I would get bullied for that because that sounded funny. I sounded weird to them but little by little I picked up English and then the Spanish that's spoken here is

the one with the Mexican accent, so I lost my accent as well, and I guess I kind of picked up theirs. So a lot of people assume that I'm Mexican because of the way I speak Spanish. This type of bullying did not merely end after childhood, as Miguel demonstrated how this discrimination from language followed him as an adult to the workplace:

There's just those words that you just don't use or you're just aware, and you're like 'OK, I know I'm around people from Mexico so you know I can't use them, or it's a way to like identify you, you know? And so once they know, 'oh you speak a certain way,' they'll treat you a certain way. And it happens a lot in workplaces. I've worked in warehouses, and then coming in and people would ask you, 'where are you from?' And then based off of that, they'll treat you a certain way without ever really getting to know you.

The impact of hearing these insults led some participants to hide their identity growing up. Carmen chose not state her ethnicity publicly, saying "I just never felt comfortable saying, 'I'm Salvadoran...' It's like an uncomfortable situation to be in. Yeah, I guess I wasn't like proud or whatever." David, who estimates that his school was 95% Mexican and only 3-4% Central American, simply elected at a young age to keep his identity a secret. "When people would ask me like, and this is 10-year-old me, where are your parents from, I'm like 'oh, they're from Guatemala,' but then I would never go more into detail. So I always kind of kept it in the back because it was either A, people weren't too familiar, or B, kind of the stereotypes behind it." Central Americans in Los Angeles have often adopted Mexican Spanish in order to fit in and avoid discrimination (Bermudez, 2008). Hiding one's identity will be discussed later in the chapter under the theme of parental relationships.

While participants mostly shared experiences with discrimination in face-to-face encounters, they also spoke of racist or discriminatory language they would encounter online.



David felt that the anonymity provided by the internet, known as the online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004), is why he is more likely to encounter discrimination against him and the community: “I do see some concern of the resentment people have against Central Americans... while people are hiding behind a mask, the digital mask, they are releasing these like misconceptions, these beliefs, and it is a bit concerning.” Isabel saw how the election of Donald Trump also allowed explicit racism to become more acceptable online. “When [Trump] came into office he really like made the racists feel comfortable being racist” She also discussed the types of comments she will see on Twitter posts or shared video clips. “A lot of times I'll find other Trump supporters saying a lot of mean things as well, and they're agreeing with him. And then I'll see stuff like, ‘oh immigrants complain so much, why don't they just go back to their country?’ And they just make me feel like, even in the media, these people perpetuating hate.”

David talked about how biased reporting on the immigrant caravans from Central America fed disinformation and stereotypes on migrants while ignoring the root causes of poverty and political instability in the region:

The terminology people were throwing out, sometimes it's misinformed. ‘Oh, all Guatemalans should go back,’ or ‘send all these scum back to their homelands.’ With how the caravan was kind of reported on, unfortunately, biased reporting really affected the reasoning behind of it, and they just kind of talked about the now versus the actual history. When you see on public pages, especially on Facebook, people comment, ‘oh if the economy is garbage it's their problem,’ you know. But then they don't come to realize that you look back a couple of decades, you see Chiquita and how they basically got the CIA to overthrow the government, and basically since then it's been on a tumble. And realizing that people ignore that fact really has made me challenge people sometimes.

Miguel however has given up on challenging people online as he feels that discussion leads nowhere quickly. “I don't make comments as much anymore just because it's tiring having to explain to people. Sometimes conversations just devolve into like arguments you know, like me again trying to explain to friends of Mexican descent that although they're also experiencing their hardships, these hardships are kind of felt more you know by Central Americans.... so it's draining you know...expressing my identity and trying to make myself visible in like Mexican-dominated spaces.”

This final comment shows how even in online spaces Central American voices are often ignored in favor of other ethnic groups. Much of the problem stems from ethnic categories and labels that fail to capture the existence of Central American communities. The term ‘Latino’ as Miguel states “erases other people’s identities, other people’s nationalities and cultures. Yeah, it's like an amalgamation, Hispanic and Latino turn into this giant blob. It just absorbed different cultures.” Diego explained how the misuse of ethnic labels like “Latino immigrants” or “the Latino population” in online debates around immigration can have serious consequences for the Central American community. “I feel the term Latino is a little too broad...like, what type of Latinos are we talking about? We talking about like Mexicans, Central Americans or South Americans...The way everything is addressed, the way how things are worded can really like have a huge impact on such communities.” The effect explained Diego is that he is shut out in certain areas like politics or society. And when these phrases go unquestioned, argues Diego, people will start to think that “this is who we are, this is how they describe us, I guess.” Victoria explained how this problem actually begins early in life, when one fills out forms requiring race to be specified when the provided options don’t capture one’s identity or background:

As a kid you learn like how when you're filling out like an application for something, it's always like Hispanic, Latino, but for some reason it'll say White on there but you're not White. That never made sense to me, you know. Why am I putting that I'm White when I'm not? And I was taking it more literal in terms of like, that's not the color of my skin, I'm like a caramel, like a light caramel color. I just never really understood that.

Maricela has noted some of the hypocrisy around the adoption of supposedly inclusive labels like Latinx or *la raza*, even if she identifies herself that way "I feel people are like, 'oh, *viva la raza*,' but yet again there's a lot of problems not only just between Mexico and Central America, but I know that Dominicans and Puerto Ricans also don't get along very well. So there's a lot of problems even within the Latinx community so I find it kind of hypocritical, all the like, "oh my god, *viva Latinos* ' and all that." David discussed the hypocrisy of how a city like Los Angeles claims to support diversity through token gestures while failing to promote people and communities. "The city promotes itself, or even the country promotes itself [as diverse], but in reality it's more of a [saying] than what's actually being done," he argues. He goes on to ask "is it more diverse just because we want to say that it's diverse, like we have like a picture of all the flags of where people come from? Or is it actually promoting diversity and really advocating for it, where we accept people from all different cultures?"

For Isabel though the problem comes back to Mexican culture still dominating the image of U.S. Latinos:

I feel like definitely because in the media or even in person a lot of people exclude Latin America in general. People just assume only Mexicans exist which is very ignorant. I feel sometimes uncomfortable because people just completely erase all other cultures that exist, and a lot of times I'll hear comments like, 'oh, only Mexicans do that.' ... I don't

have anything against them of course. I just feel like people should be more aware that there's other Latin American countries, especially in Central America.

The importance of language in the lives of participants addressed the issue of belonging central to study, and while there were some examples involving social media, for the most part language was discussed in face-to-face encounters. While their responses may have gone beyond the specific aim of this study, it revealed the importance for participants to maintain a connection to their culture through language, even at the expense of bullying and exclusion. While previous studies show that children of Central American immigrants will favor English (Menjívar, 2002) or adopt Mexican Spanish (Lavadenz, 2008), participants here emphasized the importance of maintaining Central American Spanish, either through the *voseo* or by using everyday words and phrases. Participants choosing to continue speaking their Spanish despite discrimination and bullying reveals just how important they see it as a way to maintain a sense of belonging. While some admitted to hiding their identities when they were younger, at the present it seems that participants are reclaiming their cultural heritage. The other aspect of language was participants' recognition that labels like Latino or Latinx are still associated with Mexican and Chicano identity in the United States, resulting in an erasure of their Central American heritage. Participants expressed concern that erasure will not only devalue their own culture (by favoring Mexican vocabulary and grammar) but also on the immigration debate, which I discuss later affects migrants from Central America the most.

### **Cultural Heritage/Markers**

In addition to language, cultural artifacts and symbols like clothing and food also played a large role for participants in maintaining a sense of belonging with their local communities and their parents' countries of origin. Diego spoke fondly about his Guatemalan *bolsa tipica*, a

traditional backpack which he described as one of his strongest bonds as a Guatemalan American. By wearing it publicly with pride, he can challenge stereotypes about what it means to be American or Latino (two labels he often finds constricting) and to “show that I am different from others and I can continue to be myself.” Andres described the joy of seeing people wearing sports jerseys with the Salvadorian flag outside in the summertime, with its shade of “very popping, very revealing” blue. Seeing these symbols on social media also represent opportunities to reach out to others in the community. Emma noted how just seeing the image of the Guatemalan flag on social media creates a sense of connection. “Whenever I see like flags on Instagram bios or Twitter bios, there's certain people that will put a Guatemalan flag and I'll recognize it and it makes you feel a little bit more warm towards them because you think, ‘oh they're from there too.’ So it sparks up that conversation of, ‘oh, where are you from, what part? Maybe we're neighbors?’ So yeah, the language that I’ll recognize or the flag, it sparks up that sense of belonging.” Miguel also talked about how the algorithms behind his social media accounts would suggest friends based the Guatemalan flag in his bio, and how it would encourage him to make contact with those people. “YouTube and Facebook and Instagram pick up on the fact that I would put the Guatemalan flag on my bio, and so it would show me accounts with the flag. And it's always like, OK, ‘so and so is from Long Beach or from L.A. or from Washington. It's like, oh shit, this is someone I could follow, like just briefly hop online and make conversation. I would just follow them to see what life was like for them in other places and sometimes make conversations.” By adding images of the Guatemalan flag to find like-minded people online, participants display a keen understanding of how these social media platforms and their hidden algorithms can be used to their advantage.

Food was by far the most commonly discussed cultural marker. For Daniela, discussing food with other Central Americans was an opening to share common experiences. “When I meet someone, for some reason it comes up that you’re Salvadorian or Central American, I think some of the first things we talk about is stuff like food, or things that are pretty common in the culture. And then I think mostly when it’s Salvadorians, we’re able to talk more about feeling like we don’t belong sometimes, or shared experiences where we experienced discrimination.” As with language, the way that Central American food is distinct from Mexican foods was important for participants, as David demonstrated by describing the difference in the type of cuisine he grew up eating as opposed to his non-Central American peers. “I use this example, it’s very important for me,” he explained. “It’s which type of *tamal*. Like there’s like corn *tamal* and the *tamal de platano*, but like you know, like that example, the *hojas verdes*. And like I tell people, what do you eat for the holidays? I tell them the *tamal* and the first thing they give as an example is the corn husk...” David is referring to how *tamales* from Central America differ from those from Mexico. While Mexican *tamales* are wrapped in corn husks, those from Central America are typically wrapped in banana or *platano* (plantain) leaves. Guatemalan tamales also tend to be larger and spicier, and those from El Salvador use shredded beef or chicken, green olives, capers and egg (Apodaca, 1991). Yet as David showed, a *tamal* is still associated with Mexican cuisine while those from Central America are not as well known outside the community. While David admits that this wasn’t a huge deal, he also acknowledged that one of the reasons he downplayed and hid his ethnic identity as a youth was in part because his culture wasn’t valued.

Emma also shared a similar frustration as she recalled trying to share common foods with non-Central American peers:

Honestly, it was a little frustrating [growing up surrounded by non-Central Americans] just because whenever I would want to talk about certain things about my culture that I knew from my parents, nobody understood what I was referring to. I guess just being a kid you just felt left out in a way. It was nice too because all my best friends when I was little and growing up, they all showed me different things from Mexico so I appreciated that as well, especially the food. But it would have been nice to have someone that if I told them, ‘oh, my favorite food is *garnachas*,’ which is something from Guatemala and then they can relate to that and say ‘yes I’ve tried that’ or ‘yes that plate is so good.’ It would have been super nice to relate to someone instead of them just kind of looking at you like, ‘what are you talking about?’

Their frustration echo Isabel’s prior statement about how Mexican culture still dominating what it means to be Latino at the expense of Central American culture. She noted how foods like *quesadillas* and *horchata* are still assumed to be Mexican when in fact each is used differently in El Salvador, where a *quesadilla* is a sweet pastry and the local *horchata* drink is made using different ingredients.

Festivals and parades in Los Angeles neighborhoods with a large Central American population were also important cultural markers. Andres referenced the El Salvador Community Corridor within the Pico-Union area and MacArthur Park where Independence parades take place every August and September. One of the main events for David was the Central American fair that would take place on Figueroa or in Englewood by the Forum, which he described as “the real connection I had because a lot of people would come, a lot of vendors would come in with traditional foods.” For Miguel, who spent time growing up in Guatemala between the ages of 2 and 5, being around heavy Central American presence in the MacArthur Park neighborhood

meant he didn't feel so homesick. "You can drive down Sixth Street, Alvarado, Pico, or Temple," he said, "and you can see stores and restaurants selling all kinds of Central American cuisine. And then just the people too you know, they look familiar just like they did in Guatemala." Miguel also spoke warmly of the night markets that take place in the Westlake neighborhood which feature over fifty vendors, many of whom are native Guatemalans:

I studied in Laverne [a small city approximately 30 miles east of Los Angeles]. I felt out of place, but I would come home every weekend because L.A. would give me that sense of belonging, you know? The people, like the buildings, the street vendors, like my friends, *mis conocidos*. You know, get a sense of belonging [from] that aspect and also your family gives you that sense of belonging.... [On] Friday Saturday and Sunday nights, you'll see like the streets are full of street vendors, and you know they look distinctly Central American, like their features. They've been there for years, ever since I was a little kid, and so from Union Avenue to Alvarado Street on both sides, street vendors selling Central American cuisine, and then you see their faces and there's kids working the food stands. And it just reminds me of home, it reminds me of the people at the border, so it's something that is not easy to forget. And I chose not to forget.

Social media has allowed some participants to maintain a connection in addition to these physical events. Lucas, who grew up in the Westlake area, spoke about joining a local community organization as a teenager where he would perform prayer dances in traditional clothing. While he says he has drifted from his roots since college, he now uses websites like YouTube to learn more about the history of the region and even take *k'iche* lessons. Isabel spoke of connecting with her college classmates over social media about upcoming parades and festivals in the Westlake neighborhood. More than just a way to keep in touch with friends, these



engagements over social media allow her to maintain her cultural roots which she hopes to one day share with her children. “If it wasn't for [social media] I feel like I wouldn't know so much.” I feel like social media has [helped me learn] a lot of my culture. So I feel like social media in general, I've learned a lot from there, like not just the food but I get to know a lot more about the news and it makes me think about how in the future and when I have a family hopefully, I definitely want them to know and be proud of their roots.”

Yet as with language, cultural markers were also ways to keep participants feeling othered. Emma discussed a feeling of not belonging based on her visits to Guatemala based on how she dressed. “I don't feel rejected by them,” she clarifies, “but I definitely feel a lot different around them because for some reason they just sense that you're not from there, whether it's by the stuff that you have or the way that you dress, they just know for some reason they just know that you're not from there. So trying to fit in whenever you're there, it's a little bit of a challenge.” Despite wanting to fit in visiting sites like the Mercado Central in Guatemala City, she avoids wearing items like an Apple Watch, flashy shoes, or other items unavailable there to not stand out or be treated differently. Other participants experienced direct attacks based on their cultural markers. Isabel spoke how other children would bully her using a popular Salvadoran dish as an insult. “They'd tell me really vulgar stuff, or they make fun of me. Or I had people telling me, ‘oh, shut up, you're a *pupusa*.’” Daniela talked about seeing more abuse online against the Salvadoran community prior to international soccer matches, including images of the flag of El Salvador being set on fire:

Whenever there's a Mexican soccer game, I feel like that's when I see all the tweets start like, ‘oh Salvadorians...they're not even playing, they don't even make it to the World Cup,’ or just things like that. It always turns into talking crap about El Salvador and then

you see images online of them burning the flag and it's just unwarranted... And the last time it happened, I think it was last summer around July, I saw that kind of response and I just tweeted back because I saw one of my close friends doing it, and I was like, I think El Salvador has more important things to worry about right now than a soccer game.

Miguel also spoke about another type of disrespect towards Central American flags at protests against child separations at the border. “There was a protest in LA, I think Chicano organizers took the lead. And then you know, seeing the Mexican flags at the protest. The majority of the kids are of Central American descent or are coming from Central American countries, and so you know like narratives kind of get pushed back. It's not the same people I get that, but Mexico is also deporting and criminalizing Central American immigrants and have actually received funding from the U.S. to strengthen their southern border.” The omission of the flag is also an act that demonizes the community by erasing Central Americans from an issue that primarily impacts them.

Like language, cultural markers were important ways for participants to express their own cultural heritage, learn about news and events, and maintain relationships with others in the community. And they also represent an opportunity to reclaim their heritage, whether through their choice of clothing, the food they consumer, and the events they attend. Social media did play more of a role with participants going online to learn a new language or keep in contact with peers. This suggests that participants see social media as a better opportunity to engage in the self-presentation of their cultural and ethnic identities; placing the Guatemalan or Salvadoran flag in one’s profile both publicly announces their identity and puts them in contact to meet others. But while there were also more examples of discrimination with items like country flags and food being disparaged or attacked, participants still chose to identify with these markers. To

understand more about how participants arrived at this sense of belonging today, the next categories look at how their connection to their ethnic heritage was formed by their parents.

### **Parental Relationships**

As children of immigrants, the relationships between participants and their parents were often cited as their first introduction a sense of home and belonging. Participants would often look to their parents to help build a connection to their countries of origin, from preserving cultural traditions here in the United States to accompanying them on trips back to Central America. Yet some participants spoke of frustrations with parents who either elected not to continue those traditions, or who declined to speak with them about the reasons why they migrated (though some participants theorized that past discrimination as newly arrived migrants might explain why). There were also instances of participants having political disagreements with their parents over many of the present-day problems facing those countries in the region, suggesting a generational shift in how children are engaging critically with issues like immigration and colonialism.

Participants began by discussing their present relationships with their families. Andres maintains an ongoing relationship with his Salvadoran family thanks to online messaging platforms which allows them to stay connected across distances. “My mom’s side of the family here in L.A. and even in El Salvador, we have a lot of interactions whether it’s through phone call, WhatsApp, or actually physically going to El Salvador and seeing them the few times that I’ve gone. I feel more Salvadorian if that makes sense.” As his father’s side of the family is less involved, he identifies less as Nicaraguan. Victoria credited her parents for insisting that she and her brother speak Spanish growing up, which motivated her to pursue Spanish as part of her undergrad degree. The loss of parents from participants’ lives meant a broken connection to their

culture. For Lucas however, the absence of his parents today (his mother passed away and his father left the family many years ago) has left him feeling disconnected from his cultural heritage. “I kind of drifted apart once I started college but now trying to regain or go back to my roots could be kind of difficult because I feel like life gets in the way. And then it's hard to try to find that community in the area or if I have time for to have like an extra thing on my back.”

When asked if he could regain that sense of belonging by re-visiting a cultural group in MacArthur Park he attended as a youth, he replied “not really,” acknowledging that it doesn't feel the same as family. “I don't have family here,” he explained. “I mean, it felt really nice to be part of a group and I feel like at that point I did feel like I belonged but ever since I lost that connection like I haven't really felt that.” For Miguel the one family member that did represent a bridge to his Guatemalan culture was his grandmother. “My grandma recently passed away and for me, that was the biggest connection not only to my family but also to Guatemala and the culture. And I felt like I lost a lot of history there, not only like what it was like for her to live in Guatemala but also like family history. And I'm just like, fuck, now it's just really up to me like to define who I am and not really have like a source.”

While relationships with parents and extended family were important, there were hints of a generational divide in terms of conflicting opinions about social justice issues in Central America and the U.S. Andres demonstrated just how much his political views differ from his mother's based on their reaction to online posts about El Salvador's President Nayib Bukele:

Some of my cousins, they'll post stuff about the coronavirus, like what's going in El Salvador [which] has a lot of strict sanctions around social distancing right now at the moment. So I'll see them share like different things about what they're doing in *el municipal*, like how the businesses are closing or they have curfews. And I think even

yesterday I saw an article about the gangs, right? Like the Mara and everything and how Bukele has really enforced a strict policing force within the prisons. Well I've noticed that a lot of my ideas or at least my beliefs are more on the progressive side. And I know the way my parents react to it is sometimes a little bit different. My mom's just like, 'OK well, that's really good that they're you know, being strict and everything,' and I'll be more like 'well, yeah like that's OK, but you know it might have some repercussions in terms of the long term physical and psychological abuse, of police regiment, and oppression.' So I'll have that sentiment and my parents will be like, 'well, that's not important.' So we'll have both sides but in person I try not to have those discussions because you know, often times sometimes they lead to political arguments.

Diego feels that his parents haven't thought critically about the reasons that compelled them to migrate north. He cites civil wars that in the region and other social and political issues that forced them to leave their home, something he doesn't think his parents' generation has considered enough. "I feel like the reason why many Latin Americans migrate to the U.S., especially Central Americans is because of poverty but many of us, including our parents, don't really question, or don't really [consider] too much the aspect of poverty. For example, where did poverty start? How did it start, you know? And to what context was poverty used for?" Diego feels that parents have not considered the possibility that they were victims.

Another frustration were the several examples participants feeling that their parents didn't expose them enough to their cultural heritage. Victoria wished she had grown up eating more traditional Guatemalan food, as she believes her mother became too acculturated to American culture. "My mom, she didn't always cook traditional Guatemalan food. She actually doesn't even make *tamales* which is like super weird to everyone growing up with a mom like

her. They were like, [‘does she] make *tamales*?’ And I’m like ‘no, she doesn’t make *tamales* but she makes *ponche*,’ so it was like well, at least we have that...it was more of you know, *platano frito* and the *frijoles volteados* and all of that, and with your *pan* and that was it. Everything else she said that she just randomly threw in a pot and that was it.” Isabel also regrets that her mother exposed her less to traditional Salvadoran cooking. “I wish that my mom could have immersed us more. I’m constantly like ‘mom, I want to learn how to make *quesadillas*, how come you never cook *pupusas*? You make *pozole*, you make like *chilaquiles* but how come you never make *pupusas*?’ And she’s like, ‘oh I don’t care to want to learn how to make food from over there.’ Isabel’s frustration is that *pozole* and *chilaquiles* are traditional Mexican dishes, unlike *quesadillas* and *pupusas* which are popular examples of Salvadoran cuisine.

While Isabel did not hide her disappointment with her mother not sharing more of her Salvadorean culture with her, she felt that discrimination against her family played a role in how her mother became “kind of anti-Salvadorian.” Isabel has noticed that many Central Americans in the U.S. think similarly to her mother. “In my life I don’t really come across a lot of Central Americans, and usually when I do, they’re not very proud.” She goes on to explain saying:

Of course, over here the majority is Latinx but for the most part they are Mexican, and I place like people telling me really mean things about me and my family like to the point that my mom does not like associating herself for being Salvadorian. She said that when she came here people made fun of her accent and she wishes she was born to be Mexican, because again they made fun of her. I feel like that’s been drilled into her brain to the point that like she just wishes she was not associated with it. Like she doesn’t wish to really learn a lot about it, or she doesn’t really talking about back home or anything.

As she herself acknowledged, she also felt the same way growing up. “I was usually hesitant to say, but I would always say it and sometimes get weird looks... but for the most part, there was a point where I wish I was Mexican.” Miguel spoke about his relationship with his mother and how it also left him wanting for a greater connection to his heritage, but he also blames discrimination she from what he called the trauma of crossing the border. “I know from my mom's experience with crossing the border, the coyotes would tell her, don't use [Guatemalan] words because then they'll know; it sounds weird in Mexico, and you might mean something else. Not as an offense but it would just like identify you and then that can lead to problems.” Miguel notes that as a result, his mother “...doesn't have the accent although I hear it sometimes when she speaks with family members from Guatemala. But it doesn't come out naturally anymore.”

This attempt to avoid drawing attention is be common among undocumented Salvadoran migrants will use try to blend in with their fellow Mexican workers and avoid detection from immigration officials (Sorenson, 2013). Woods and Rivera-Mills (Woods & Rivera-Mills, 2012) discuss how some Central American communities can experience linguistic insecurities when ridiculed for not speaking the more common Mexican Spanish. One reason for this ridicule is that the *voseo*, so commonly identified with Central American identity, has a history of being looked down on, in the words of one writer, as an "ignominious ugliness" and "the smallpox of the [Spanish] language" and (Villegas, 1963). These views are examples of linguisticism, which refers to the unequal division of power and resources between groups based on language (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1989). While adopting the *tuteo* does allow for certain economic advantages for Central Americans seeking work in environments dominated by Mexican Spanish, doing so effectively requires the community to wear a “mask” that suppresses

their true identity(Woods & Rivera-Mills, 2012). But in passing as Mexican as a survival strategy, migrants like Miguel's mother are forced as Arias notes, "to adopt an identity that was not truly their own, an identity they were somewhat familiar with, but that they did not master nor act out with the same casualness of gesticulations than if they were simply being themselves" (2003).

Discrimination and the trauma of crossing the border in Miguel's words might also explain why parents would often not discuss the reasons why they chose to move to the United States. Carmen's father told her stories about civil war in Central America, but she didn't learn more about that history until college. "I mean my dad would always tell me like the stories about the civil war but that was just like his stories and things like that, but I learned more about it like in academia." Daniela knows more about the discrimination her father faced crossing the three borders from El Salvador to the U.S. and the racism he encountered when he arrived, though like her mother he doesn't talk about it much. "I feel like my dad isn't...he has emotions and he'll talk about it and say it's really sad, but I feel like he's not expressive. And I definitely think that's something due to the things that he went through and the experience or the trauma, or whatever it may be. And my mom when it comes up...you know it's really sad... we don't talk about it too much." Andres too learned more about historical events like political violence in the region from college courses rather than from older generations of Salvadoreans. "A lot of the history that these countries have faced, my family doesn't really talk about it," he admits. "Nobody really talks about the war because it's something people don't want to talk about.... But of course, it's a history that maybe I should know about? And it's so like, 'oh, how do I connect with that?' So I been, I've done that and gone out of my way to learn about that."



This hesitation on behalf of parents to discuss their experience speaks to the levels of violence that immigrants face in the process of migration, starting from the factors that cause them to leave their country of origin. Families and individuals fleeing their home countries of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala are often escaping violence, sexual assault, and the murder of family members, and they have developed high rates of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (Keller et al., 2017). Migrants also face a number of dangers when crossing *La Bestia* (the Beast), the nickname for the network of freight trains that many migrants ride across Mexico to reach the U.S. border, where they face threats of violence from the gangs that control the routes (Dominguez-Villegas, 2014). Amnesty International has called on Mexico to secure the safety of Central American migrants traversing the country, as many are subject to kidnappings, sexual violence, and extortion (Shetty, 2014). For migrants fortunate enough to reach the United States, they then face threats of violence in their neighborhoods, the fear of deportation, and the lingering impact of trauma (N. Hamilton & Chinchilla, 2001). Acculturating to U.S. culture and trying to adapt to the dominant Mexican culture can be seen as way for the previous generation to ease their transition into a new country. Yet for participants eager to learn more about their ethnic background through everyday cultural practices like food and learning more about their parents' reasons for migrating, this reluctance prevents them from attaining the sense of belonging they seek.

Participants have therefore looked to social media and the internet to regain that connection. With his heritage not discussed at home and his grandmother deceased, Miguel has begun doing research online to learn more about his culture. Emma admits that social media has made it easier for her to maintain connections with others and her cultural roots than her parents.

I think because of social media and what's already in place and what we have, I think it might be a little bit easier than it was for my parents, you know. From what I know, they didn't they don't have many friends or any friends at all then I know of that are Central American or are from Guatemala that live here, and the fact that I'm able to find that in my communities, like in my college community or in my work community, that I'm able to see all these different Central Americans and Guatemalans, I think that in having this social media just makes it a lot more easier.”

In addition to social media, participants identified their college and university experience as another way to connect to their cultural heritage and think more critically about the relationship between the U.S. and Central America, which is the final section of this chapter.

### **Education**

For many participants, attending college or university became an opportunity to gain more knowledge about the region through specialized courses and to connect with other peers of Central American heritage student-led clubs. Meeting students with the same background was especially important as many participants were often one of the few Central Americans in their classes growing up, and as mentioned previously in this chapter, many experienced bullying. Often though there were concerns that not enough courses dedicated to Central American studies, or that student ethnic clubs weren't as prominently advertised or given the same number of resources by the college. When available though, Central American studies programs and clubs were ways to form tight bonds with others, gain valuable insights into the history of the region, and advocate for social justice both here in the U.S. and abroad.

College offered a chance at feeling belonging after feeling ostracized in high school. Prior to college, Carmen described how she was made to feel like an outsider, even from her

friends: “I knew that I was Salvadorian and I grew up with a bunch of Mexicans around me. I think that's what I really started to like, not feel singled out, but definitely it was pointed out to me that I wasn't Mexican, that I was Salvadorian. And that was mostly my friends would start talking crap and say ‘I don't like Salvadorians. Salvadorians are this, Salvadorians are that.’ And then I'd be like ‘I'm Salvadorian,’ and then they'd be like, ‘oh but not you, you're different’ you know?” When she did discover another Central American classmate, she would exclaim “Oh my gosh, we're both from El Salvador, that's so cool! Let's be friends.” It wasn't until college then that Carmen became more aware of her Central American identity. “I think before college I didn't really give much thought into it. I just knew I was Hispanic or a Latina, that's just how I would identify. In high school I know for sure I never shared, ‘oh yeah, I'm Central American.’ I didn't start to embrace what it meant to be Central American until my second year in college when I started finding out more about the history of Central America and El Salvador. And that's when I really embraced who I was.” For Diego, going to college as a Central American Studies major was an opportunity to reclaim his Central American identity after he felt he had become “Mexicanized” during his youth. “I just felt like I had to learn and embrace myself as a Central American, and not just someone that's out of their own shadow I guess you could say. I just feel like the more courses I learned about Central American Studies, the more I was able to slowly and culturally attach back to my own Central American identity and reach a point where I don't have to do or act in a certain way that others do because of their race, you know?” Victoria, who previously expressed her frustration completing forms, discussed how college allowed her to look beyond the limitations of labels that failed to capture her fully. “I think I started gaining a lot more conscious and understanding once I hit college,” she recalled. “And that's when I understood that obviously the way that we're labeled is incorrect, absolutely. But you know it's

OK to put 'Other' [on forms] and it's OK to stand up for yourself. And that was something that I started learning how to do for myself, to assert that no, I'm not Mexican or no, I'm not this or no, I'm not that."

For Andres, taking courses with an emphasis in Central American studies was where he gained a history of political violence in the region. "I've been able to kind of learn about Señor Oscar Romero<sup>2</sup>, the genocides that happened in Guatemala, and just the racism that existed from imperialism." Diego likewise gained a greater understanding about the root causes of poverty and economic instability by citing the forced removal of indigenous lands:

I learned that poverty emerged as a result of the Central American civil wars, it had to do basically with neoliberalism. [The Chiquita banana company] was used to create a sense of economic power to help those U.S. companies stay in power. The way how they did it was by seizing away peasant's lands and taking over lands that you know they were not authorized, and then when those peasants, indigenous and Guatemala populations tried to speak up and challenge those companies, those companies would retaliate through government military power.

Social media was also a tool to maintain contact with friends both during and after college. Isabel was able to connect with fellow peers on social media who share similar backgrounds and experiences. "[At] school I feel like there's small communities of people trying to empower Central Americans, and I found my community through social media. I made a friend who's *Nicaraguense* and we try to empower each other out and we talk about the issues we faced with like xenophobia." Diego still finds it important to maintain contact with his former classmates from Central American Studies over social media even though he is no longer in

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<sup>2</sup> The late archbishop from El Salvador who was assassinated in 1980 for speaking out against poverty and injustice. He was canonized by Pope Francis in 2018.

school. “I try to maintain that communication because ever since I left, I just felt like I needed to maintain my sense of belonging. And the more I continue to maintain that connection with my fellow peers I feel like the more that sense of belonging continues to strengthen. And that is something that I won’t be able to lose.” He also uses social media to share news with his peers on issues relating to the region at present, such as a recent post he shared with others advocating for water as a fundamental right in El Salvador. “I just feel like those posts that we spread to one another would help bring issues that we can discuss and try to find ways on how we can try to challenge those issues in Central America, and also issues that are similar here in L.A. or around the world that would continue to affect Central Americans.”

While these experiences highlight the importance of dedicated courses and departments on campus, access to dedicated Central American studies courses and student clubs are still rare. For Emma, this is due to a lack of representation on campus. “I feel like institutions like [my own], why do they only have a Chicano Department instead of like Latinx Department? I would have loved to take the Central American course, and I feel weird going to take a Chicano class. I feel like it should be more open. And I know that [another school] has a Central American Department and I feel like that's the only other school I've heard that they even have that...so yeah, they just lack a lot of representation and it's really so sad.” Student groups serving Central Americans students are also underfunded compared to other ethnic clubs. Carmen noted that a Central American club had existed on campus but unfortunately had fallen apart due to a lack of board members. When she instead visited a club that claimed to represent the Latino population, she felt uncomfortable as many of the students used Chicana slang that she did not use. Emma felt the same after joining the Chicano group at her university. “On campus we had the Chicano student program and they had a classroom [with] a big sign out the door and I remember talking

to my housemate and she was a part of it, and I was telling her, 'yeah this seems cool.' I signed up for it my freshman year, but I just don't relate to them. I was telling her that it's mainly for the Mexican culture. You know, we both speak Spanish, we have similar cultures, but it just feels so different. So I never really took that club seriously because I couldn't relate to them as much."

This year did she become aware of the existence of a group for Central Americans (she was unable to attend due to an injury, much to her disappointment), but the fact that she wasn't even aware of it suggests that these groups fail to get as resources or funding from the university. Here she talks about just how little support the club gets:

When my friend who is also from Guatemala mentioned [the group], it just made a lot of sense for me to try to get myself involved because it was something that I wanted since my freshman year, but I didn't know existed. So they're not backed up by the campus in general or by our administration. They don't have their own classroom or office where people can go and meet and all that. They just rely on the tabling when we have our events on campus, and a lot of those events happen during class time, or you know all these different factors come in place that a lot of people don't know about it. I told a few friends that I knew that were from El Salvador and Guatemala and they all seem shocked that we had a Central American club on campus.

While participants spoke fondly of their opportunities to take courses on Central American history and culture and meet with others who share a similar background, their experiences also highlight the scarcity of these departments. Even when universities do establish these departments, they are often met with pushback. The UCLA Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies recently expanded its name to include Central American studies after years of discussion, reflecting an increase in enrollment of students of Central American heritage and a

need to address the issues of social justice and immigrant rights facing the community (Bermudez, 2020; Chavez-Martinez, 2019). But the name change was met with criticism online. One writer called it a “blow for Chicano Studies,” and argued that by attaching their name to the department, Central Americans were merely latching on to the “rich culture and unique history” of Chicanismo (Brandon, 2019). The writer went on to state, without evidence, that the name change was only a concession to a few students who complained to professors trying hard to appear woke. Daniela admitted seeing an uptick in abuse online against Salvadorans after the name change at UCLA was announced. A similar controversy occurred when the student group MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicanc de Aztlán) proposed removing the word Chicanc from its name to “connect with our Black, Indigenous, Central American, South American, and Caribbean hermanx” (MEChA National Board, 2019). That name change was also met with outrage, with the UCLA chapter seceding from the National MEChA organization in protest (MEChA de UCLA, 2019). “Just seeing the Internet backlash over it from students and professors, I think that's another time where you know, I feel like I don't belong,” Daniela said. She also discussed how frustrated she was by the name change controversy and how it portrayed her community. “When MEChA was fighting over changing its name, I remember there was a lot of debate and I just got so fed up with it. And I posted something on Instagram like, “we never asked to be included in your org. I think you should instead lift up the space that we've made for ourselves.”

Yet despite these controversies, participants remain committed to the importance of these academic departments and groups. The Central American Studies department at Diego's college may have been small, but as he notes, “we still matter on this campus... We are basically the younger future generation for many Central Americans who don't fit in, but we can also like

empower, make those changes a little bit.” He went to explain what it meant for him to be around peers studying the same courses and sharing a similar background. “I started a sense of belonging among my Central American peers because as we were taking courses to get better, we were starting to learn and share this expression of, this bond, identity, of who we are.” For David, his time as a member of a campus club has strengthened his own identity as a Guatemalan American and inspired him share his culture with others:

There’s a lot of clubs that like even though we’re small group, we’re actively trying to grow and increase awareness. [It] really has allowed me to kind of step out of my comfort zone. I kind of question myself like, what does it mean for me to be Guatemalan? And more importantly I kind of realize like yeah, being Guatemalan is important. And being Central American actually is important. Realize that we're not the little region between North and South America and that there's actually rich culture that has historically been hidden for many, and at least from my perspective it’s allowed me to realize that I should be kind of proud of it and not hide it behind other things, and really just be proud of being Guatemalan and more importantly just tell others about the wonderful culture.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter reviewed how participants define belonging for themselves as well as the spaces where they feel that belonging the most. Based on their responses, participants are actively seeking belonging within their community—both in how they express themselves publicly and in the relationships they maintain with others. But more than just a way of self-expression and membership with a group, participants are also trying to defend a culture that they feel is under threat from acculturation and erasure. In Los Angeles County, those of



Mexican origin account for over 75% of the Latino population compared to just 17% of all Central American countries combined (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Mexican language and culture remain the dominant cultural and political force, often at the exclusion of other ethnic groups. But there have also been long-simmering conflicts between the two communities. Chinchilla and Nora Hamilton (2013) show how modern-day resentments between the Mexican and Central American communities date as far back as the nineteenth century when provinces in Central America declared their independence from Mexico, and still linger today as undocumented Central Americans fleeing civil war and violence obtain refugee status unavailable to other ethnic groups. Emphasizing their linguistic traits, preserving the names of local cuisine, and maintaining relationships with others online or in person therefore allows participants to affirm their existence and reject being absorbed into “the giant blob” of generic categories like Latino or Mexican.

For most participants, these expressions of belonging are still mostly felt in face-to-face interactions and physical spaces. Social media was still mentioned numerous times as a tool to make new connections with people online and to keep in touch with old acquaintances, or to learn about current events both locally and in the region. It was also discussed as a way to reestablish a connection to their culture when preferred methods like relationships with their parents or long distances from college classmates are not possible. The next chapter deals more directly with how participants are engaging with issues of immigration on social media.

## **CHAPTER 5: UNDERSTANDING IMMIGRATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA**

This chapter includes responses from participants about the types of immigration-related content they have encountered on social media and how they have chosen to engage with it. The structure of the chapter follows research questions 1 and 2. Participants mentioned a wide range of examples including news stories and posts about children being separated from their parents along the U.S.-Mexico border, local protests to abolish the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), online campaigns to raise funds for undocumented college students, and news about events in Central America in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. They also discussed how they are responding to this content, ranging from directly replying with comments, liking, sharing, or retweeting posts with friends and family, or in some cases actively ignoring this content completely. Their responses about the choices they make when engaging with this content reveal just how involved participants are with these issues, and how their actions and non-actions show a level of active and critical engagement. It also demonstrates why it is important to hear more from this community about topics like immigration, especially when these voices are marginalized or ignored.

### **Viewing Immigration-Related Content**

Participants were very attuned to local news events. Lucas recalled an Instagram story collecting donations for a relief fund after one of the community colleges of L.A. sued the Department of Education for not giving undocumented students the funds they needed, and Victoria recounted seeing stories about street vendor attacks that have mainly targeted Latinos (“I don’t know what’s possessing kids but they’ve like start[ed] hitting street vendors,” she lamented). Miguel kept track of news that affects the Latino community, such as the detention centers on the border, the street vendor attacks, and the pandemic as part of his work for a

nonprofit in downtown Los Angeles. “The demographics we work with are household workers, just primarily female immigrants and day laborers which are male immigrants, and so I keep myself busy with immigration topics.” Miguel noted that a major difference with social media is that anyone can be a reporter now. While not all are necessarily activists, “...more and more people are sharing stuff online. It’s not only from like news outlets but also from other people who weren't necessarily involved in politics or interested in news.” Household workers and day laborers, two professions likely to employ Central American immigrants, have in the past received negative news coverage (Valenzuela, 2000), so Miguel going online to find out more about the clients he serves suggests that social media can offer better insights into this community than traditional media outlets.

Other participants discussed engaging with immigration stories that made national headlines in 2020. Isabel mentioned a number of posts calling for ICE to be abolished. Emma recalled posts on Instagram from friends about children separated from their parents and locked up in cages, and another where Department of Health and Human Services lost track of almost 1,500 children, the majority unaccompanied minors from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala who had been placed with sponsor families in the U.S. (Nixon, 2018). Emma was so angered to hear President Trump say “oh we just lost them there, we don't know where they're at” that she felt compelled to post the story on her Instagram page. Carmen shared a story regarding shelters that had been quickly built to house migrant children arriving from Central America that was shut down due to poor conditions. In her current job as a case manager for unaccompanied youth, she has actually worked with children who had been placed in those shelters who described conditions so horrible they told Carmen they never wanted to return.

Participants also showed how engaged they are in news events happening abroad that affects their community. Diego found a post calling for greater awareness about the lack of clean drinking water to poor people in El Salvador. Andres found several stories on a Facebook page that serves the Central American diaspora in Los Angeles, including one on President Nayib Bukele of El Salvador and his strict laws on social distancing and harsher policing in the prisons in response to the Covid-19 outbreak. Daniela also retweeted a story about Bukele making a deal with Trump to deport people seeking asylum back to El Salvador, and another where ICE was not doing enough to protect detainees from getting COVID-19.

For David, social media was an opportunity to gain an international perspective on immigration stories that are often lacking in the U.S. media. In order to gain a greater insight into the migrant caravan headed towards the southern border, David would read the online version of the Guatemalan newspaper *Prensa Libre* and scan public comments on social media to get both the Guatemalan and American perspective. He noticed a stark difference between the two sides. The Guatemalan perspective would try to understand the root causes for why the migrants were leaving Guatemala. “In the first round on social media I would get the local comments, whether it was Central Americans following here in the states or Guatemalans in Guatemala. And I would get those responses with the concerns health wise, the reasoning behind it, which was a kind of like getting away from the drug violence in Guatemala.” The American perspective however focused on xenophobic stereotypes. “The second wave of information, and the interaction that I got more of like conservatives commenting saying, ‘oh they’re coming in.’ You know the comment of ‘they’re bringing in drugs, they’re bringing in crime, etc., etc.’ They’re baby anchors,’ all of that. So, I got two different commentaries on it.”

David's comments show how the lack of Central American voices in the U.S. discourse on the caravan and other immigration-related issues can lead to the demonization of an entire community. Agrelo refers to this as the visibility paradox, in which "Central Americans are prominent in the mainstream news and on social media, but their voices, their concerns, and their collective history are still invisible" (2018). For example, the majority of unaccompanied children caught at the border, many fleeing violence and natural disasters, have come from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras (Hesson & Rosenberg, 2021). These young Central Americans fleeing violence and trauma (and facing a number of dangers on their journey across Mexico such as sex trafficking or forced labor) are at risk to harmful mental health outcomes that can last long into adulthood and be passed down to future generations (Estefan et al., 2017). Yet the American news media has failed to seek the input of Central Americans who might offer any political and historical context; instead, they rely on simplistic narratives and stereotypes and exploitive images of desperate youth (Lovato, 2018a). For participants, social media can be a tool to gain better understanding on these complex issues and to hear these voices often ignored. It can also serve as a platform to counter some of these harmful stereotypes through their engagement with this content.

### **Types of online engagement**

Participants interacted with these stories in a variety of ways, the most common being sharing stories or posts with friends. Andres and his coworkers regularly send stories to each other and engage in discussion. Diego found that sharing stories with former Central American classmates from college was a way to maintain awareness about issues facing their community; by continually discussing them and other issues facing the diaspora in the U.S., they can prevent them from being ignored. Lucas feels very comfortable expressing his emotions online. "On

Twitter since I don't have a lot of followers, I tend to definitely rant about anything and I rant about how angry I am, about all these things that are going on. So that's more of like, yeah that's where I rant! That's how I express myself on there.” His most recent rant was about Trump supporters in response to the Obamagate controversy. For Lucas these rants are not so much about engagement; in fact, he hopes that the people he challenges ignore everything he says. He does however leave open the possibility that someone might find his rants useful. “I'm just being mad and expressing my emotions,” he says, but “... as long as maybe there's someone out there who actually needs that information and hears it, I'm talking specifically on Instagram, then that'd be good. Like I'm glad I passed it on.”

For Isabel, seeing online discrimination has motivated her to defend groups being attacked. She previously only used Twitter for entertainment, but after Trump was elected to office and began making racist comments against Mexicans, she noticed more discrimination online, because as she put it, Trump “made the racists feel comfortable being racist.” This made a big impact on her and encouraged her to be more informed about the community and others also under attack. On Twitter she will read Trump supporters voicing their support for him or saying things like, “oh immigrants complain so much, why don't they just go back to their country?” While she admits that she does not want to treat people badly as some of her mutuals might when encountering xenophobia, she will directly respond with statements like, “oh really that's very ignorant of you to say.”

Carmen also shared certain posts on Instagram Stories or Twitter but does not feel as comfortable commenting like other participants. Despite her work as a case manager for unaccompanied youth, she does not feel qualified to respond on issues. “I read about it, but I think for me, I just don't know what to do. ... I just feel like I'm not an expert in trying to give an

opinion because there might be others that know more about it and might correct me or might think I'm wrong. I'd just rather not interact in that way I guess." Her reluctance to comment is commendable given the amount of disinformation about Central American migrants, which has been responsible for fostering anti-immigrant hostility (Cobian, 2019) and sowing confusion about whether migrants will be accepted for asylum or be sent to Mexico (Kocherga, 2021). Daniela will also rarely comment but will if it is someone close like her sister or a fellow coworker who is Salvadoran. She has however directly engaged with friends who say anti-Salvadoran things online. When a friend of hers made fun of El Salvador on Twitter prior to a Mexico soccer match, she felt a need to respond. "I think it's a little more hurtful when I see my friends do it," she admitted. "I saw that kind of response and I just tweeted back because I saw one of my close friends doing it, and I was like, 'I think El Salvador has more important things to worry about right now than a soccer game.'" Another time she responded to similar jokes prior to a game. "At the time you know I don't really know how to respond other than in anger, but I know I tweeted something like "Mexicans are always talking crap and we're not even in the game. Get over yourself."

Others have become frustrated based on what they see as insincere comments about Central Americans. Isabel's best friend who is Mexican will talk about issues like discrimination and how hate against Central Americans is ignorant and stupid. But while her friends may say this, Isabel notes that "I don't ever see them sharing any Central American posts or anything, which now I'm reflecting on it is interesting...I feel like if they would like to share and bring awareness, it would be really nice because I feel like it [would] be support. But yeah, other than that my other friends don't talk about it at all." Miguel had a similar experience when speaking

with his Mexican friends online, but his frustrations with how they minimize the struggles of Central Americans led him to stop:

I don't make comments as much anymore just because it's tiring having to explain to people. Sometimes conversations just devolve into like arguments, like me again trying to explain to friends of Mexican descent that although [they have] their hardships, these hardships are kind of felt more by Central Americans. And it just devolves into like the oppression Olympics you know? Like, 'oh, I have it worse than you' and... 'oh you know we've had it bad for years and years and years,' and it kind of feels like, oh you know you guys gotta suffer too? And I'm like, shouldn't the point be like for you guys to help out? You know, share some knowledge and shit?

Some participants will only engage on platforms that they feel are conducive to productive conversation. When David seeks to engage with others, he prefers Reddit over Facebook or Twitter because those sites in his words feature "some batshit crazy stuff." On Reddit, the layout of the site allows for threads, or subreddits, to cover specific topics like 'Los Angeles' or 'Guatemala' that allow for a more focused conversation. "The way I like approaching people is bringing in a lot of evidence, whether it's directly from the federal government or articles that are in support of it," says David. Reddit also provides a better system for user verification and content moderation, as David can see what a user has written previously in other subreddits. While conversations aren't always civil, he can easily leave a subreddit if it gets out of hand. Emma also sees less value in a platform like Twitter for direct engagement but does rely on the Twitter trending topics section for news from reliable sources like *The New Yorker*. She shares content on Twitter or Facebook that she feels is worth sharing even though she does not have a large following online. She does not however engage directly with people



online. “A lot of people on Twitter I try to ignore as much as possible because they are very ignorant, so I try not to get into any arguments or any exchange of comments with people on Twitter because they just have their own opinions and they’re very set on those opinions, so why waste my breath on these people when I could actually be educating my family or friends or friends of friends that are actually interested in willing to listen?” One strategy she does use when sharing content is to add a small gif or emojis rather than too many words, since she has learned from her job at a marketing agency that people are not likely to read long quotes.

These examples suggest that participants possess not only a high level of the technical skill needed to navigate multiple social media platforms, but also the skills to engage in critical media literacy. Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share propose that critical approaches to media should explore how “media construct meanings, influence and educate audiences, and impose their messages and values” (2008). By critically analyzing of texts and employing alternative forms of media production, users can challenge dominant values and ideologies embedded in media and become active participants in a democratic society. When David compares coverage of the caravan in Guatemala, he can see how U.S. media pushes a narrative of immigrants as a threat, while avoiding any discussion about the causes of why migrants are fleeing their homes in the first place. And when David tries to engage with people online, he chooses Reddit because Twitter is not a platform that allows for the kind of evidence-based conversation he prefers.

Another way participants are critical analyzing of content they see online is by not engaging with it. Victoria avoids any online arguments that disrespects a person. “I’m not going to engage into a conversation if you’re trying to undermine someone’s humanity because you think a certain way. I’m just not gonna do it. I’m not engaging with you about that. I believe what I believe, and you believe what you believe, but I’m not going to try to change your mind I’m not

going to try to do anything [with] that because that's my wasted time and my wasted energy.”

She also refuses to watch videos that show any type of cruelty or violence against any person.

Referring to a video that was shared on Instagram that showed a child who had died in ICE custody, Victoria said:

I don't have the heart, the energy or the space to watch what happened in if it's a video a photo. I refuse, refuse, refuse, absolutely refuse to look at that...it was just too overwhelming for me to think that some of these kids that make their way here and these parents, you know these human beings, if they are making the dangerous journey of coming all the way over here, how are we not questioning why? What was so bad that they had to come here? I cannot in this day and age imagine what possible dangers they were facing for them to make that choice, to say you know what? Excuse my language, but fuck it, you know? Let's go. We need to go. We need to leave. And you know people like to portray that ‘oh no, it's irresponsible if parents are bringing their kids over and dadadadada, and I'm like well, that's a sacrifice. That's a love. That's beyond love, love beyond measure that I cannot even imagine you know...

She also discussed the same approach to videos of murdered Black Americans going viral on social media, a prescient comment as our interview took place on the same day as the murder of George Floyd:

When people show videos of African Americans dying, like that's horrifying you know. That's horrifying to even think that you know, it's not going to do anything just by posting a video. There has to be something else that has to move people, and that thing that moves people is compassion. And you know figuring out if, are you shocked because you know this isn't something that you've experienced? Is that why you're shocked? Or are

you shocked because you know you're realizing that someone's humanity was undermined and someone literally did not care to consider this other human being when they shot them, you know?

Victoria's refusal to watch these videos or to interact with content that dehumanizes migrants of Persons of Color shows how non-engagement can be just as meaningful as active engagement. Ellison et. al. have challenged the dichotomy of active vs passive engagement. While active users are typically assumed to routinely post and share content or respond to comments and passive users those who simply scroll past content, they argue that deliberate non-clicking can also be "intentional act[s] resulting from conscious and thoughtful engagement" (2020). Victoria's non-clicking of videos of dead migrants or Black Americans thus becomes an act of resistance. First, by not clicking on traumatic images of Central American migrants in pain or anguish, she can challenge simplistic attitudes about migrants that often play into right-wing narratives (Lovato, 2018b). Victoria instead chooses to focus on the parents' love and sacrifice for their children, who are compelled to leave their homes and risk considerable danger to themselves and their families (Palau-Sampio, 2019). Second, by refusing to view migrants or Black men solely as victims of violence she can instead focus on their humanity. The author Blue Telusma has written about the unsettling trend of trauma porn, defined as "any type of media – be it written, photographed or filmed – which exploits traumatic moments of adversity to generate buzz, notoriety or social media attention" (2019). Victoria looks beyond the pain and suffering and instead empathizes with the people in these images and calls on others to do the same. As Victoria states, people should be motivated by compassion, not despair.

## **Chapter Summary**

This chapter showed how participants are engaging with various immigration-related content on social media. Responses varied from liking and sharing posts, engaging in debates with friends or sometimes strangers, or avoiding certain topics completely. While these forms of engagement may seem conventional, how and why participants engage was also telling. The decision by many participants to avoid certain videos, to rely solely on trusted sources, or to engage only in civil conversation demonstrates how their online engagement becomes as much an act of resistance. By reframing narratives about the Central American community away from simplistic and harmful stereotypes and shock value trauma porn, they can humanize families and participate in critical discussions about these issues. In their way they are reversing the visibility paradox by listening to trusted Central American sources and inserting themselves in these online discussions. By setting boundaries in what they choose to view and how they choose to respond, they can gain a greater perspective about issues that are commonly under- or falsely reported, while ensuring that any discussion they do have treats people with dignity and respect.

These questions about how and participants engage with immigration-related content on social media led into our discussion about how these engagements have affected their sense of belonging and their conception of citizenship.

## **CHAPTER 6: BELONGING, IMMIGRATION, AND CITIZENSHIP**

This chapter focuses on how participants' engagement on social media has affected their sense of belonging and citizenship. Participants largely felt that social media had had a positive effect on their sense of belonging as Central Americans but were more conflicted about whether they felt more connected as American citizens, largely due to the country's treatment of immigrants through xenophobic policies and their own fears about the safety of their parents and others in the community. Their feelings of exclusion and a weak allegiance to the state in favor of their ethnic or cultural group would suggest they are experiencing failed citizenship (Banks, 2015). Yet by expressing solidarity towards other marginalized groups and engaging in transformative activism, they also perform transformative citizenship to enhance democracy and social justice within their communities (2015).

### **Identity, Belonging, and Citizenship**

Participants were asked if their online engagements had any impact on their sense of belonging, and once again their responses again covered a wide range of experiences and feelings. For some the presence of social media has had a positive impact on their sense of belonging to their ethnic communities, but less so with the U.S. Andres does feels a closer bond to the Salvadoran community. "I definitely think that social media helps me stay connected [and] have that sense of belonging" notes Andres. "I'm able to learn, I'm able to interact, I'm able to connect with other people within those spaces, so it definitely does help to have that sense of belonging." He even points out that he now maintains physical friendships with people he first met on Facebook. Andres finds it hard though to identify with the country, in part because he never saw himself as a stereotypical American. "My family isn't like patriotic or anything like that, like you know following the American Dream or barbeques or whatever the stereotype may

be of a typical white person and how they act... I really don't feel that because it's not like a common theme like that I've had growing up or in my community." Lucas for example struggled with how to answer the question before saying "I'm not quite sure but yes I guess, yeah, I do feel like I belong." He does not feel though that social media has had any impact at all.

Carmen said that as a child of immigrants and the sibling of an unaccompanied minor, social media has made her feel less a sense of belonging as an American. "I think especially the political climate that we're in right now, I definitely don't," Carmen explained. "We're kind of like the laughingstock to the rest of the world." She did acknowledge the privileges she has as an American citizen, but when she thinks of an American now she can only visualize a Trump supporter waving the flag, and for that reason can never see herself as being that proud.

Diego found that it has made him feel both a sense of belonging and exclusion. "I've had moments where basically I feel like I have a sense of belonging in my own country...and I've had other moments where I guess you could say I might belong in the U.S. but I just felt like my presence was more excluded," he admitted. He also feels that the Central American community he belongs to isn't accepted based on how he sees the immigration debate on social media. "The Central American population of Los Angeles, I feel because we are a small population, I feel like sometimes you're not really counted, or we're just you know part of a group...because we're all seen as Latinos, as one category." For Daniela, the answer of whether social media has had an impact was yes and no. She acknowledged a kind of push and pull feeling, where on the one hand she feels a sense of community but on the other hand feels othered by an administration that demonized her. She felt triggered with "everyone talking crap" against the community, but since the election of Trump she does feel a close sense of belonging with the Latino community as they all share a common struggle against xenophobia. "I would say that in a way I feel more

of a sense of belonging with the Latino community in general because even though I know there's some people that aren't on the same page, I think it's a minority and I just feel like we're more united.”

Victoria said she does not feel any less welcome, but she was shocked to discover that her father experienced the same kind of discrimination that she has seen in online videos of immigrants being abused. After telling her father that she couldn't believe what she was seeing, he replied, “Oh honey, they did that to me when I was in high school.” He told her how where men were rallied up believing they were being given jobs only to be sprayed down with hoses. “I remember thinking, oh my God, like you mean this has been going around since the 80s? And he goes, ‘Yeah, it’s probably been longer than that too.’”

For Emma, seeing current news stories online about how immigrants are being treated or about children being locked in cages made her feel ashamed as an American.

As a *guatemalteca* it's hurtful to see [immigrants] treated like their animals or they're not human beings. So it hurts to think that the people that I relate to and the culture that I love is being treated this way for just trying to find a better future. And as an American it's shameful. It's shameful that we're allowing people to be treated like that, and that there's people out there that think this is OK, you know? It's embarrassing as an American. I always tell my mom that when I get the chance, I don't wanna be here anymore. I don't want to be in America because of the way that we think it's OK, and I say ‘we’ very lightly because obviously I don't feel that way.

For Emma, being an American just means the place she was born. As a Latina with immigrant parents, she didn't feel any kind of belonging to a country that she feels judges her for her ethnicity or skin color. “I'm obviously not white, I'm not blonde, I don't have blue eyes so, that's

what is expected in a way from a lot of people. So to me being an American, it's not necessarily something that I hold dearly to my heart.” She does recognize that her privilege as an U.S. citizen allows her opportunities that her parents did not have, but “...it doesn't spark that emotion to me of feeling like I belong here and that this is where I want to be. I think that it would hold so much of a bigger meaning if people weren't being the way that they were towards Hispanics, Latinos, you know, African Americans, all that. So that's why I don't really identify as 100% American.”

David did identify as American, but it was not something he was proud of, especially given the state of the country in 2020. “I think there's a lot that the country needs to be done,” he explained, “and to some extent I feel like the country’s weaknesses have really [been] exposed because of Covid-19.” In fact, he feels a greater sense of belonging to California than he does the U.S. But while he doesn’t feel a sense of exclusion, he does feel he faces an uphill battle to advocate for himself and his community. He stated that the misinformed comments on Facebook and the biased reporting on immigration-related issues has revealed the danger of “alternative facts” and lack of representation of Central American voices. “I think at least for me the best way to advocate myself is to kind of fight against the stigmas that Central Americans and as a whole Guatemalans have.” He hoped to not only work to increase more Central Americans in position of power to inspire people but also demonstrate to others that this community is no less equal.

Isabel felt her belonging to U.S. is somewhere between yes and no. “I guess not 100%, maybe halfway I would say I belong,” she explained. She did though feel a close sense of belonging to what she calls her “community of Central America” on Twitter. “I just suddenly started following a lot of people who are Central American themselves and then they started following me. And I feel very comfortable in that space.” But the election of Trump has also had



a negative effect on her as it made her more aware of the level of racism in the country. “I feel like we were progressing as a nation and then like he came and it was like, oh we took like 1,000 steps back. And in a way he's also highlighted how there's a lot more like racist people than I thought because I lived in this bubble where there is only undocumented Latinx people around me, and he made me realize that like this country's so big and there's just so many people with so many different opinions from me.”

Miguel admitted that while he does feel a connection to the country and actually hopes to establish roots here, he does hold it accountable. “I criticize the US. I hold it [with] some disdain, while at the same time this is my country, you know.” He has been able to establish relationships across the Latino community thanks to Miguel's work in community organizing. “[I've] been able to build community...among Salvadorians, Guatemalans, Mexicans, African Americans and it feels really amazing you know...I still keep in touch with them. They feel like family, you know? Like those are the bonds that like at the end of the day Latinos are able to establish once we overcome our prejudices or biases, stereotypes, and it shows me some people might be worse off than others, but at the end of the day it's the same struggle.” So for Miguel while in-fighting and pettiness of online discourse can be draining, it is his hope that these relationships based on a common purpose will, in his words, keep him going.

## **Fear**

Much of the reason why participants did not feel a sense of attachment to the state was in its mistreatment and vilification of the community, and across our discussions one word that emerged as a common theme was fear. Many talked about fearing for their family's safety and security under Donald Trump's presidency (particularly for those members who are undocumented), while others feared more for the Central American community based on the

discourse happening on social media. In fact, it was their engagements on social media that seem to reinforce old fears felt from a young age. It was a fear that did not begin with Trump; rather, from an early age, participants were already fearful for their parents. David spoke about his anxiety over the immigration status of his Guatemalan parents as a child. “[My parents] overstayed their visas so there's always fear of their deportation, and when I was younger, I wasn't too familiar about how policies work at all. So just having that fear and my parents telling me that this could happen, I was always like kind of on edge because I knew one day something could happen.” Today he feels less anxiety because he is more aware about immigration policies and laws, but he still expressed concerns over children being deported in what he calls “the cruelty happening under the Trump administration.” Lucas also grew up fearful for his parents’ immigration status. “I was always afraid that my parents were going to get deported,” he recounted. “I feel like I've lived in fear as a child because I knew that was behind my head so whenever I saw that my parents weren't home or they were coming late, that was always behind my head, like they might get deported.” For Diego, the thought of losing his mother, who has been living in the United States undocumented for more than 20 years despite attempts for legal documentation, was unimaginable. Not only would it be painful but it would also cut him off entirely from his Guatemalan identity and community, and leave him to be absorbed into the generic category of American:

Sometimes I think to myself that if my mom were to be deported one of these days, I just feel like I would lose my sense of belonging as a Guatemalan American. My mother raised me, has given me the courage of being a Guatemalan American, has given me this courage to just embrace my Guatemalan side, you know? And I feel like if her presence is not around me, that I feel like I would just lose that Guatemalan presence through the

food, for example. And I would also feel like I wouldn't be much attached to my Guatemalan side because I feel like without my mother, there would be other things that I may not learn from her you know? And I feel like this attachment of Guatemalan aspect would be broken, and then I would basically stick to just my American heritage, which is something that I would like to stick to, but I don't want to necessarily categorize it as, 'I'm just like an American, that's it.'

Fear of deportation extended to other family members as well. With his parents no longer in the picture, Lucas's concern today is over his brother who is an undocumented college student and depends on DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) for financial support. Lucas expressed his anger over then-Education Secretary Betsy DeVos and her plan to limit support for DACA recipients. "When Betsy DeVos said that undocumented students aren't able to get the funds that all the other students are going to be able to get or something, that really pissed me off. So the fact that my brother doesn't really have like a stable job as well, that concerns me a lot." Daniela worries about family who recently emigrated from El Salvador based on the racism and hardships her parents experienced. "It's definitely affected me. On one hand both my parents are now citizens and so is my entire family, but I still have family there and I have a cousin who recently immigrated here.... but yeah, to me I think it definitely makes me emotional." When discussing the children being kept in cages near the border, Emma recalled a memory about when ICE deported a family member and the feeling of uncertainty when they could not be located:

I had a cousin that was living out in Nebraska a long time ago, and he was working in a factory... and ICE came and raided the factory and they ended up taking him. And one of the things that really affected our family was that they didn't just take him and he went

back to Guatemala and that was it, you know. It wasn't 'oh it's gonna take a few a few days to get him there.' He was probably held for about over a year and from what I remember I think that my aunt, his mom, was having a really hard time even being able to contact him. So it was a big waiting game of, 'is he OK? Is he alive? When is he coming home?'

Fears over those who have been detained indefinitely is a common fear in families with undocumented members. Uncertainty about family deportations can lead to short- and long-term mental and physical consequences for children, including fears over economic insecurity, family instability and emotional distress, and depression and separation anxiety disorder (Dreby, 2012; L. Zayas, 2015). In addition to knowing if a family member will one day be picked up, there is also the uncertainty about their status since making public inquiries risks putting more undocumented family at risk (Talavera et al., 2010). When Emma reads stories online about family separations, those fears resurface. “[The family separations] affect me because it brought all these different memories and I can only imagine what those families are dealing with now, especially seeing all the different stuff that that came out to the public eye, of them being held in these basically cages. That was heartbreaking...it's a sore subject for her side of the family, especially because it happened to them but us having family and friends that aren't U.S. citizens, that it could happen to them at any moment.” Emma and her family would share news articles about potential ICE raids over WhatsApp to keep their friends and loves ones informed about potential raids. “Whenever we would hear something, we would send it into the group chat that we had with my cousins and my uncles, saying ‘if you know someone let them know that ICE was reported to be seen around this area, stay away from that area,’ stuff like that.”

In addition to concerns over their immediate family members, there were also fears about the Central American community in general. “I just feel in a sensitive way affects me because I realized that my mom is undocumented,” said Diego. “I can imagine other families, not just from Central America backgrounds but also like other diverse backgrounds, it's also going to be a struggle because their parents are undocumented.” Later he thought of himself in his mother’s shoes, and how an undocumented status would limit his opportunities. “How would my sense of belonging be in the U.S. because of my documentation status and if I would have been marginalized?” he pondered aloud. Isabel felt a need to defend her family and the undocumented community from President Trump’s insults:

Because he attacks the undocumented community and most of my family is undocumented, it makes me feel belittled. And then when he said that they're lazy and they don't work, if anything my mom's like and my family is the most hardworking people I've come across. A lot of undocumented people in my community are up at 5:00 AM and they're already going to work week until midnight and I feel like for him to say that it's definitely not OK...I feel very attacked by that because I feel like he doesn't appreciate the work [of] the undocumented community, and it's also scary when he says that he wants to deport millions of undocumented people just because they don't have a piece of paper.

Lucas’s concerns for his brother’s well-being extends as well as to the high school students he mentors at a non-profit that helps with college applications:

I've definitely thought about the Guatemalan community and how there's a lot of undocumented people that live here and are basically losing their jobs because of this whole COVID-19, and how they're not getting any type of financial support while others

like me are getting that support. And I feel like it's unjust because especially for younger generations, maybe aren't like especially with parents that are documented and have kids here as well, they're the ones struggling and they're trying to get their kid through high school or through middle school, and I feel really concerned about them because it's unfair that they have to go through that and I feel like, but they get they have a kid here you know? I'm concerned about them. I'm concerned about undocumented parents who have kids here and aren't able to support them financially.

Children of immigrants often experience feelings of guilt for holding privileges that their parents and families don't have. Kohli refers to this feeling as thriver's guilt, when children of immigrants have access to growing, healing, accessing resources and opportunities thanks to their status as legal citizens (2021).

Andres works with students who have been separated from their families and he has found himself having to console. "I work in schools that are within this community so there are a lot of children in the schools that are recently arrived... [and they] are really sad that they're not able to be with their family. Sometimes I'll often find myself consoling them or talking to them and trying to connect with them and let them know that 'hey, I can kind of relate because my family is from El Salvador. It has been kind of heartbreaking to see that.'" Even Miguel, who does not have any personal experience with family members being detained, nonetheless took news about immigration news and children in cages personally. "I'm a very emotional person as it is, and I feel things very deeply and I sit with them a lot. So yeah, I do feel it at another level or more intensely because I do have a connection with individuals from Central America, and you know sharing what my process has been like in terms of coming to terms with my identity, it's very difficult. You know, life in Central America is very difficult."

## **Expressions of Solidarity**

Despite being born with the full rights and privileges of citizenship, participants felt excluded from the nation state and their identification with the state was either non-existent or complicated. Having been personally exposed to various forms of discrimination in public and virtual spaces and remaining fearful about the safety of their families and communities, participants could be experiencing failed citizenship by showing more connection to their Central American identities according to Banks's citizenship typography (2017). But Banks also shows that these citizens will advocate on behalf their communities and take actions to ensure social justice and equality in acts of transformative citizenship. As our discussions came to a close, it became clear that participants see themselves are pursuing changes rooted in the values of social justice to become transformative citizens. In this section, participants spoke about how their online engagements have led them to feel solidarity with other communities. For some that has meant feeling closer to their ethnic heritage, while for others it has also meant solidarity with all children of immigrants, the broader Latino community in the U.S., or with other marginalized racial or ethnic groups. This solidarity is often based on a sense of shared experience either with discrimination or similar cultural values, with social media again playing a role.

Participants sense of belonging with the countries of their parents' origin would often extend to a similar feeling with the region of Central America itself. For example, Diego noted that embracing his Guatemalan American identity has led him to feel a stronger sense of connection with other Central Americans and has reached out to them to tackle issues and increase the visibility of their community. "I feel like I'm trying to basically make a difference," he notes, "where not only am I involving my presence but I'm also helping recruit others, basically get their presence involved when it comes to community issues." Lucas has sought to

establish a stronger bond with other Guatemalans as his family has been impacted by recent immigration policies, especially his brother who is a DACA recipient. “I feel like that’s what drives my wanting to belong so I could better understand the issues that they're going through, and I could better understand like what traumas that they face or what traumas follow them. And I could definitely build that connection more, rather than just being a U.S. citizen that that has parents from Guatemala but has no type of connection. I want to feel like I could make that conversation and understand the struggle.” Daniela spoke about developing what she called “sense of linked fate” with other Central Americans, as they too share similar experiences of being a minority within a minority. “You feel proud to meet them. Not like your family, but you feel some sort of immediate connection... I don't know, it feels different. Like I feel like I can talk about more things. I feel like I'm not being judged.” Emma admits that in the past she hasn’t put herself out there enough to represent her culture, but she is committed to making herself and others more visible to be role models for the community:

It’s so exciting to see news articles or press releases where you see someone come into a big position and then them saying, ‘oh they're from Guatemala, from El Salvador, From Honduras, Nicaragua, all these different Central American places,’ because we don't have a lot of that... I think it would be so amazing for me to be able to accomplish something and be able to put my roots there, and people say, ‘oh she's from Guatemala,’ so definitely it's something that I would love to do.

Her response again highlights the need for greater representation of Central Americans in positions of leadership which then serve as role models to others. Emma hopes to one day be that role model. She also noted that she sees opportunities with social media to strengthen a sense of belonging as a *chapina* and form coalitions with others. “I think that especially now since



everything is basically remote because of the circumstances that we're in, I think that it's a great opportunity for a lot of these communities to build that platform. So I think that being able to find more *chapines* or Central Americans would be I guess a little bit easier.”

There was also a sense of solidarity with all those who are children of immigrants. For Daniela, she felt a camaraderie with other children of immigrants like herself, saying “I'm one of them, and then you know, I'm friends with a lot of people who are. And I think just knowing the same struggles or whatever that they may go through, or experiences as well, I definitely feel a sense of belonging.” Victoria has also developed a similar sense of connection, regardless of where their family originates. “I think that we have such a such a shared experience, more than what we might even realize. I love when I go on like social media and someone who obviously might not be a child of an immigrant from Guatemala but they're a child of an immigrant of a different country or different continent, but we still have those shared experiences.” She also said that as someone who identifies as straight and cisgender, she has tried to gain more knowledge and understanding to be an ally to different marginalized groups. “Just because I don't have that experience,” she said, “it doesn't mean that I can't support you and also being able to give people the voice you know. Something simple as like, I support them and showing that by allowing them to speak for themselves.”

Finally, there are connections being made with the broader Latino community and other racial and ethnic groups. Daniela acknowledged that differences exist within the Latino community, but she sees their common struggles as a source of unity. Together she hoped to “[fight] against the administration or anyone who's anti-immigrant or those people that you see who will be filmed and they're saying, ‘go back to your country’ or ‘speak English’ or whatever it may be.” For Diego, a sense of belonging that began in college with other Central Americans

has expanded to include other groups that also share similar struggles such as racism and economic disparities. “I would also see my other non-Central American peers like my fellow Asian American peers, my fellow black African American peers, my fellow American Indian peers you know, I just felt like I had this sense of belonging...and although we have our own forms of struggles, at the end of the day we all still share one common train of struggles.” David was able to empathize with the Asian American community when he noticed how President Trump’s attacks towards them during the coronavirus pandemic mirrored the same kind of comments he saw on social media about the migrant caravan. For example, he noticed how comments accusing the Chinese of being responsible for COVID-19 were as xenophobic as comments saying Guatemalan migrants are “scum” and should go back to their country.

Finally, Miguel was able to recognize the need to support African Americans while acknowledging the anti-Blackness that exists within the Latino community:

[I’ve] been able to build community among Salvadorians, Guatemalans, Mexicans, African Americans and it feels really like, amazing you know. Even though we try to have these conversations, why don’t we as Latinos try to establish connections with African Americans? That’s a no-no for some Latinos. But I feel really fortunate to have been able to do that on my own, of own accord, and it shows me my community is more than our differences, and like the struggle kind of outshines that, you know.

### **Expressions of Activism**

This last section looks at how participants engage in transformative citizenship through their activism. As expected, these acts took on various forms. For some participants it meant using social media to stay aware of issues facing the community or trying to educate people on

the history of the region. Others sought to take those feelings into their everyday practices, either through their work or their social justice activism.

Andres supports a grassroots organization which seeks to ensure equal access to clean water in El Salvador. For him, being able to use social media to connect with others to address these kinds of injustices in El Salvador is what he calls his sense of belonging. “I feel like that’s where I identify as a Salvadorian, it’s a part of me, right? And it probably will be for the rest of my life.” For David, active engagement in an Instagram group made up of Central American-heritage students allows him to tell counter-narratives that challenge stereotypes about migrants, particularly in light of the so-called migrant caravan, and to teach others about the history of the region. “When you see on public pages especially on Facebook, people comment, “oh like if the economy is garbage, it’s their problem.” But then they don't come to realize that you look back a couple of decades, you see Chiquita and how they basically got the CIA to overthrow the government, and basically since then it's been on a tumble. And realizing that people ignore that fact has made me challenge and educate people sometimes.” David realizes this is an uphill battle, but he is optimistic that there are groups trying to fight against bigotry and online disinformation and bring awareness. He also hopes that future generations will realize that there were people who fought on their behalf, which is why he believes in more responsible use of social media and digital citizenship education as a tool to help Central Americans:

Social media is very dangerous...it's a great tool but because everyone got thrown in, a lot of us didn't get informed of how the internet works, and how it has its benefits but also has its cons. So going forward I want to educate people...I was a huge advocate for technology education whether it was just creating email accounts or digital citizenship. I've promoted digital citizenship and I still want to and it's one thing I want to continue,

where the Internet now especially with Covid-19, we're all moving digitally, and we all have to communicate more on the internet. It's huge, it's still an important tool that we all need to learn. I believe that's one way to continue helping others and help Central Americans and Guatemalans make that transition.

Other participants channel their activism in their work. After Victoria graduated from college she pursued a career in counseling. "I ended up getting my bachelors in English and Spanish and that's where I think I started to understand more about what it is that I wanted to do, and what is really important to me in terms of social justice and how to give back to the community and what was I passionate about." Victoria's work as a counselor helped her to navigate the often troubling and disturbing news on immigration. "As a counselor [listening to people has] always been important to me, and it's like a basic rule of counseling which is just listen.... I know when people think of school counselors, they think of like your class scheduler, but I do way more than that. Way, way more than that. What I'm coming down to is like I definitely felt like I'm part of something bigger than myself in being a counselor and being in the profession and that's also incredibly important to me."

Daniela admitted that she used to ignore news about immigration online and in the media; if it made her sad she could ignore it and go offline. It wasn't until a trip to Thailand that she recognized her privilege in being able to switch off the TV, which helped her to see the situation in the U.S. in a new light:

I think it hit me more when I studied in Thailand and one of the organizations that we could volunteer for, one of the things was to visit an immigration detention center. So I went one time and we basically took supplies and talked to them. There was people who were in there and were sick, some people whose mother was sick, and you know they

were just trying to find their way to them or whatever. Or political refugees, religious refugees...And I think that's when it hit me, that that situation that I was seeing was something that was happening here in the United States. And yeah, it was one of those experiences that like I was no longer able to just turn it off.

Today Daniela works for a nonprofit helping people with developmental disabilities and hopes to apply to law school soon.

Carmen discussed feeling a responsibility to advocate for immigrants, both as a child of immigrants herself and because her brother came to the U.S. as an unaccompanied minor. "I'm a case manager for unaccompanied youth, so children that are coming from Central America and are being reunited with family members or their parents that already here, and I help connect them with resources like legal resources, medical resources, and making sure that the children are enrolled in school." She estimated that today 98% of her cases come primarily from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. Miguel sees his work at his nonprofit as directly involved in immigration issues that affect his clients and addresses other local issues that he sees on social media. "I've been able to help tenants, Latinos and from Mexican backgrounds. They're very thankful, I still keep in touch with them. They feel like family you know, like those are the bonds that at the end of the day Latinos are able to establish once we overcome our prejudices or biases."

As we concluded our interview, Miguel told a story about taking a road trip with his mother to Tijuana, Mexico. He had asked to go because he wanted to see how Central American immigrants were living at the border. As they returned to Los Angeles, he asked his mother if they could try through Skid Row, an area in Downtown Los Angeles where many residents live in poverty or experience homelessness, hoping to hand out some bread and money. As they

walked through Skid Row, he noticed how people in the neighborhood, out on the street sleeping in tents or on mats, were living just like the Central Americans he saw on the border. But there was one feature he noticed above all. “On Skid Row you’ll see like older people right? You won't really see families, although there are families, but you know when I saw the Central American families, it was families, moms, kids, and fathers, or just moms and their kids or dads and their kids. And that shit took me out, you know.” Those images and knowing that whatever he handed out was nothing more than a band aid stayed with him for weeks later. And yet it also helped him imagine a future where he could do something:

I would think when I make it you know, whatever that may be for me, I'm gonna set out some kind of like fund or some kind of scholarship for children who are in detention centers, who cross the border, and see if I can support them in any way for them to advance their education, or like some kind of vocational technical trade or something like that. At the moment I can't really do much other than raise awareness. But yeah it still sits with me.

His recollection of this particular memory reminded me of his vivid description of the night markets in MacArthur Park, where since he was young he would walk down those streets full of Central American street vendors selling food. How he could see the uniquely Central American features in their faces as they worked the stands. As he said, “it just reminds me of home, it reminds me of the people at the border, so it's something that is not easy to forget. And I chose not to forget.”

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter summarized how participants’ social media engagement impacted their sense of belonging. Overwhelming, these interactions have had a positive impact on their

belonging to their ethnic and cultural community. As discussed previously, the affordances of social media sites have given participants opportunities to maintain close contact with fellow peers from university, learn more about their culture through YouTube lessons, and stay informed about news events affecting their community in the U.S. and Central America. But more than just a tool to stay connected or learn about their ethnic heritage, these online experiences are about preserving a culture they feel is threatened by discrimination, xenophobic policies, and acculturation and absorption of their Central American identity into generic categories like American or Latino. By taking on this added dimension, these online engagements have only strengthened their bond with their community. It has also motivated them to find common ground with other groups, as participants expressed solidarity with those communities who are also under attack based on their race, ethnicity, gender expression, or citizenship status. On the other hand, participants have developed a weaker identification with the nation. The impact of increased attacks on their community which has intensified longstanding fears for their families, as well as the botched government response to Covid-19, has left participants feeling ambivalence towards the country. Their interactions with immigration-related content on social media has only exacerbated the feeling that they do not fit the ideal image of a typical American. Yet by engaging in transformative citizenship through their activism, they are using social media as one means to address discrimination, challenge old stereotypes, and ensure that Central American voices are more represented online and in public discourse.

## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

*“Disagreements over who belongs will define the 21st century.”* Michael Ignatieff

This study sought to understand how children of Central American immigrants develop and maintain feelings of belonging through their engagement on social media. I came to this study from the positionality of a child of a Guatemalan immigrant parent, and I became interested in these questions about belonging and social media because as the Central American community continues to grow here in Southern California it will remain at the center of ongoing discussions about immigration in physical and online spaces. Much of the social media discourse has unfortunately been focused on the demonization of the community, whether from non-Central American ethnic groups or from those in government still espousing Trump-era vitriol. Social media continues to a space where much of this xenophobia and disinformation goes on daily, which threatens to distort the complex issue of immigration and drown out voices with the Central American community. My aim was to uncover what Central American-heritage young people are encountering in these spaces, and how their interactions and engagement affects their notion of belonging as members of their ethnic communities, the broader Latino/a/x population, or the nation-state. Based on my conversations, participants do see their sense of belonging as having been impacted based on their social media activity. Through a variety of interactions ranging from direct engagement to non-clicking, and by transferring their online experiences to their lived experiences, participants strengthened their sense of belonging with their cultural heritage and now advocate on its behalf.

But our conversations revealed a far richer story about the lives on children of Central American immigrants, one that went well beyond social media. I had diverged from Nira Yuval-Davis’s framework on belonging and the politics of belonging to consider social media as a



distinct level where belonging is constructed and maintained. Based on discussions with participants however, social media was less a separate location than an extension for participants to engage in questions about belonging and citizenship they have been contemplating from a young age. The responses from participants also revealed a distinct relationship between their conception of belonging and citizenship that intersects with the ongoing hostile immigration debate—one that is felt in their local environment and at the national level, and within their own ethnic circles and across racial lines. Participants showed just how much belonging has been central concern in their lives; from early in their youth, they have debating what it means to belong and how that belonging can be expressed in everyday actions and words. Through their language choices and their adoption of cultural markers such as food and clothing, participants are able to express not just their identity but establish a sense of connection with others who like them also feel like minorities within a minority. Speaking a similar language or recognizing a particular regional cuisine was a way of bridging any gap between someone unknown and someone who shared a similar background. Likewise, participants' relationships with their parents and later their fellow peers at college helped them to establish a connection to their past and become more engaged in the current social and political realities affecting the community in the United States and abroad. Yet language and cultural markers were also ways to differentiate themselves from other non-Central American ethnic groups, particularly Mexicans and Mexican Americans. Many participants experienced discrimination from an early age because of how they spoke or the food they ate, with some feeling they had to hide their identity or become in the words of Diego, "Mexicanized." My discussions with them reveal that participants are reclaiming their identities, taking back what once made them feel othered like their language to now be symbols of strength and pride, and seeking opportunities to develop a greater sense of

belonging to their ethnic community. Social media thus provides opportunities for participants to re-connect to their roots, either by learning more on their own about the region, connecting with peers from school, or engaging in social justice activism.

The question of how they feel a sense of belonging to the nation state appears to be more complex. The fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic and the initial disastrous government response, combined with Trump-era policies separating and locking up children at the border and increasing deportations, have led some to feeling shame in being American or having no sense of emotional attachment at all. Instead, these actions have exposed the country's many weaknesses to participants, and its treatment of immigrant communities has led one participant to call the U.S. "the laughingstock to the rest of the world." Others recognized that being U.S. citizens affords them privileges that they otherwise wouldn't have, but still felt difficulty in proclaiming themselves as American. There were references to the stereotypical American with blond hair and white skin that participants could simply not identify with. Fear seems to have played a large role as well, in that many participants recalled feeling fearful as youths about their parents being deported. Today that fear has expanded to the Central American community in general as it faces stigmatization and threats of punishment from the government. Of course, their experiences with discrimination both from non-Central American Latinos and from the immigration content they encounter online often reinforces the narrative that they and their families do not belong. Instead of feeling a greater sense of belonging to the nation-state, participants have instead sought to make greater connections to the Central American diaspora.

Participants also developed a sense of solidarity with other marginalized groups, including those of different racial or ethnic backgrounds, those who identify as LGBTQ, and other children of immigrants, based on shared struggle and feelings of marginalization. The rise

of social movements like Black Lives Matter has reinforced that sense of marginalization and led to greater demand for equal rights for Black Americans and minority groups in the U.S. This movement towards potential change has participants being more active in the community, either promoting causes on social media or in their own work as educators and counselors.

While maintaining a strong sense of belonging with certain groups is important, participants also emphasized their desire to maintain their own individuality. Whether it is listening to a certain type of music or having additional identities separate from their ethnic ones, participants are seeking to create their own unique selves. This was most obvious in how participants held different political views from their parents' generation which are often more critical of U.S. policies towards Central America. And while their parents seemed to acculturate more to American culture (though as was noted, often to avoid discrimination), participants expressed frustration that their parents were less involved in their own cultures. They are therefore seeking to re-establish those connections and be more public about their Central American heritage but in a way that represents them more fully. Social media again becomes an extension to creating their own unique identities, ones that cannot be easily defined by labels but that honors their past and looks towards a brighter future for the health and safety of their community.

### **Implications/Future Study**

The conversations recounted here took place under one of the most difficult times in recent memory. The COVID-19 pandemic, which has since killed close to 600,000 Americans, led to widespread fear and uncertainty, strained an already fragile U.S. health care system, and forced an unprecedented shutdown of schools and businesses with seemingly no end in sight. The murder of George Floyd would go viral on social media and lead to an international outcry

and weeks of protests met with police violence (Sottek, 2020). Overseeing all of this was a president who sought to exploit both issues for his own political gain. And the continued demonization of immigrant communities continued whether on social media or through policies separating families. One year later however, there is some cause for optimism. In a rare win for racial justice, officer Derek Chauvin was found guilty in the murder of George Floyd. Lifesaving vaccines have been administered to millions of Americans, with schools and restaurants set to reopen to full capacity by the end of 2021. Trump lost reelection (despite his repeated attempts to overturn the will of the voters) and Joe Biden was elected as President with Kamala Harris, the first woman, the first Black American, and the first South Asian American as Vice President. Their election suggests a return towards a humane discourse that is more welcoming to those communities vilified under the previous administration, but serious questions remain whether this will extend to communication over social media. The effects of four years of Trumpism will be difficult to end overnight and marginalized communities still face threats. Asian Americans, who were routinely the targets of racism by Trump during the Covid-19 pandemic, have reported greater instances of verbal and online harassment and physical assault (Jeung et al., 2021), with many in the community now feeling concerned that they could become targets of violence (Ruiz et al., 2021). With respect to the immigration debate, the Biden administration has been criticized for its response to the most recent wave of migrants heading towards the southern border, with both the President and the Vice-President telling Central American migrants “Don't come over. Don't leave your town or city or community” (Gittleson, 2021; Kanno-Youngs, 2021).

Social media remains an integral part of our society and its use is now extended to include spaces originally reserved for in-person interactions. The connections made and the

nature of discourses in these spaces will define how people imagine themselves with respect to the question of citizenship and belonging. I argue that understanding how Central American children of immigrants engage with these questions in these spaces, and the impact it has on their sense of belonging, will remain an important topic of study for the foreseeable future. We have seen the negative social and mental effects when individuals or communities experience a sense of exclusion, so it is vital that this community feels included both within their local communities and to the nation state. With media and social media central to how these issues are debated and defined, it is vital that the voices of this community are supported and heard. Below I suggest a few areas for future study.

Social media will require more distinctive voices to be a responsive and thriving medium that can better speak on complex issues like immigration, particularly for communities that are often ignored. The need for greater representation from the Central American community was one of the most prominent themes of this study, and it reflects increased calls to include more diverse voices across all forms of media. Yet despite the growing Latino and Central American population in the United States, they are absent in most creative and leadership positions. Negrón-Muntaner and Abbas (2016) refer to the ‘Latino disconnect’ to explain how Latinos are more involved in media consumption and online content creation, yet are not represented in leadership roles in major media companies. Latinos are also some of the most frequent moviegoers in the country yet are rarely visible on screen or behind the camera as writers and directors according to the UCLA School of Social Science’s Hollywood Diversity Report 2020 (Hunt et al., 2020). Smith et. al. (2019) analyzed 200 films from 2017-2018 and found that movies that did cast Latinos had them playing roles such as criminals, or as poor or impoverished working low-level jobs or manual labor (Smith et al., 2019). The Dominican

American writer-director Diana Peralta blames Hollywood for failing to understand Latinx talent. “We’re not ‘Latin’ enough, but we’re not ‘American’ enough for them either,” she says (Aguilar, 2020). With the Latino population continuing to grow and with more issues like immigration and the border continuing to be hot-button issues, it is vital that more Latinos be placed in positions of leadership and influence. And with Central American countries often in the middle of those discussions, it is vital to ensure those communities aren’t erased when expanding Latino voices.

Expanding high speed broadband for all Americans has long been a national priority. President Biden’s plan to expand access would make broadband an essential public service that could democratize the internet (Pickard & Berman, 2021). Greater access to these spaces is important to prevent further marginalization and exclusion of communities under threat, which is especially true for poor and rural communities who often cannot afford access if it is available (Condon & Shields, 2021). One of the first steps therefore should be to expand reliable and affordable broadband access. Latinos in particular still lag behind the California average for home broadband, as 20% of families do not have a computing device at home (Gao & Hayes, 2021). Another related goal should be to increase learning and job opportunities for Latinos of Central American-origin in STEM fields. The enrollment rates for Latinos in STEM majors in college and post graduate degrees are still low, as are Latinos hired in STEM fields (Fry et al., 2021). Closing both gaps is important particularly for young people, though any effort aimed at underserved communities must go beyond simply improving access to addressing complex social problems like poverty and education (Warschauer, 2003).

There should be a greater effort to include more Central American courses in school curriculum, and to hire more Central American-origin faculty, support staff, and leadership

positions in schools. Many participants recounted how isolated they felt as Central American youths in their elementary and high school experiences, with many opting to keep their heritage and identity a secret. It was not until college that many were able to find fellow peers and role models. It is unknown how many teachers are of Central American origin in Los Angeles Unified Schools, and the Ethnic Studies page on the district's website makes no mention of Central American studies. A lack of Latino and Central American voices is not only detrimental to stopping disinformation and stereotypes around immigration and immigrants, but it also impacts other areas of potential discrimination against the community, such as algorithmic bias in the criminal justice system that adversely affects Latinos (M. Hamilton, 2018) or discriminatory housing and job advertisements on platforms like Facebook (Statt, 2018). That is why it is also important to include best practices for social media in classrooms so children can learn to interact with others and engage in critical media production.

Finally, one limitation of this study was its lack of distinct voices from within the Central American community. All of my participants hailed from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. These leaves out the views of those hailing from Honduras, Costa Rica, Panama, and Belize. It would be important therefore to seek more input not only from those countries, but also those groups within the Central American isthmus that are often ignored such as black, indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC). This study also focused on those young people who had access to community resources and the privilege of obtaining an undergraduate or postgraduate education. All were fluent in English and had regular access to reliable internet and connected devices. Future studies could look at how individuals might experience belonging without having these resources available to them.

## **Final Thoughts**

I don't know when it happened, but at some point I stopped addressing my late father as *papi* or *papá* and just started calling him *vos*. "*Mira vos! Que querés?*" My non-Latina wife who is fluent in Spanish would find this odd- how could I refer to my father as "hey you" to his face? I have always spoken the *voseo* with great pride, so it felt natural that I would use it exclusively with the person who was my strongest connection to Guatemala. Since his passing I have tried to share as much of my Guatemalan culture to my two young boys as possible. My heart sings when I hear my oldest ask "*que querés?*" or when he commands me to sit with him at bedtime by saying "*sentáte vos.*" I try to introduce them to Guatemalan cuisine, and I make it a point to have them speak with their cousins in Guatemala over FaceTime or listen to traditional marimba music on Spotify. To paraphrase one participant, these things remind me of home and I choose not to forget them.

I often ask myself: what will their Guatemalan identity look like? How will it differ from mine? While I try to expose them to that part of their culture, I know that they will develop their own unique identities just as I did. But as I see them looking at YouTube videos on a tablet (with frighteningly adept skills), I also worry about what kind of an environment they will grow up into. Will they experience discrimination in schools or online once they have their own social media accounts?

This study came out from my own personal experiences and from these questions above that I ask myself every day, and I hope that it will lead to a greater understanding about the lives of Central American-heritage youth. Going into the field (even if it was online) was an incredibly profound and moving experience, not only because of my connection to the community and in hearing such moving stories from participants, but also because it took place during one of the most trying times in recent memory. Yet participants demonstrated their strength and resilience



in the face of hate and uncertainty and displayed a strong commitment to improving the lives of those within the community and to anyone else suffering from exclusion. I was able to see in real time the renegotiation of the social contract and a reimagining of the state (Rosaldo, 1994). It gives me hope for the future and for the future of my children.

I choose not to forget. I choose to belong.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Interview Protocol

<b>Part I: Focused Life History</b>	<b>Part II: Details of Experience</b>	<b>Part III: Reflections on Meaning</b>
<p>Please describe your background (where you grew up, languages).</p> <p>Describe where your family is from, and how and why they came to the US, and specifically California.</p> <p>Describe how you prefer to self-identify (nationality, race, ethnicity). How has this identity evolved over time?</p> <p>Discuss what communities you feel you most belong to (cultural, religious, ethnic, racial, local/national)</p> <p>Please list the social media sites you commonly use and what you use them for?</p> <p>Do you often come across issues relating to immigration on social media?</p>	<p>Describe how you experienced growing up as a child of immigrant parent(s). If your parents were mixed, what was that experience like? How did it vary to other children your age?</p> <p>Describe your relationship with the Latin-American community.</p> <p>What is your understanding of the term belonging? What does it mean to you?</p> <p>To what groups do you feel a sense of belonging? What groups do you not? Explain the factors for each.</p> <p>With communities you belong to, how or in what ways (what setting) do you most experience this belonging?</p> <p>Please describe the kinds of content you see or have seen online related to issues of immigration.</p> <p>Discuss if and how you respond to this content?</p>	<p>What is your understanding of current immigration issues? How do you feel that it personally affects your or your family?</p> <p>Based on what you see on social media related to immigration (and if and how you respond), how do you think this has affected your sense of inclusion as a citizen?</p> <p>In response to Trump, do you feel more included or less?</p> <p>Is identity separate from belonging?</p> <p>How can social media help you maintain a sense of belonging?</p> <p>Is social media a space where you can experience belonging?</p>

## **Appendix B: Consent Form**

### **UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LOS ANGELES STUDY INFORMATION SHEET**

*Belonging in an era of exclusion: The role of social media in second-generation youth's perception of belonging: A Qualitative Research Study*

Christian A. Reyes and Edith Omwami from the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) are conducting a research study.

You were selected as a possible participant as someone who uses social media, and as your status as a U.S.-born citizen to at least one parent born in a Latin American country. Your participation in this research study is voluntary.

#### **Why is this study being done?**

The aim of this study is to understand how second-generation immigrants experience feelings of belonging and inclusion through their engagement with social media.

While there has been research on how young people access and utilize technology and social media to develop a sense of identity, there has been less research on how these experiences shape their sense of belonging. This question is particularly relevant for native-born children of Latino immigrants, who in the current climate of nationalism can often be targets of racism and xenophobia online. The study aims to understand these experiences to better understand how second-generation youth can develop stronger feelings of belonging as fully engaged citizens, and to better develop skills to counter hateful rhetoric that seek to exclude them.

#### **What will happen if I take part in this research study?**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, the researcher will ask you to do the following:

- Participate in an interview approximately 60-90 minutes. Select participants will be asked to appear in a 30-minute online focus group session. The total time commitment will therefore range from 90 minutes to 2 hours.
  - o The date, time, and location of each interview will be arranged in advanced and at the convenience of the participant.
  - o Interviews may be done over the phone or video chat (Skype, FaceTime).
  - o The Principal Investigator will use an electronic device to record each interview, and in addition will take handwritten notes on a notepad.
  - o Audio and/or video recordings are only to be used for transcription purposes and will not be shared with anyone. Recordings will be held in a secure location on an encrypted hard drive that is not connected to the Internet. The participant may request for audio and video recording to cease at any time during the interview.
  - o Interviews will first focus on a general overview of participant's personal background and work history. Next participants will be asked more in-depth and detailed questions about their social media usage. Finally, participants will be asked to give their personal reflections about how these experiences have shaped their sense of belonging.

#### **How long will I be in the research study?**

The time commitment will be 90 minutes for participants who are interviewed, and 2 hours for those who are also asked to participate in a focus group. The target date to complete all interviews is by June 2020. Arrangements can be made with the Principal Investigator to extend this date if necessary.

**Are there any potential risks or discomforts that I can expect from this study?**

- Participants may be asked to discuss their own experiences with hateful rhetoric or images that attack them personally as Latinos, which some may find upsetting.

**Are there any potential benefits if I participate?**

All participants will receive a \$20 gift card. Participation in the focus group is not required in order to receive the \$20 gift card after completing the interview.

Participating in this study can help shed light on how young children of immigrant-origin families perceive belonging as they participate in online spaces. Learning the factors that lead to feelings of inclusion or exclusion can better help Latino youth to respond to the messages they see on a daily basis. It can also help educators and policy makers to implement better uses of technology to address the specific needs of this community, particularly at a time of increasing hostility.

**Will information about me and my participation be kept confidential?**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can identify you will remain confidential. It will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of pseudonyms for all participant names. Places of employment will not be disclosed, nor any other personal information that may reveal the identity of the participant. All data collected by the principal investigator, including but not limited to audio or video recordings and field notes, will be kept in a secure location accessible only to the PI, which can be made available to the participant upon request. Any document files created and stored on the Principal Investigator's computer will be password-protected. All data collected will be stored for future use by the principal investigator.

**What are my rights if I take part in this study?**

- You can choose whether or not you want to be in this study, and you may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time.
- Whatever decision you make, there will be no penalty to you, and no loss of benefits to which you were otherwise entitled.
- You may refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still remain in the study.

**Who can I contact if I have questions about this study?**

• **The research team:**

If you have any questions, comments or concerns about the research, you can talk to the one of the researchers. Please contact:

Christian Reyes  
[Christian.Reyes@ucla.edu](mailto:Christian.Reyes@ucla.edu)

Professor Edith Omwami  
[omwami@gseis.ucla.edu](mailto:omwami@gseis.ucla.edu)

- **UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program (OHRPP):**

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, or you have concerns or suggestions and you want to talk to someone other than the researchers, you may contact the UCLA OHRPP by phone: (310) 206-2040; by email: [participants@research.ucla.edu](mailto:participants@research.ucla.edu) or by mail:

Box 951406,  
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1406.

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