UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Existimos porque resistimos:
Navigating identity through soccer as a Chicanx in Southern California

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Arts

in

Latin American Studies

by

Erick Calderon

Committee in charge:

Professor Juan Pablo Pardo Guerra, Chair
Professor Luis Alvarez
Professor Alexander Fattal

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DEDICATION

To my muse Esmeralda, whose smile and laugh bring joy and inspiration to my life. To my wife Estrella who has lovingly and patiently motivated me to chase my academic dreams. To my family who has been there for me in my ups and downs. To myself, the person who has spent vast amounts of time writing, reading, and researching to make this thesis a reality. To the 8-year-old me who would dive on the bed imagining he was Memo Ochoa. This thesis is for all of you.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AT&T	American Telephone and Telegraph Company
AYSO	American Youth Soccer Association
BIRG	Basking in Reflected Glory
CIF	California Interscholastic Federation
CONCACAF	Confederation of North, Central America and Caribbean Association Football
ECNL	Elite Clubs National League
ESPN	Entertainment and Sports Programming Network
MLB	Major League Baseball
MLS	Major League Soccer
NBA	National Basketball Association
NCAA	National Collegiate Athletic Association
NFL	National Football League
NHL	National Hockey League
NPL	National Premiere Leagues
NWSL	National Women's Soccer League
PRI	Partido Revolucionario Institucional
SoCal	Southern California
US	United States

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This research holds a dear place in my heart as soccer has played a pivotal role in my life. I hope I can shed light to a diaspora who through this sport have constructed and planted their identity in Southern California. I would like to acknowledge the professors who along the way have inspired me to continue growing intellectually. To my chair Juan Pablo, who has patiently molded this piece into what it is, and in turn has molded me into the researcher I have become. To my committee members Luis Alvarez and Alexandar Fattal for joining on such short notice. To my original committee David Widener and Roy Perez, who for individual reasons could not accompany me to the finish line, but through their words of encouragement and classes, aided me in my journey. I would also like to thank and acknowledge the hard work and dedication of the Latin American Studies program staff who have answered all of my questions and have made this Master's experience an amazing one. To Sarah Carvalho, Luciana Laberge, Jody Blanco, and Cambria Herrera. To my cohort, who have been there every step of the way, I would not have wanted to experience this with anyone else. Thank you, Katherine Garcia, Lucas Taglia, Marina Chebly, Kayla Aceves, Ricardo Favela, and Eden Wiggins.

VITA

2018 Associates Degree in Criminal Justice & Liberal Arts, Santa Ana College

2022 Bachelor of Arts in Sociology & Latin American Studies, Brigham Young University

2024 Master of Arts in Latin American Studies, University of California San Diego

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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Professor Juan Pablo Pardo Guerra, Chair

In my thesis I examine the role that soccer plays in the formation of identity, specifically within the Mexican diaspora in Southern California. For years scholars have researched, battled, and even gone on self-healing journeys on what it means to be a Mexican, specially within the confines of the U.S.. Although research has been done that ties the two, most have been attempts to solely view the sport as a means to fit in, assimilate, or to even cope living in this country; however, few have spoken on the ways the sport has been used purposely as a way of preventing and combating full concepts of Americanization. This thesis sheds light into that resistance and in the constant battle Chicanxs face to stay grounded to their ethnic roots.

INTRODUCTION

June 11, 2010, was a Friday, coincidentally a week before the end of my freshman high school year. The day before, everybody that I knew was talking about the "big game" that was happening tomorrow. There was speculation that everyone was going to skip school and that it would be empty. My friends asked what I was going to do? I thought about it, but I knew my parents would kill me if they found out I was not in class. The "big game" in question was the inaugural World Cup opening game where South Africa was going to face off against Mexico. Mexico being chosen as the team to play against South Africa in the world cup opener was a big deal for us. The last time they had inaugurated the prestigious tournament was in 1970, when the country hosted the games, decades before my existence. The game was going to begin at 7am pacific standard time, just in time for our first period class. There were rumors going around that some teachers were going to put the game on the TV, and I wondered if my class would be so fortunate. I entered the school to a sea of green jerseys and Mexican flags everywhere. Whispers of the game were going around, tension and excitement were felt every hallway you entered, and it felt like I was entering a stadium rather than a school. I opened the door of my classroom just to see it in normal conditions. I was devastated. It was hard to pay attention to my choir teacher, especially as I heard a roar coming from next door. The bell rang and apparently so did the referees' whistle. As I entered the hallway my friend came up from behind and exclaimed, "Did you see the goal!? Rafa tied it for us! It was crazy!" Their teacher, a Mexican American just like us, had shown the game during class. It was an amazing and historic day for most of us.

I would later learn that similar scenes, like the one in my high school, played out throughout Southern California. As one of my San Diego participants recounts,

> One of the first memories I could think of was in 2010 when I was in second grade… and they took us to the library. They brought like the most old TV into the room, and they started putting the game like, Mexico and South Africa, the first game, right? And you would think you're in the United States, they'd play like a US game, right, but like, most aren't, they're going to schools and it is like Mexican-American or Mexican. (Bob, personal communication, April 10, 2024)

Just like San Diego, being born in a city like Santa Ana, CA, it was hard to stray away from my Mexican heritage. In 2020 more than 76% of my city identified as Hispanic/Latinx (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). My high school was no different. Out of those Hispanic/Latinx students, almost all of them identified as Mexican. Our high school was like many other public high schools in the region (Buenrostro, 2016). All this to say that soccer was a big deal within our region and demographics. Such a passionate subject is often characterized as religious (Bain-Selbo, 2016). In the book *Fútbol!: Why soccer matters in Latin America*, author Joshua H. Nadel describes this passion by saying the following, "People live for it. They kill for it. It is a source of hope and a reason for suicide. It is a way out of poverty and misery for a very few and an intangible escape for millions more." (2014, p.1) This is true for Latin America and for Latin Americans for that matter, who devoutly spread the sport wherever they go. Soccer is instilled in us Latinxs and is part of our upbringing, whether directly or indirectly.

How does soccer impact a Mexican American's identity growing up? Why do Chicanxs root less for the U.S. team and more for the Mexican team? Some authors have expressed their concerns on the matter, mentioning that soccer is not used among Chicanxs as a form of keeping Mexican traditions alive or as a way of preventing further erosion from their culture, but rather as a way of integrating and forming strong roots within a U.S. working class (Pescador, 2004 p.73). Disregarding this inner rebellion to retain their ethnicity through soccer is a disservice and a lack of understanding of a community who has almost invented themselves through acts of rebellion. My thesis argues precisely that, that through selective acculturation, Chicanxs in

Southern California maintain their allegiance towards their Mexican heritage through the sport due to its sociocultural significance. By living their heritage and supporting the Mexican national team in the process, my participants continuously challenge efforts of Americanization as they strive to retain their second nationality, while not fully assimilating to the country's perceived shared culture.

My thesis also attempts to explain that rebelling is not the same as rejecting and is perhaps the reason why some authors state this concern. Choosing the Mexican national soccer team is a yearning of ethnic attachment, rather than a coup attempt to dismantle American culture. "Existimos porque resistimos" (We exist because we resist) is a statement to that truth and an indicator of how important sports are to a community who has been historically oppressed and marginalized. Soccer is central to the construction of the identity of Mexican Americans and has provided a window in which we can further explore the ever-changing dynamics to that identity.

It is important to note that my paper does not strive to measure one's cultural assimilation or degrees of loyalties to the U.S. (Valeriano, 2014), after all Chicanxs are not a monolith and are a very fluid ethnicity, rather it is an attempt to show how new generations are holding on to what they perceive is inherently their right to their culture. As many past scholars have analyzed and explained this limbo and void of being Mexican American this side of the border, I repurpose the arguments of historian David M. Potter to address the "why". A number of Mexican Americans feel deprived of a genuine connection to their Latin American past, to their heritage, and to their ancestors and therefore become fixated in becoming accepted to their diaspora (Potter, 1962). That and the marginalization they encounter that further make them feel like "other", are pull factors that engage Chicanxs in efforts to keep their ethnic attachment. That

is where soccer comes in. Sports, throughout the history of the U.S., have helped both Mexican migrants and their children, "transition into American society and helped them to reconnect with Mexican culture." (Alamillo, 2020, p.39). Soccer is specifically used in this research because of its level of popularity and admiration in Mexico, and for the impact it creates around it. In this paper you will see that soccer and its games are not just sporting events, but a space full of symbols that contest race, nationality, and identity (Sawyer & Gooding, 2007). In essence, for many, soccer becomes a medium that integrates them into their desired culture and validates their "Mexicanism".

The following excerpts and analysis from interviews found throughout the paper were conducted during the spring of 2024. Throughout the course of 3 months, I conducted 12 individual interviews to better understand how Mexican Americans in the region of Southern California create and magnify their identity through the sport of soccer. This thesis focuses primarily on these experiences, but also touches on autoethnographic and phenomenological observations and experiences as a Chicanx myself, and as an employee of a professional soccer team in SoCal who has observed and worked with many soccer players, staff, and coaches in the region. I also do textual analysis of written text, social media posts, films, and various videos (television commercials, interviews, etc…).

Furthermore, participants in this research were recruited by way of a flier that circulated through my social media, through the Latin American Studies department at UC San Diego, and through local soccer coaches in San Diego. The three main filtering criteria for participants was for them to consider themselves a fan of the sport, self-identify as Mexican/Mexican-American/Chicano/a/x, and be 18 years or older. Interviews were held via Zoom call, phone, and in person. 9 of the interviews were between the ages of 18-30 and the rest were 30 and over.

Participants represented the counties of Riverside, Los Angeles, San Diego, and Orange. 5 of my interviews were with women. As soccer has been an ever-growing sport of practice for women everywhere, I made an effort to represent their point of view and shine a light on the Chicana perspective. Various points of view are addressed from my pool with participants being everyday avid fans, former players, and coaches representing colleges, NPL, and AYSO clubs. Lastly, to maintain anonymity and preserve the integrity of this research, names have been replaced by pseudonyms and identifying markers have been erased.

Focus on Southern California

Why choose Southern California as a point of interest in my research? Because it is a unique melting pot, composed of a majority of a population who identify as Mexican, Mexican American, and/or Chicanx. Its cultural, historical, and activist past contributes to this. Much of this stems from the unique location it occupies as a borderland. Its proximity to the Mexican border provides a steady flow of cultural, financial, and social exchanges that creates a distinct enclave, peculiar to anywhere else in the world. The rise and influence of the Chicano movement is a direct result of this distinction, as its roots stem from the region. Other social counter identities such as the brown berets, 'cholo' gang culture, low-rider car clubs, and others are a testament to the legacy of such movements in Southern California. These identities are then copied and replicated throughout the world, thanks to the help of Hollywood and the music industry who are also unique inhabitants of the region (Thompson-Hernandez, 2019; Pheonix, personal communication, April 15, 2024). Sport teams have a special place in the hearts of Southern Californians, it is an extension of them. Its rich GDP, weather, and fanbase invites cities and independent investors to finance and back up sports teams. Not counting the whole state, there are 15 franchises of major sports leagues (MLB/NFL/NBA/NHL/MLS/NWSL)

between only San Diego, Orange, and Los Angeles County. These three southernmost counties have more professional teams than any other state[1]. These enclaves in SoCal help create a unique sporting diaspora, that in turn "...help us rethink our understanding of hybrid identity in Chicano/a history" (Alamillo, 2020, p.10). My thesis will show how this intersection between sports fandom and the unique ethnic Southern California enclave creates a distinct rich setting on how identity is formed in an imagined community (Leiva, 2013, p.347).

Many of the terms used throughout this research paper have been debated and are still in contention, so I wish to define them for matters of clarity and purpose. For starters, the terms Mexican, Mexican American, and Chicanx, unless otherwise noted, will be used interchangeably since it is used in that manner by those being interviewed. For matters of this paper it is an individual of Mexican descendance (whether immediate or through generations) that lives in the US. The usage of the letter "x" has been included in the word Chicano/a as a way of removing medical binaries and therefore being more inclusive to groups who have historically been ignored and outcasted by the collective (Vargas et al., 2017, p.35). It will be used as an ethnic identifier, I only rely on its original term (o/a) when referring to the historical movement, other originating events, or to specifically point out a gender.

Southern California (SoCal) is mentioned repeatedly as it is the region of interest in my research. When mentioning it I am referring to the 10 southern counties in California[2]. I am aware that this may be controversial as there has always been a gray area to where North, Central, and Southern California begins and ends. My end decision to include Kern County as the cut-off derived from three areas. These included government agencies' interpretations,

[1] Lakers, Clippers, Sparks, Angel City FC, San Diego Wave FC, Padres, Rams, Chargers, Dodgers, Angels, Galaxy, LAFC, SDFC, Kings, Ducks
[2] San Luis Obispo, Ventura, Los Angeles, Orange, San Diego, Riverside, Imperial, San Bernardino, Kern, Santa Barbara

historical events in the county such as Cesar Chavez's labor and civil rights movement which were instrumental during the Chicano movement, and even gang affiliations like the Mexican Mafia (Sureños) and Nuestra Familia (Norteños) (CALBHBC; VLADTV, 2023; United Farm Workers). The latter is relevant because "Cholo" culture and lifestyle is often intertwined with Chicanx culture.

Similarly controversial, the term "identity" has been a word molded to the benefit of one's field of research. Whether it is politics, sociology, or religion, identity has been a topic of discussion, perhaps because its usage can affect and promote a certain discourse. The same could be said of this paper's usage of the term; however, it is important to note that it is exactly this versatility that enables the term to possibly explain patterns found in research. I opt to use James D. Fearon's definition, as it fits well with my findings, and my participant's understanding of the term. Identity has a double sense that is both social and personal. It "refers simply to a social category, a set of persons marked by a label and distinguished by rules deciding membership and (alleged) characteristic features or attributes. In the second sense of personal identity, an identity is some distinguishing characteristic (or characteristics) that a person takes a special pride in or views as socially consequential but more-or-less unchangeable." (Fearon, 1999, p.2).

Lastly, the terms assimilation and acculturation are key to the theoretical framework of this study, as they play a crucial role in the intentions of my participants and others alike. Acculturation occurs when "a minority group adopts the practices of the dominant culture and is a one-way process", whereas assimilation "is the decline of an ethnic distinction and its corollary cultural and social differences" (Alba & Nee, 2003, p.23). Like identity, both words reside in the political spectrum and have an agenda of unifying a diverse population, whether by will or by force. As discrimination and anti-immigrant sentiment rises, so does the desire to apply these

terms as they play with the concept of nationality and nation building. This is especially true with concepts of Americanization, which is the forced assimilation of ethnic groups in the US through education, language, and other social and cultural factors. This concept arose due to the perceived threat that the influx of immigrants would tarnish and replace the distinct forms of American living (Mirel, 2010). Essentially, those seen as opposing such unification efforts by celebrating their diversity or even attempting to retain it, are seen as unpatriotic or ungrateful. As Benedict Anderson argues, people, institutions, and governments attempt to create an "imagined community" by thinking everyone in a country shares a "mutual interests…and a deep, horizontal comradeship" with each other, even if they have not all met (Anderson, 2016).

This paper will examine the intersection of sports, nationalism, and politics within Chicanxs in Southern California. It will begin doing so by examining the historical background and context that has inevitably brought these points of discussion into fruition. Then, the question of identity will be analyzed through the oral histories recollected during my interviews. These responses will be explored through the framework of Americanization, as concepts of assimilation and acculturation will be addressed.

I: History of soccer and the construction of identity

Understanding Mexico's indigenous past is vital in understanding Mexicans and how they perceive themselves. It is a source of great pride that has for many years been cemented in the psyche of the nation and its people. Exploring this foundation can help us comprehend concepts of rebellion that often come with notions of indigeneity, as resistance and resilience are a constant in the battle against historic and modern-day colonialism.

Aztec warriors run through a dense jungle, embodying the strength and velocity of a jaguar. Multitudes of them approach an encampment of enemies ready to battle to the death, ferocious in their demeanor. Being victorious after the battle, the emperor and his people shout in immense jubilation on top of a pyramid, satisfied with their strength and bravery. The camera then spans and shows Javier Hernandez (aka Chicharito), a Mexican national team soccer player, dribbling down the field with the same ferociousness. During this transition of scenes the narrator says, "Their giant palaces stand as witnesses. They remind us that once, we were warriors. But the land is wise, and now brings them back. They're the new Aztec warriors. Some say they play. I say they fight…Once, we were warriors. But they still are." (AT&T Mobility, 2010). This AT&T commercial was shown prior to the inaugural game of the 2010 world cup. Its commercial aim was to promote their telecommunication company as equally fast and superior; however, it played with the sentiment of national pride and fandom. Their advertisement embodied the bravado that many Mexicans feed off when thinking about their rich historical and cultural past. It is this idea that their history and warrior mentality makes them suitable for such a competitive sport that is soccer.

Although organized soccer did not come until the early 1900's to the Americas, a similar ballgame was present long before the conquistadors had arrived. Pok-ta-Pok to the Mayans and

Ulama to the Aztecs, this ballgame consisted of 9 to 16 pound balls made of rubber native to the region which was then bounced around using only their hips (Besnier et al., 2017; Blakemore, 2023). Some ball courts found in the country had two stone rings, one on each end, similar to basketball hoops. “Sending a ball through the ring, which must have been a rare event, may have resulted in immediate victory.” (Besnier et al., 2017, p21). These ball games were a surprise to the Europeans that came to the region, they had not seen anything like it. Because rubber was new to them, some thought that the balls were possessed by spirits when they bounced (Besnier et al., 2017). Of course, rules and formats varied with indigenous groups and similar ball games were found all over the continent as far as modern-day Paraguay (Culturapy, 2014). Many of these games, especially in the Maya and Aztec civilizations, had religious implications. It was not just a game for amusement, but had a respected role in society. In fact, it is mentioned numerous times in the Popol Vuh as playing a crucial role in the making of our universe, at least how the Maya had conceived it (Tedlock, 1996). This is key to note, because it was precisely this importance that the sport played that convinced the Spanish conquistadors and missionaries alike to erase it from cultural memory, as they banned the practice of it. However, today the sport is alive through practice and text, and one might say through soccer.

These historic ball games are a source of pride for many Mexicans. It informs the Mexican psyche that we have a rich tradition in sports and have a shared inheritance to pre-Colombian notions of soccer, after all, modern fútbol is a cultural amalgamation; Its concepts have foreign roots and its ball is a mix of rubber (native to the Americas) and leather (native to Europe). Similar to the commercial portrayed at the beginning of the chapter, many other television ads promote the notion that Mexico’s historical success in soccer stems from its indigenous past, after all these symbols are everywhere you go in the country (Jesus Lira, 2014).

From the image of the eagle-eating-serpent on the Mexican flag, to the Amerindian culture found in currency, and food, these symbols are used to magnify the country's indigenous foundation. These can be found within the Mexican Soccer Federation as well. For example, the current mascot for the national team is Kin, an animated figure who "...represents a Mayan magician and is dressed in the country's representative colors. He also wears a mask on his face and feathers on his head." (Torres, 2022).

These notions of indigeneity and pride made their way among Chicanxs in southern border states and were adopted heavily during the Chicano movement of the 1960's. In 1967, Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales would publish "Yo soy Joaquin" a poem that encapsulated the identity of many Mexican Americans who battled with the conflicting notions of being mestizo. In it he would claim that he was an Aztec warrior, an Aztec God, while also being a Christian and a Spaniard. He would end his poem by stating,

I am Aztec prince and Christian Christ.

I SHALL ENDURE!

I WILL ENDURE! (Gonzales, 1969)

This poem's popularity catapulted because its message resonated with many who could not find the words to properly describe their identity and their struggles. It would ignite a series of discussions that would ultimately provide a stage for the first National Chicano Liberation Youth Conference held in 1969, headed by Corky himself. A man by the artistic name "Alurista" would perform another powerful poem called "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlan" or "The Spiritual Plan for Aztlan". His poem, which advocated for social justice, but most importantly claimed indigenous heritage by reclaiming this land as Aztlan[3], was adopted and used as the epilogue for

[3] "Aztlan, in the Nahuatl tongue of ancient Mexico, means 'the lands to the north.' Thus Aztlan refers to what is now known as the southwestern states of this country" (see Gonzales, Rodolfo and Alberto Urista, 1969)

the conference, and as the prologue for the student movement of the time (MECHA) (Olguin, 2013, p.32). These exercises of reclaiming indigenous identity among Chicanx would prove important in identity formation and would impact current cultural practices. “This is important because if one lacks an identity the inherent result is assimilation, but if on the contrary one possesses this identity there is something to hold on to, one can create a culture” (Díaz López, 2019, p.168)

Wearing Identity

In 1996 ABA Sport brand launched what would be, “one of the most sought after (and faked) jerseys of all time.” (Cult Kits). ABA Sport had guaranteed itself a contract to make a jersey for the national soccer team for the upcoming 1998 world cup. After decades of various relatively simple designs by UMBRO, Levi’s, and Adidas, ABA decided to step it up and put a show-stopping design that would relate to the Mexican people. It was a zoomed-in stenciled image of the Aztec calendar, covered in a staple green color. The face of the Aztec god of the sun, Tonatiuh, was dead center in the middle with its eyes popping out and tongue out in a ferocious demeanor. It was a hard to miss image, as it covered nearly all of the front and backside of the jersey, it was clearly a statement of identity. “Using the iconic Sun Stone design, the shirt represented the country’s pre-Hispanic roots and fused the culture and history of the country in a shirt that was widely acclaimed both inside and outside of Mexico.” (Cult Kits). Since 1996, 8 of out the last 18 designs have had some sort of pre-Hispanic marker, whether it be feathers from an Aztec warrior or historic patterns and symbols found in temples and codices. The last world cup in 2022, had a similar feel to the ‘98 design, as its patterns did not allude to pre-Hispanic origins, but it directly stemmed from them. The away jersey was an off-white with stamped red wine color designs of five Aztec cultural icons, the malinalli, conch shell, spiral,

staff, and fire. “These items represented on the away jersey display the history, roots, and culture of our country, carrying knowledge and power to the playing fields of Qatar, revealing not only a uniform, but armor filled with magic, power and poetry,” adidas and the Mexican Soccer Federation said in a joint statement (Baxter, 2022). In an ESPN FC show, Sebastian Salazar and Hercules Gomez, both Mexican American correspondents, praised the jersey highly by stating, “Everybody seems to be going wild for these things. I think I don’t care what it costs, I will pay for it for sure” and “I’ve not seen a jersey so inspiring from Mexico since 98, the Aztec calendar one in that world cup” (ESPN FC, 2022). This sentiment was shared by many Mexicans on this side of the border, as it became the second most sold jersey in the United States, behind the U.S. national team (Soccer.com, 2022). In fact, other than Arizona, it would outsell the U.S. national team in all three border states (California, New Mexico, and Texas). Mexican Americans are undoubtedly a protagonist in this consumption of the sport, and contribute heavily to the U.S. Hispanic consumer market, but to many of them the jersey represents an extension of their identity.

Figure 1: ABA Jersey

Figure 2: Qatar Jersey

Wearing the Mexican national soccer jersey is more than a fashion statement or choosing a national soccer team to represent during a tournament, it is a chosen attachment to our lost indigeneity and a form of resistance. Similar to traditional clothes such as guayaberas, huipiles, and huaraches, the jersey occupies a space in the Chicanx imaginary in terms of culture and identity. As colonial rulers banned and burned many indigenous markers, including that of the ball games, their aim was to civilize and force assimilation, often in the name of Christianity. By doing so they began a process of "desindianización" or "dis-Indianization", a term coined by Mexican anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla to describe "the process through which Mexicans have been historically and systematically stripped away, at times quite literally, from any signifier of Indigenous ethnic identity." (Gutiérrez y Muhs, 2020, p.92). This process began with colonial occupation, but continued through eurocentrism, modernity, racialization, and capitalism, all fruits of "coloniality of power" (Quijano et al., 2024). Being Chicanx puts us in an interesting realm, where we not only continuously practice mestizaje, but being this side of the border, we live and practice Western ways of life too. These practices, like Norma E. Cantu explains, "place us more in the realm of non-Indigenous…" (2020, p.35) and therefore, makes us want to prove that we truly do belong in our diaspora and that our wearing of jerseys is a reclaiming of our forced erasure of our indigeneity, even more when the soccer jerseys have emblems of our indigenous past.

When asked how they showed or expressed their fandom, wearing and buying a jersey was a constant among my participants. Nick and Gonzalo mentioned that they buy and collect jerseys as a manifestation of their pride to the Mexican national team. Wearing them often means publicly expressing their support and said pride. As Bob states, "So, like, I think just being proud whenever I wear the jersey or something. I think that also plays a role" (Bob, personal

communication, April 10, 2024). Natalie also shares a similar sentiment, “Especially like if you see somebody wearing maybe a jersey that's not even like in the United States or in Mexico or is just somewhere else, you’re like, ‘oh my god’, you identify with that person. It's just like automatically brings you like, makes you feel like home.” (Natalie, personal communication, April 11, 2024).

Wearing something like a jersey brings us much closer to our desired imagined community as it is quite literally with us or on us. We can practice culture through food, music, and other means, but wearing something quite physically allows us to display our culture everywhere we go. The jersey becomes an extension of ourselves, and of our eagerness to resist further colonial practice. We wear it as a statement to others that this is us, and that we are here to stay. Like Gloria Anzaldúa points out in her book Borderlands/La Frontera,

> this land was Mexican once
>
> was Indian always
>
> and is.
>
> And will be again. (1987, p.25)

Migration and the Spread of Fútbol in the U.S.

From its introduction to the Americas, to its usage in politics, soccer’s societal impact is hard to undermine. Analyzing these past historical events gives us a lens into how modern-day soccer became such an icon to the Latin American population, and it turn to the migrants who have continuously come into this country to chase the “American Dream”. In 1863, more than two centuries after the Europeans had arrived in the Americas, the sport of soccer would be “codified” with rules and regulations by the English (Wernicke, 2022, p.13). Soccer was introduced to Latin America via the vast European migration that occurred during the early

1800s. Countries like Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil were among the first to be stung by the modern-day practices of the sport. It was not until the late 19th century that British mining and textile workers introduced the sport to Mexico. As the sport became popular among the masses, British companies in the country began establishing clubs and competitions (Pescador, 2007). During this same period, Mexico had been very active in sports. In fact, it had enacted national policies that required every state to have physical education programs as a way to modernize the country and "civilize" the people (Elsey & Nadel, 2019). These policies only grew in popularity post-revolution, as Mexico was trying to find their national identity amidst a tough time. The only difference was that the physical education programs, now enacted by the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) were more focused on creating a "revolutionary rhetoric", rather than civility (Elsey & Nadel, 2019, p.147).

Mexico's new national curriculum sent teachers to rural towns and cities to implement these teachings as they aimed to create individuals "…who could contribute efficiently to the defense of the nation" (Brewster & Brewster, 2009, p.732). This rhetoric allowed the country to use sports to further reinforce gender roles and to create a hyper sense of power and masculinity (Alamillo, 2010, p.22). This practice would eventually limit the advancement of women's professional soccer in the future as women were limited to swimming, track and field, and tennis because soccer was deemed "too rough" (Elsey & Nadel, 2019). These programs helped propel soccer as one of its main sporting attractions in the country and it became a staple among many due to its accessibility and affordability.

As soccer became vastly popular, the Mexican government and other nations began to use it politically, even using it as a "diplomatic tool" (Elsey & Nadel, 2019, p.147). In fact, as a way to reinforce his good neighbor program, president Franklin D. Roosevelt held numerous

exhibition games in Latin America during the 1930's and 1940's to improve regional relationships (Iber, 2011, p.132). The same sentiment came from popular figures like Eva and Juan Peron from Argentina who "found in soccer a magnificent partner for the manipulation of the masses, prolonging their stay in power…" (Wernicke, 2022, p.11). Soccer had reached the United States at a similar time, but it never became as equally as passionate in the sport as their Latin American counterparts did; however, World War 2 would change that.

As the sport's light diminished behind baseball and American Football, Mexican migrants took it to themselves to carry and reignite the torch on a local level. They began establishing amateur clubs all over Southern California. In late 1940's Mexican professional teams began touring Los Angeles, playing friendlies against local clubs. In 1948, Atlante of Mexico played and beat the Los Angeles Scots and the Maygers. "The exhibition of local talent playing against Mexican-league players particularly enthralled Mexican Americans in Los Angeles." (Goldberger, 2012, p.14). The fascination would continue when Manchester United would visit and play against Atlas of Mexico in June of 1950, drawing the game 6 to 6 in a suspenseful match that drew over 15,000 fans (Soccer …Manchester United Versus Mexico's Atlas Club ...Action Pictures, 1950). In addition, Mexico's hosting of the Olympic Games in 1968 and the World Cup in 1970 would further spur up this soccer frenzy, officially displacing "baseball, wrestling, and boxing as Mexico's favorite sport (Pescador, 2007, pp.76-77). Soccer was officially here to stay. Mexican migrants would turn to the sport as a way to observe their culture and cultivate "Mexicanidad" in Southern California. "Sports helped Mexicans ease their transition into American society and helped them to reconnect with Mexican culture" (Alamillo, 2020, p.39).

Figure 3: Atlas vs. Manchester United

Through a complex process of cultural adaptation, Mexican migrants and multi-generational Mexican Americans began creating their own identity and traditions in Southern California (Sanchez, 1993). Through selective acculturation, they navigated (and still do) back and forth between Mexican and American cultures and traditions, selective when to be whom and when to do what. This living "in-between" cultures characterizes Chicanxs as their way of being has always been "a tolerance of contradiction" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p.79). Although not every immigrant shares "the same process of cultural adaptation" (Sanchez, 1993, p.5), visual and historic patterns suggest that soccer became a common shared must among Mexicans in the region.

Soccer being the primary sport of practice among Mexican migrants, became an essential figure in Southern California communities. It provided a venue of physical activity, sense of Mexican national pride, and important source of local social capital. Today, immigrant men,

especially those of Latin American descent are becoming more and more of a habitual scene at local parks and established soccer fields as they play fútbol and create social ties with one another. These fields become safe havens where they can express their passion, while also exchanging ideas and social resources like jobs, medical referrals, and other forms of social capital (Trouille, 2021). The sport, and its practice, has also become a way to make a stance against systematic and racial abuses who have historically impacted the Mexican community in the region. These social and political tensions against the community are not new and have occurred throughout the same timeframe as the development of soccer in Southern California that was mentioned previously. The mass Mexican deportation of the 1930's, the inciting of the Zoot Suit Riots during the 1940's, and the police brutality that led to the murder of journalist Ruben Salazar during the Chicano Moratorium March of 1970, all unfolded alongside the growth of the sport, and it shaped the environment in which soccer evolved.

David Trouille, author of *Fútbol in the Park: Immigrants, Soccer, and the Creation of Social Ties*, explains that the urgency in creating his book stemmed from the anti-immigrant rhetoric being mentioned by then presidential candidate Donald Trump. Trump during the running of his first campaign had said that Mexico was not sending their "best" people to the U.S., rather they were bringing their criminals and rapist (CNN, 2015). Trouille then mentioned, "The men I interacted with for eleven years at the park are not hardened criminals; but when outsiders believe they are— against all evidence— they are reacting to external cues that make them feel unsafe" (Trouille, 2021, p.4). TV Azteca, one of Mexico's main television channels, poked fun at this discourse by creating a commercial ad using Donald Trump's exact words. While the republican nominee stated the phrases, "The country is in serious trouble", "We don't have victories anymore", and "The American dream is dead", the video footage in the

background showed reels of Mexico humiliating the U.S. national team in previous soccer matches (Francisco Valtierra, 2015). It then finishes by promoting the 2015 CONCACAF Cup, of which Mexico would come up victorious. This type of rhetoric creates more incentive for Chicanxs to use soccer as a way of combating complete assimilation, as soccer is not seen as an American sport. It also facilitates fandom towards the Mexican national team, which fuels the historical Mexico-U.S. rivalry. This is what makes soccer fandom around the borderland especially unique.

Rooting for the team of your descendants rather than rooting for the nation you are in becomes an act of rebellion. It is a way of integrating to the American culture, rather than fully assimilating to it and losing what is inheritably yours. I should note, as I have previously, that this rebellion and resistance are not signs of disloyalty to the U.S., rather the opposite is true. It is a sign of an attempt to be a part of, but having to react defensively to stand up against what they see as unfair treatment or control by the larger community (Santamaria Gomez, 2010, p.231). Stadiums provide a place for the "…expression of national feelings and allegiances" where political rivalries and tensions play out on the field (Storey, 2021, p.3). This can be very evident when the U.S. faces Mexico in soccer tournaments held in the U.S.. This was evident in 1998, when the U.S. faced Mexico for a regional championship game known as the Gold Cup. The event took place in Los Angeles, where over 90,000 people filled the Rose Bowl and many more gathered outside the stadium. The Mexican team would eventually come out victorious with a 1-0 victory. Although that was the highlight of the game, the big news came from the demographic of the crowd that attended. The attendees were overwhelmingly Latinxs. This was when "the American players found out ... that playing in Los Angeles" was no longer a "home game for the United States national team." (Gutierrez, 1999, p.482). With the crowd against them a U.S.

player named Alexis Lalas would soon complain to a reporter stating, “You don't get used to it. It stinks every time. I'm all for roots and understanding where you come from and having a respect for your homeland, but tomorrow morning all of those people are going to get up and work in the United States and live in the United States and have all the benefits of living in the United States. I would never be caught dead rooting for any other team than the United States because I know what it's given me.” (Gutierrez, 1999, p.483). Alexis Lalas later apologized for his comments, but the idea that any immigrant or their descendants are obliged to root for the nation they are in, rather than have the ability to choose, feeds into the ideology of assimilation and forced Americanization. Today, Mexico and many other Latin American national teams play to home crowds in the U.S.. Chicanxs have provided the Mexican national team a home in Southern California, while the national team in return has provided a community and a safe haven where Chicanxs can negotiate their relationship with one another (Leiva, 2013, p.347).

Upbringing and Fandom

Days before I graduated with my associate’s degree in criminal justice, my Mexican grandfather began interrogating me, asking if becoming a police officer was really what I wanted to do. After I had nodded affirmatively, he began preaching how good this country had been to us and how the decision I had made to serve this country was an honorable one. He paused for a while, looked at me with a serious face and told me that no matter what I did, or how I decided to serve this country, I should never ever root for the U.S. national soccer team. We both laughed infectiously and when I had a moment to breathe, I replied with an affirmative, “Of course. I would never.” I often laugh when I remember that encounter with my grandfather, but it was not until I began writing this thesis that I began to question why he even bothered to mention it. I understood that underneath that comical interaction were layers of patriotism, pride, and history.

Traditionally and historically, the Mexican national soccer team has always been a powerhouse in the region. It is a member of the CONCACAF (Confederation of North, Central America and Caribbean Association Football) and holds the most Gold Cup titles, a tournament hosted by the confederation every two years (Concacaf). It has also qualified for the pinnacle soccer tournament that is the World Cup 17 times, and has qualified consecutively since 1994, making it one of six countries to do so (ElJalisco). This rich history and success provide people with a sense of pride and it makes it easier for them to become attached to the team, because putting it simply, people like being on the winning side. Sport psychologist Robert Cialdini describes this social tie to success as BIRG (Basking in Reflected Glory). In his study, Cialdini describes BIRG or BIRGing as an act of "publicly announcing one's associations" with anything or anyone deemed successful (Cialdini & Lanzetta, 1976, p.366). People do this by wearing jerseys, proudly waving their country's flag, buying souvenirs, chanting songs, etc... The use of terms such as "us" and "we" are also used as a way of stating that they are an extension of the team. The success of the Latin American national teams at the world stage has created this BIRG mentality in many Latinx individuals. Ultimately, the country's success is their success. These notions of BIRG elevate fandom to a unique point in soccer, especially when politics or other social issues are involved. This is what ultimately elevates the U.S. - Mexico rivalry. They produce this aura around soccer that is sacred-like. As Mexican writer Juan Villoro explains in his book, *Dios es redondo*, "Soccer is a secular religion" and fans treat it as such (2016). This statement is true in many parts of the world, but it is especially true for Mexicans.

Herencia

Just as English merchants spread the sport of soccer into the Americas, Latinx migrants have spread the sport and its fandom into the United States. For many Latinxs, soccer is their first love, and for some their only. Just like culture, language, and gastronomy are passed down and carried to the next generation, so is the passion for the sport of soccer. My emotional connection to the Mexican team is largely from my encounters with the team as a child. Supporting Mexican league teams like Club America are also entrenched in my memory. These early experiences made it easy for me to choose soccer as my sport of practice when I turned 8. The same is true for many Southern Californians. Ricky, a native of Orange County, said, "My first exposure to soccer on TV was the Mexican League and to us my family is a big Chivas fan. They're from the region." (personal communication, April 22, 2024). The majority of my participants agreed with Ricky, naming Mexican teams like Club America, Pumas, Pachuca, and Chivas as being a fundamental cornerstone in their exposure to soccer.

> I mean, my whole family likes soccer, basically, right? So I would play with some of my older cousins. And then I want to say about around age seven, maybe. I used to see them watching soccer to like my tios and tias and my parents, right. But around age seven, I asked my dad, 'Hey, what team do you go for? And why?' You know, and he's like, 'Oh, I go for Pachuca because they're from Hidalgo.' And the rest is history, bro. Die hard Pachuca fan. I'm probably the biggest one you'll ever meet." (Alex, personal communication, May 21, 2024).

This introduction to the sport and the fandom that follows suit is made possible by two things, inheritance and television exposure. A YouTube video posted by the Mexican national soccer team engages with this concept of inheritance. It shows a single father introducing soccer to her daughter at a young age. He wakes her up from her sleep at 6 in the morning to watch her first World Cup. She sits down, half asleep and half lost into what is taking place, while her father is evidently engaged in the soccer match. When Mexico scores and ties against Italy he

jumps and yells and motions her daughter to do the same. Seeing the joy it brings to her father, she looks at him and gradually forms a smile and joins in on the celebration. The caption of the video reads “The legacy of #MexicoOfMyLife is a generational legacy that makes us live the love for Mexico together — always Mexico” (Selección Nacional de México, 2022). The first comment of the YouTube video embodies the attempt of the post to play with fan’s nostalgia and memory. “My first World Cup that I watched was 1998 with my grandfather. May he rest in peace. I am from the USA but my team will always be Mexico.” (Selección Nacional de México, 2022). Ricky, who coincidentally grew up with a single mother, mentioned an identical experience growing up.

> My mom who wasn't necessarily a big Chivas fan, did follow the national team pretty heavily and actually one of my first memories of soccer at home is the [2002] World Cup, Italy versus Mexico. And I remember it because my mom woke us up all early in the morning. I think it was a three or something. The game must have been like around two or four in the morning and my mom had it playing in the background while we were trying to sleep and so I got to see the Borgetti goal where he like wrapped his neck all around the ball and scored on Italy which is pretty awesome. (personal communication, April 22, 2024)

What might seem solely like marketing videos, are actual lived experiences that live rent-free in the minds of people and influence their lives. Attesting to this notion of inheritance, Gonzalo, a participant from Mexico City who grew up in Orange County, talks about his introduction to the sport and how that parental connection with his father made him want to have similar ones with his children.

> Once I got here to this country at the age of 10, that’s when I got introduced to soccer. My dad took [my brothers and I] to the park and just shoot around. And one time, a coach saw us playing and he just invited us to come over to go try out for his team and we went and we played with that same coach for like 10 years. We stayed with him all of our childhood until we started playing in high school and college. I'm the oldest of three, with two brothers. They also play soccer…So pretty much all of my family's around soccer. I have three kids, two of them are into soccer now so they're starting out. (personal communication, April 28, 2024)

As Andrew Guest describes in his book, *Soccer in Mind: A Thinking Fan's Guide to the Global Game*, many "...fans likewise identify with their teams because of their community, their family, or other deep personal connections. But at some point, most fans start to think about their affiliations and make conscious decisions about what they mean." (2022, p.33) By inheritance, American born Latinxs like myself buy into the idea of national pride of our parent's countries and soon BIRG takes its own effect. Personal encounters with political, racial, and social dilemmas only add and contribute to this. "These early experiences and collective memories directly feed into continued support for the Mexican national team." (Valeriano, 2014, p.297).

Secondly, television plays a huge role in how Chicanxs and their families access soccer. Research stated that among all Hispanics in the country, 55% mention they watch some portion of their television in Spanish, with 28% saying they exclusively watch in that language and with 26% saying they watch it in both languages equally (Taylor et al., 2012). However, the same research suggests that there is a vivid generational impact. As Hispanics become more Americanized with the second and third generation, their Spanish viewership goes tremendously down. By the second generation 69% watch mostly English and by the third that percentage drastically increases to 83% (Taylor et al., 2012). Despite this, data suggests that this has a low-to-no-impact on soccer as "90% of Latino fans prefer to watch broadcasts in Spanish, but 65% of white non-Latino fans do as well." (Dale Leal, 2024). Due to this high demand, two of the largest tv stations catering to Spanish speaking audiences in the U.S., Univision and Telemundo constantly broadcast Mexican league matches and other soccer tournaments. In fact, from 2016-2023, Liga MX Clausura Finals were up 74% in viewership, showing that there is no end in sight to that growth (Nielsen Media Research, 2024). This is where inheritance comes to play. The fact that Americanization has no significant effect on how Hispanics view and consume their sport

speaks to the significance soccer has in their lives and how it is attached to their ethnicity. In other words, through selective acculturation, Chicanxs choose to engage in American ways of life by consuming American media, but when it comes to something as special as soccer, there is no other alternative on how to practice the sport or their fandom but through their ethnic roots.

U.S./Mex Rivalry

The level of tensions, not only between the United States and Mexico, but between Mexican Americans and their white counterparts in the U.S. often make it seem "as if the recent inter-ethnic and national tensions in the region are new and unique," but history informs us otherwise (Gutiérrez, 1999, p.484). Mexico has always been in competition with the United States, or the other way around, depending on who you ask. From the Mexican American War of 1846 to the constant present political bickering, Mexico and the U.S. have had a lengthy back-and-forth tug. On a sporting level, the United States has always been superior in terms of having state-of-the-art leagues, stadiums, and players. High School stadiums in the U.S. look like professional stadiums, and the amount of money the NCAA makes during the school year is incomprehensible. They are a sporting powerhouse who take sports on a different level than most other countries do. South African comedian Trevor Noah humorously makes this observation in a stand-up routine by saying, "You analyze them. You worship them. You watch the game before the game. You watch the game after the game. You talk about what might happen in the game… It's just the craziest thing I've seen in my life" (2019). However, even with all this money and attention thrown at sports, Mexico has been historically superior to the U.S. in one of them, that is soccer. This fact is crucial to note and to understand because it feeds the U.S.-Mexico rivalry, and it also allows Chicanxs to reinforce or to challenge their concepts of identity

as they navigate their biculturalism in deciding who to root for. Through a geopolitical lens, to one nation, winning means maintaining a status quo, to another, it is an identity test.

Soccer, for the most part, is a safe space for people to interact in. Appreciating the soccer history behind the rivalry, most fans settle their differences through innocent back and forth taunting. Oscar, who plays for a club team in Temecula, a city in Riverside County, expressed to me what this looks like with his friends during match week. “The team's basically like half Mexican, half white. So, half the team is like ‘no Mexico!’ and the other half is like ‘no the U.S.!’ So, like if you know the environment, at least with my teammates and like my soccer friends will just kind of be like that head butting.” (personal communication, April 11, 2024). For others like Natalie, this rivalry goes beyond the context of sport and reveals deeper emotions found in previous unfortunate interactions. She states, “I think it's more than a rivalry. And I feel like it stems from, I don't know, maybe things that we lived as Mexicans living in the USA. So, like, when I associate, like, when I think of like Mexico vs USA in terms of like, a game, I kind of associate it with that history that we've lived. So, it's kind of like, makes me all mad, not mad but like, just like, oh, we have to beat them, you know...” (personal communication, April 11, 2024).

Furthermore, Natalies’ feelings are a common sight amongst several Chicanxs in Southern California who have faced microaggressions, racism, anti-immigrant rhetoric, and all sorts of discrimination against them or their diaspora. Jasmine mentioned to me just how difficult it was growing up in that negative ambiance and how that reinforced her identity and allegiance to Mexico and motivated her to give back to her Chicanx community. “We ended up going to public high school, which is most likely well known for a very racist environment. The head of

the KKK lived there, so we did have a lot of race wars and whatnot there. Growing up it was a struggle, especially for Latinos and Chicanos there" (personal communication, May 2, 2024).

Due to these experiences, this rivalry provides a unique opportunity for Chicanxs, and even the country of Mexico, to momentarily strip away from its negative connotations and gives them an opportunity, "...to feel a symbolic superiority, even if it is ephemeral, in the face of a society that, in general terms, uses them economically and discriminates against them racially and culturally." (Santamaria Gomez, 2010, p.379). In the forward of the book, Perspectives on the U.S.-Mexico Soccer Rivalry: Passion and Politics in Red, White, Blue, and Green, journalist Andres Martinez recounts, "When I was a kid, the United States posed no threat to Mexico at soccer. And that was an important salve for Mexican's identity." (Kassing & Meân, 2017, p.viii). This sentiment brings power to these ethnic groups who find themselves oppressed through ideology or political acts that reinforce the global south and global north narratives. These feelings elevate international rivalries as this mentality is passed into the stands and later into the fields.

A Winning U.S. Team

In a recent documentary, legendary Mexican national soccer team captain Rafael Marquez stated his thoughts on his rival opponents when they faced them during an elimination round in the 2002 World Cup. "With the U.S. being the world power in all other sports. So if we're better at soccer, we should have no reason to lose against them." (Armell, 2024, 28:34). Unfortunately, the match went another route, and the U.S. surprised everyone by beating the Mexican team 2-0 and advancing to the round of eight. Mexicans everywhere were distressed, furious, and embarrassed. Cameras caught then President Fox of Mexico and his family stunned at what had happened, as they were in their living-room televising their support for the national

team. A fan outside the stadium yelled, “We’d expect this from whatever freaking other team, except the United States. It is a national shame….and to who? That’s the worst part!” [Armell, 2024, 31:28]. The impact of that match was so drastic, that post-match, the Mexican coach Javier Aguirre cried for an extensive period of time (ESPN Deportes, 2022). Since that defeat, both teams have had their ups and downs, but the U.S. has been progressively getting better and has wins against Mexico to show for it.

This success has created a shift in the younger generation who now know a successful American team, rather than a losing one. This is one of the reasons why this paper exists, because a lot of previous work in this field is outdated. A lot of the previous work that has been done on this topic, write of a lack of attachment to the U.S. national soccer team because of their historical inferiority to the Mexican team (Valeriano, 2014). Many of my participants acknowledged this difference and the impact it has had on the younger generation. Natalie states, “Especially like I was saying, like those younger kids, younger adults who maybe are, who aren't Mexican, or identify as Mexican, but like, don't necessarily relate to the culture. I think those are, especially now that the success of the U.S. national team, maybe that's the people who they look up to now” (personal communication, April 11, 2024).

Since 2010, Allstate has been using a fictitious character named “Mayhem” or “Mala Suerte” in Spanish (which literally translates into “bad luck”) to sell its insurance services. During TV commercials, Mayhem often involves himself in everyday situations that may lead to life-altering accidents, often finishing the ad by saying, “So get Allstate and be better protected by mayhem, like me.” A month after the U.S. and Mexico had tied in a friendly preparation match en route to the 2014 World Cup, Allstate ran a Spanish-language television commercial that caused both humor and discussion in my household. While outside a soccer stadium hosting

a U.S. vs Mexico match, Mala Suerte begins the ad by saying, “They say that passion for a team is passed down and inherited…well sometimes.” The camera then spans and focuses on a vehicle where a father and son are driving in the parking lot. The father is giddy for the match, with a Mexican team sweater on, a smile, and an eagerness to find a parking spot. In contrast, the son on the passenger seat has a blue sweater on and is evidently troubled. With a stutter and a frantic look, he begins telling his father, “Dad, I need to confess something to you. That I like…” He takes a short pause, and as he does, the father, who is now tense, elevates his voice and exclaims, “What!? You’re making me nervous, what is it?”. The son, while unzipping his sweater says, “These colors” and soon reveals that he is wearing a United States soccer jersey. The father stares at him, taking his eyes off the road as he is left with an expression of shame and shock. The vehicle steers away, hitting a souvenir booth outside the stadium, wrecking his car in the process. Mala Suerte pops up and finishes the commercial with his iconic line, leaving the father grieving over the news of his tragic betrayal (Allstate, 2014).

Figure 4: Allstate TV Spot, 'Son' TV Commercial Screenshot 1

Figure 5: Allstate TV Spot, 'Son' TV Commercial Screenshot 2

This commercial toys with the new shifts among adolescents mentioned previously, where younger Gen Z and Gen Alpha youth find themselves more attached to the U.S. national team. While this is true for younger generations, surprisingly everyone except one of those I interviewed stated that they would remain loyal to the Mexican team despite the losses or even a more diverse USA roster.

Choosing Allegiance and Social Media

It is apparent that victorious trends on either side help facilitate the job for many Chicanxs when they debate on who to root for, and it only helps them solidify their chosen national allegiance. If this is true, what impedes those who actively still root for Mexico to keep their allegiance? If they switch, does that make them less Mexican? Fandom challenges these notions of identity to a unique level. It can be a form of attachment to commonality, but it could also be divisive. “Sport can be a medium that facilitates both belonging and exclusion”, I would add, even within one’s own diaspora (Storey, 2021, p.86). These notions play out in the field and

in person, but social media has propelled its impact to another level. Suddenly, the number of people that can question your identity becomes infinite, and the number of people who can dictate the in-groups and out-groups becomes uncontrollable. This manifested fanaticism weighs more on Chicanxs because of their already fluid ethnicity.

Legendary Ranchera singer Chavela Vargas, when asked on one occasion why she felt so Mexican if she was Costa Rican famously replied, “Mexicans are born wherever the f**k we want” (R.Medina, 2024). These words and attitude have been replicated among athletes who find themselves able to represent more than one country or ethnicity. David Storey, in his book *Football, Place and National Identity: Transferring Allegiance*, talks about these challenges and how not everyone might agree with the words of Chavela Vargas.

Since 1998, individuals born in the United States to Mexican parent(s) have had the ability to obtain dual citizenship (Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 2022). This has led many Mexican Americans to explore possibilities not only playing abroad in Mexico but representing the country as well on an international level. For athletes, switching allegiance means proudly representing a country, who although far from them, has impacted their identity greatly. Others switch simply for a chance to play more minutes on the field, often providing them “...with an opportunity to further their careers and to garner their rewards associated with that.” (Storey, 2021, p.41). Knowing this, Mexican clubs have pushed their scouting and recruitment efforts of American born players in the U.S., often appearing at ECNL tournaments and even being personally invited by them through soccer ID camps (San Diego Surf Club, 2024). In fact, earlier this year Club America partnered with San Diego Surf, the most successful ECNL club, to host a tournament called “Club America Cup”, where different boys and girls teams from Latin America and the U.S. would play (Club America Cup). Just last month in October, Legends FC,

another Southern California ECNL powerhouse, announced their official partnership with Chivas of Guadalajara, announcing in a statement, “This collaboration will focus on sharing best practices, resources, and opportunities in player identification, tournaments, exhibition games, and more!” (Legends FC, 2024).

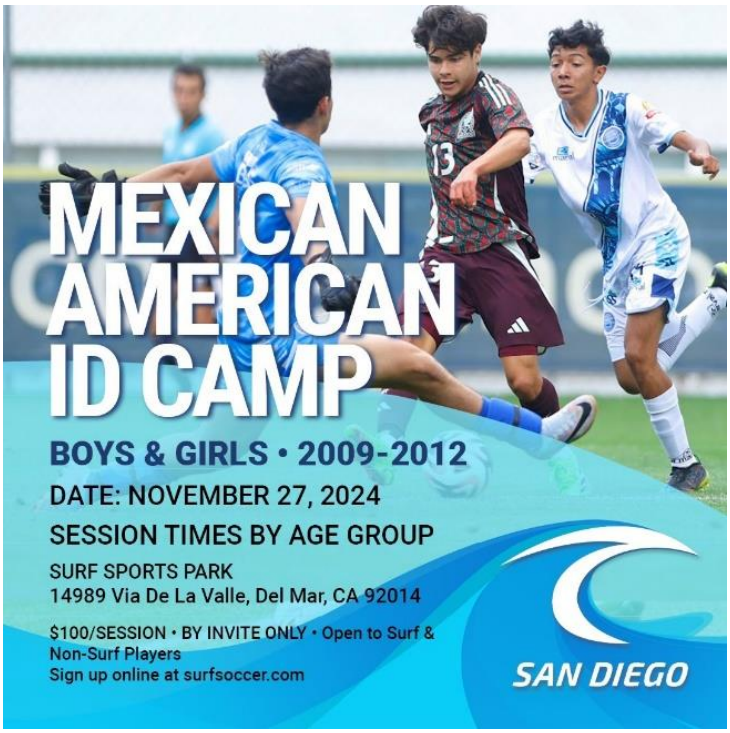

Figure 6: Mexican ID Camp

Figure 7: Legends FC Collaboration with Chivas de Guadalajara

As Storey mentions in his book, “The reaction of fans is varied, with some supporters comfortable with the idea of players from immigrant backgrounds. For others, there is a solidly pragmatic view that it widens the pool of players, while others are concerned over the supposed dilution of the team's identity” (Storey, 2021, p.42).

On July 28, 2021, in the middle of the Tokyo Summer Olympic Games, Mexican boxer Brianda Tamara posted on Twitter (now known as X) a picture of a bag full of Mexican Olympic apparel. It apparently belonged to the Mexican Softball Team and was found near a trash bin in the Olympic Village. Brianda furiously captioned the picture with, “This uniform represents years of effort, sacrifice and tears. All Mexican athletes long to wear it with dignity, and today, sadly, the Mexican softball team left it all in the garbage of the Olympic villages.” (Brianda Tamara OLY, 2021). Her frustration did not just come from the fact that it was left as waste, but

because it was devalued and unappreciated, something a “Mexican” athlete would never do. She specifically alluded to that because the softball team was composed of 14 U.S. born players, and only one born in Mexico.

Even before the Olympic games had started, many on social media were pointing that out and questioning the athlete’s loyalty. Many players posted on Instagram their lament for the situation and mentioned it was a question of insufficient cargo space, even posting pictures of all the uniforms they did keep as evidence. Pitcher Danielle O’toole, an Arizona native, published a statement which read, “We have been proud to wear Mexico’s colors, and to give other young girls of Mexican heritage hope and inspiration…We had no intention of disrespecting our country or our flag. We had no intention of disregarding what being in the Olympics means for so many.” (Danielle O'Toole Trejo Oly, July 29, 2021). Despite the message, many took to social media to address their frustration, saying things like, “They are not even Mexican, that's why they don't feel proud to represent MEXICO…” and “...they are nothing more than daughters of immigrants who the US doesn't even want” (Danielle O'Toole Trejo Oly, August 21, 2021).

Figure 8: Comments on catcher Sashel Palacios' Olympic post

These posts and interactions are evidence that although the nation state is fixed and unmovable, nationalism is free to wander and may be taken anywhere. These social media grounds give way to more unfiltered opinions as people seem to think they can get away with more. International sporting events like the Olympic games and the World Cup showcase a special pride in fans who wait years to manifest it. Soccer fans can be seen as a "version of the nation on display" and often bring it upon themselves to filter who is allowed to represent the nation, and in turn, who is allowed to represent them (Storey, p102).

A number of social media comments of the Mexican softball team alluded to the idea that they were not "real" Mexicans and in fact, were taking the spot of one. Of course, the opposite effect happens when they are victorious. When you help the country win and put them on a pedestal, where you are originally from becomes the least of worries. Phrases like "Ya eres Mexicano" and "You're invited to the carne asada" flood the comments section. Mesut Özil, a former German national soccer team player, is the perfect example of the opposite effect. "I am

German when we win, but I am an immigrant when we lose" were the exact words former German midfielder Özil stated on his Instagram when formally announcing his retirement from the sport (van Campenhout & van Houtum, 2021). His comment was fueled by years of negative and even racial encounters with fans and media because of his Turkish background, despite being born in Germany. This comment also demonstrates how impactful these interactions with fandom can be on an already fragile state of national belonging and identity. The experience the Mexican softball players had led many players to mute their post and prevent comments from being published. Some chose to defend who they were, and others simply opted to no longer represent the team and leave that chapter in their life behind them. This often characterizes a sociological theory of looking-glass self, that leads many to develop their sense of who they are through constant interactions with others and how they perceive them (Cooley, 1902).

Elite Soccer Clubs and Segregation

Historically, soccer in the United States has always been tied to ethnic communities. As the country was attempting to create an image, an accent, and a culture far removed from Europe, European immigrants chose to keep its practice alive by necessity. It was a way of staying connected to their heritage, "to their fellow immigrants and to their homeland — and that was exactly why they loved it." (Keyes, 2015, p.37). Ultimately, it was this distinction that far-removed the sport from ever breaking through into the mainstream, and it further attached it as the sport of migrants and not Americans, eventually "othering" it (Wangerin, 2009, p.33). Today, even with the sport being played all over the U.S., there is still an ethnic distinction about it. This ethnic distinction plays out more through classism, than it does directly with race, but the two are often related.

Soccer in Southern California is worshiped by two groups of people, poor and middle-class urban Latinx communities and upper-middle and upper class white suburban communities. This stark contrast is interesting, but is key to understanding how Chicanxs negotiate their identity with other intersectionality issues such as class. This issue has so many layers that it has merited its own dissertation titled, *Fútbol Americano: Immigration, Social Capital, and Youth Soccer in Southern California*. In it, David Keyes provides an insight on how the sport grew into popularity within the upper-class suburban areas, and how the sport in Southern California does more segregating, then integrating, especially among youth.

Keyes notes that the Californian based American Youth Soccer Association (AYSO) played a huge role in Americanizing the sport post WW2, which in turn made it popular among affluent and white communities. They did this through what he coined as "triple domestication", where AYSO founders stripped associations of ethnicity from the sport, presenting it as an emotionally and physically safe game, and connecting it to the realm of the nuclear family (2015, p.34). By stripping the foreignness of the sport, it would no longer be exclusive to ethnic clubs, giving affluent communities a reason to participate. Bill Hughes and other AYSO leaders did this by banning "foreign-sounding names" for clubs, and by prohibiting the use of any other language on the soccer field that was not English (2015, p.43). By inviting affluent and suburban communities to be more heavily involved in the sport, money would soon play a major role.

Money talks, and when business is involved, it can mute and ignore others. Today, in order to be readily seen and have realistic possibilities of being recruited by a university or a professional team, you have to play in a "Pay-to-play" elite club. Looking at the roster bios of a local women's university team like USC, I found that all of their 29 players had played club soccer (USC Trojans, 2024). 21 out of the 23 U.S.-born players played specifically in an ECNL

club before coming to the university. The same pattern can be seen in most competitive universities nationwide. Elite Clubs National League, also known as ECNL, was established in 2009 as a way to "...challenge the status quo of youth soccer, with a vision to be better." (ECNL, 2023). They began focusing on youth girls, but soon broadened their program to include boys in 2017. These clubs are dominated by affluent communities because they require an immense amount of money to play in. Families pay up to 5k a year on team fees alone, which do not include travel, hotel stays, competitions, and/or other expenses (Mary, personal communication, April 26, 2024). This disproportionality excludes minority communities, like Chicanxs, who tend to come from limited economic means, creating a "...systematic racism in soccer" (Bushnell, 2020).

After interviewing Ashley Sanchez and Sofia Huerta, the only Mexican Americans representing the U.S. women's national team during the 2023 World Cup, the reporter asked why there were so few Mexican Americans in the sport of soccer at that level? "Both women have said that the sport is very expensive and in fact Sophia also mentioned that had it not been for her friend's parents who were able to pay for all of those expenses and for her getting a full ride to Santa Clara University then she may have not been playing soccer professionally" (NBC Sports, 2023).

A map showcasing the county of Orange shows how racial demographics and poverty are visually correlated (Global Policy Leadership Academy, 2022). When mapping the locations of affiliated boys and girls ECNL clubs in the same county, it is clear that they cater toward majority white suburban upper-class parts of the county. The same display is evident in Keyes' research in San Diego County and can be said about the rest of Southern California.

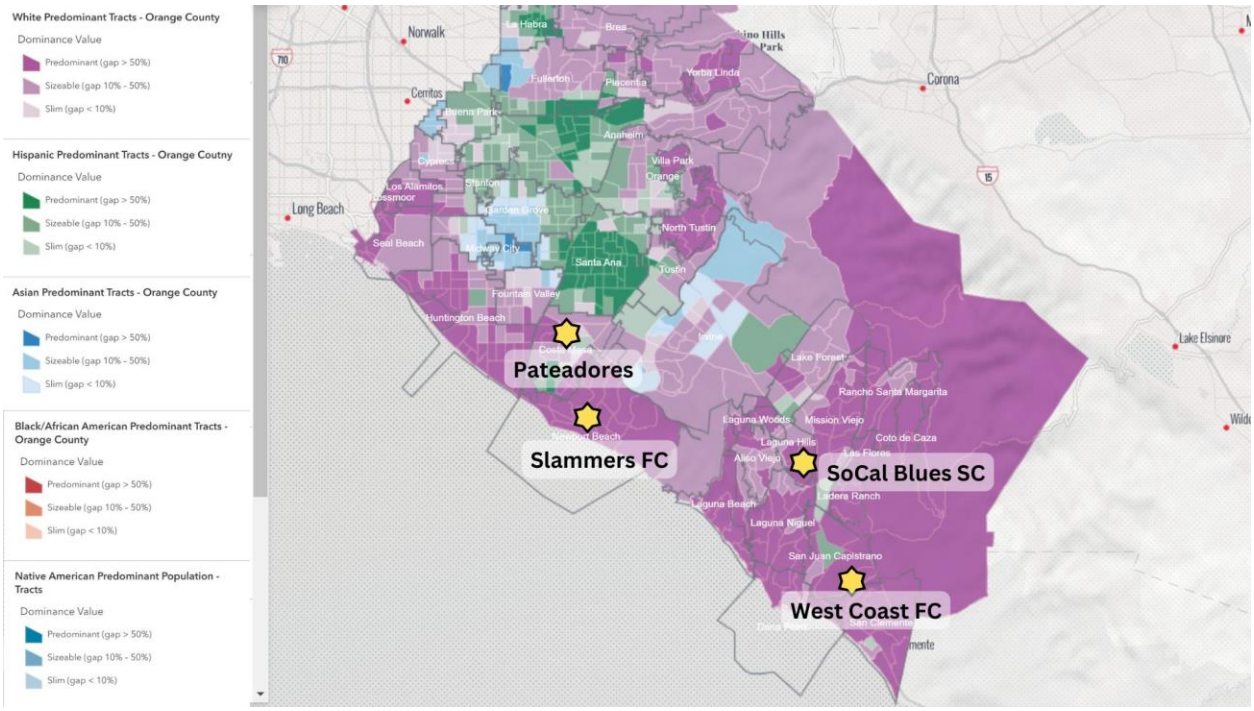

Figure 9: Orange County, CA Racial Tracts with ECNL Clubs

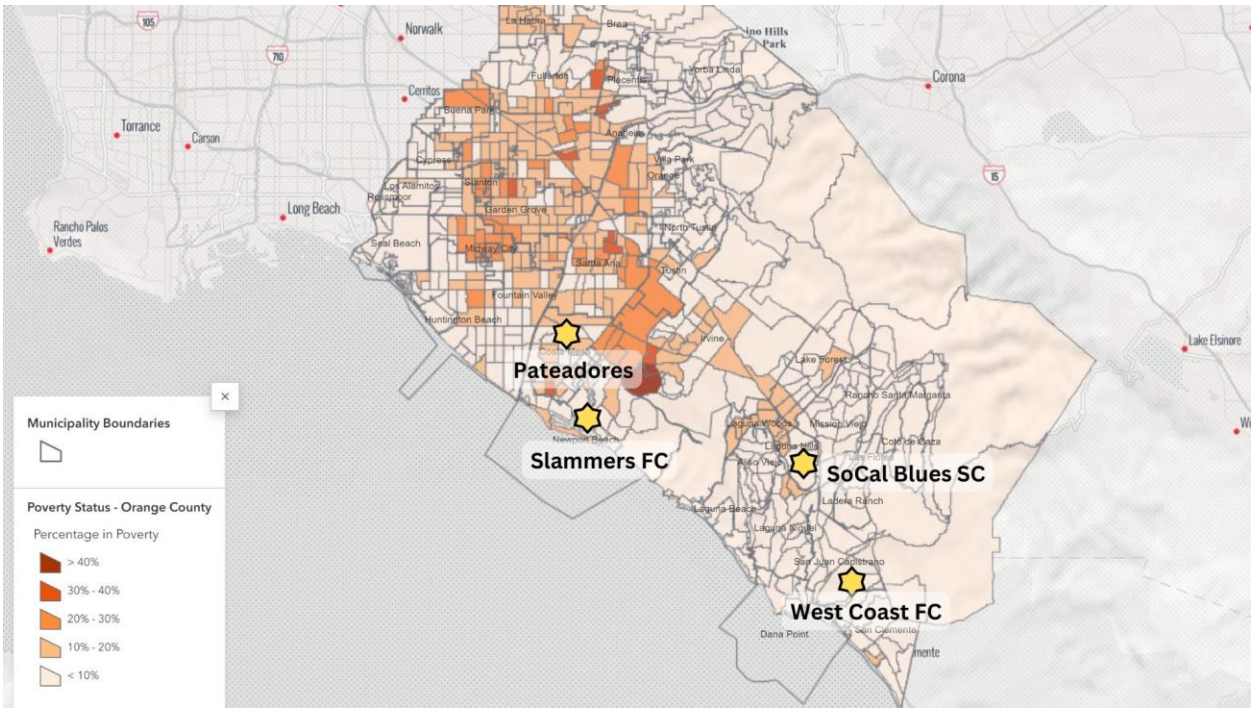

Figure 10: Orange County, CA Poverty Status with ECNL Clubs

The majority of Latinx youth who do not live in these communities, and do not have the means to enter these clubs, find themselves involved in local leagues that are much cheaper. Even these leagues are coined “Mexican Leagues” because of their collective demographic, which only further separates and contrasts the two leagues and communities. Since these upper-white-suburban neighborhoods benefit from elite clubs and their infrastructure, the high schools these youth attend do too. Gonzalo, who played soccer at a predominantly Hispanic high school, shared with me an interaction he had during a CIF regional playoff game with a high school who was demographically the exact opposite.

> Gonzalo: We felt uncomfortable just because like you said in all of us being Hispanics and the difference of race, you feel uncomfortable. Just getting to the game there was like there were a lot of people waiting for us, screaming at us when we're like kids, we are in high school.
>
> Erick: What did they say?
>
> Gonzalo: Oh they just said racial stuff or like you know, putting fingers up stuff like that. Yeah, when we went to their field to play, they tried to scare us. And then when we stepped into the field, you know, it's just 11 versus 11. So you kind of close out on everybody outside or whatever it is that they discriminate. And when they came to play to our field, our people didn't do any of that. We respected them coming into our house and we just tried to show them the field and try to beat them in the field and get them back for what they did to us the year before. (personal communication, April 28, 2024)

This unfortunate interaction is reflective of the segregation that is caused by these institutions that limit access to diversity on the soccer field. Elite clubs and leagues like ECNL make it more difficult for minorities to progress in the sport. It makes it impossible for lower-income communities in Southern California, who are overwhelmingly Latinx, to become visible to universities because they do not have access to the same tournaments. The best possibility they have to be seen is to outshine during their high school career or to somehow amplify their

visibility through videos. This interesting phenomenon seen in Southern California can offer to explain similar trends seen nationally.

Maria Sanchez, a Mexican American NWSL player, spoke about this phenomenon in a recent podcast interview with legendary players Tobin Heath and Christen Press.

> Maria: Growing up, I mean I didn't play club soccer, which in the US is like…
>
> Tobin: Every, like, youth soccer parent just like went 'HUHHH'
>
> Christen: Gasp
>
> Maria: …But, yeah, for me, it was like the joy of playing soccer and, like, the happiness that it brought me. In my mind, I was like, I'm going to be a professional soccer player. I'm going to play for Mexico. I want to do so much. I looked at the process of becoming a professional soccer player in the U.S. and everybody was like, you're going to get scouted in these club soccer tournaments. And I was like, 'okay, I don't have that. So what do I do?' So for me, I think it was play every day with boys, play by myself, and watch videos. (Re-Inc, 2024)

This issue directly impacts the psyche of Chicanx youth in the region who through a sport they historically call their own, are further segregated by their white counterparts to excel in it. These limitations affect resources and social capital and create a chain reaction that contributes to ideas of counter-assimilation among Mexican Americans. "The structural barriers to the integration of Latinos into top-level youth soccer are so numerous and so strong that integration largely fails to occur. As a result, there are few opportunities for the suburbanites who make up one half of the soccer world to see Latinos as anything but 'others.'" (Keyes, 2015, p.208).

Women's Soccer

With the rapid growth of women's sports globally, including women's perspectives on the topic of identity and soccer is crucial because it helps to challenge and expand the traditionally male-dominated narrative. Even the Chicano movement, which was impactful to the community, famously left out issues Chicanas faced and even ignored them in organizing the movement. This section is intended to offer a perspective on the Chicana experience and how gender, culture, and social dynamics shape their identity in soccer.

There is no question that fútbol in Mexico, and in Mexican households, is a male dominated sport. History reminds us that women all over Latin America were being deviated from the sport because it did not fit with the concepts of femininity. Especially after the Mexican revolution of 1910, with more patriotic heroes to glorify, masculinity was at center stage in Mexico. Men were pictured as "machos" capable of anything, whereas women had to fit this specific criterion of marianismo. Some nations like Brazil, would go as far as to ban and prohibit organized women's soccer from 1940 to the 80's because it "…became a cause of concern for patriarchal sports organizations" (Elsey & Nadel, 2019, p.61). This concept, although confronted over the years, did not fully get challenged until the second-wave feminism movement of the 60s and 70s. This era instilled a hope in many girls and women alike and gave a possibility for women to become active in sports like soccer (Elsey & Nadel, 2019).

Even with this movement, soccer would not become established for women in Mexico until 2017 with the inauguration of the Liga MX Femenil. Women felt a bit more empowered, but without the resources or even being taken seriously by the Mexican soccer federation and other important actors, the dream dwindled. In the United States however, policies like Title IX would play a major role in elevating the sport among women because it provided equal spending

within high schools, colleges, and universities, which in turn provided opportunities for women to play soccer at an elite level (Women's Sports Foundation). With stable infrastructures in place like that of a university, it was easier to form a competitive U.S. Women's National Team (USWNT). Today's U.S. women's professional national league, the NWSL, is a descendant of the Women's United Soccer Association (WUSA) which began as the world's first professional women's soccer league in the world in 2001 (Miller et al.). These major steppingstones have allowed the USWNT to rack up success and eventually produce 4 World Cup titles and 5 Olympic gold medals.

Interestingly enough, with women's soccer starting at a much earlier stage in the U.S. than in Mexico, we find opposite identity scripts playing out among Chicanas. The women I interviewed mentioned this enigma, trying to comprehend it themselves. Two reasons dominated our conversations and paralleled the story we see on the men's side. First, being familiar with the players plays a huge role in who to root for. Living in the U.S. and supporting women's soccer means supporting the NWSL. As they see the players periodically in the NWSL, it is most likely that they will see them in the national team. As Jessica mentions, "And the US team, I like the women's team because I know a lot more US players and like, obviously, watching them play in the NWSL, that makes me want them to win more." (personal communication, May 1, 2024). Alexandra's point of view is similar, especially as someone who more recently started following the sport in general, although she found it a bit more difficult when they faced the Mexican team recently.

> I was at the Mexico versus USA game. It was a really good game, and I was rooting for the US because I know those players and I like watched them whenever I go to the San Diego Wave games because it's always you know, the team is also in the national team. So, I know these players and I know how they play and I know they're good because I always root for the US team, but if Mexico scores, I will support them. (personal communication, May 2, 2024)

Jasmine also notes that lack of media coverage of the Liga MX Femenil and national team contributes to this chosen allegiance.

> Erick: If I may ask, why is it why is it Mexico with the men's team, but for the woman's it's the U.S.?
>
> Jasmine: …I ask myself that quite a bit. I do follow the app. I do have the team's apps, and I think with the men's I get more alert notifications. It's televised more than the women. Unfortunately, it's very hard for [me] to watch those games. And that's why for me, I was able to watch more of the American women's team and watch them in in seeing them play and you know, and have that growth towards them. Whereas the women's Mexican team, I don't see you very much publicity. (personal communication, May 2, 2024)

Secondly, because Mexico has just formally begun their women's soccer league, they have relied on the USWNT for years now as an identity figure. This identity figure is a peculiar one because it does not stop at ethnicity. The USWNT plays a bigger role socially in the United States as they have contributed to the advancement of women's sports nationally, have fought for equitable fair pay, and are routinely activist for LGBTQ+ rights (Vu, 2024). Supporting them is not just a way of manifesting national pride, but a way of supporting feminism. It is because of this, that Mexican American women find themselves caught in a struggle with identity when they face the Mexican women's national team. I prodded at Alexandra's existing dilemma and asked if she ever felt any internal feelings whenever both teams faced each other. She replied,

> Yes. I have it every time. Where it's like, oh, like I'm supporting the US but internally I feel like I should be supporting Mexico and knowing more about the Mexico team. And every single time I'm like, I got to start looking into the Mexican teams and Mexico national team and start looking at those players and start learning about them more. And for some reason, I just haven't done it, but now that Maria Sanchez has come into the Wave [NWSL team] I'm like oh, she's in the Mexico team. I'm like, okay, now I really really have to like learn and really start getting into the Mexico national team but also I want to do get into the Liga [MX] femenil. I do want to get into it especially now because Wave is gonna play them. (personal communication, May 2, 2024)

Despite this bicultural dilemma within Chicanas, there has been a steady pull to support the Mexican women's national team now that they have become more established. Chicanas interestingly enough have contributed immensely to this newcome success. In an effort to grow the women's soccer league in Mexico, Liga MX Femenil has taken advantage of the dual-citizenship capability among Chicanas, allowing, since 2019, for Mexican Americans to count as Mexicans and not foreigners, allowing teams to keep their four foreign player roster spots open. (Hernandez, 2023). Between the league's top 3 teams, Mexican Americans make up 25% of their roster, with Club America Femenil having the most with 8 players, more than a third of their team[4]. These results have spilled over into the Mexican women's national team, who today with 12 Mexican American players, compose more than half of the team. From those 12, 7 are a product of Southern California.

During the first Women's Gold Cup tournament held earlier this year, Mexico would face the United States as they finalized the group stage. Entering the match, the U.S. was the clear favorite having won 40 out of the last 42 games against them (Associated Press, 2024). Mexico would eventually come out victorious, shutting down the powerful U.S. team with a contending 2-0 win. This would be the first victory against the U.S. since 2010 for the Women's Mexican National Team. This game, and its result, vividly impacted my participant's psyche and it challenged their notions of identity. Alexandra's dilemma deriving from the "U.S. vs Mexico game" was in fact a hint to this specific game. Another participant named Mary shared with me the special pride she felt when she saw Mexico win.

[4] Kiana Palacios, Scarlett Camberos, Jocelyn Orejal, Miah Zuazua, Nicolette Hernandez, Sabrina Enciso, Kimberley Rodriguez, and Karina Rodriguez

> …if men are playing, I cheer for Mexico, if the women are playing, I cheer for the USA. But the last game that they played and they won, I cannot tell you the amount of pride I felt after that game. That was nothing like I ever felt for a USA game. So, it was different like seeing that is like I know it that changed in me because of just the surroundings of what's going on right now and stuff and so like I can't say I'm just a USA fan anymore for the women, like Mexico came out and it is insane when they played them and they played so well. They play with so much heart and I know that attributes a lot to like the new league and letting them actually be professional soccer players in Mexico and get paid like it and this is what's happening from it. And so it's just like… I'm getting goosebumps talking about it because that just that is like so much pride in being Mexicana to know that that's like an option for people, like it makes me so happy. (personal communication, April 26, 2024)

This pride is a result of a progressing Mexican Women's National Team that is defying gender stereotypes and machismo, while providing a stronger sense of identity among Chicanas. I predict that as they become more successful, Mexican American women in Southern California will relate more with them in the future than with the USWNT. This will only amplify as young girls see themselves reflected in a roster that has faces and a demographic like them, something that the USWNT's roster has been tremendously lacking in. Despite the mention of Chicanas in soccer in this section and throughout the thesis, more work must be done to explore this phenomenon that is women's sports. This scholarly gap must be further explored, not only to amplify women's voices, but to magnify Latinas and other minority groups whose intersectionality affect them uniquely.

Conclusion

There are certain spots in Southern California that are designated for la raza, like Whittier Blvd in East LA, and Van Nuys Blvd in the San Fernando Valley. These are not formally established in any way, but if you are from the area, you just know it is the spot to gather. In my city of Santa Ana, it is Bristol Street. This is where we gather to cruise lowriders, to protest during manifestations, and routinely, to show our support for the Mexican national team. If Mexico ever wins any important games, you know everyone is going to Bristol. When the U-17

team won the World Cup in 2005, my family and I went to Bristol. When Mexico beat South Korea during the 2018 World Cup, I made my way to Bristol to join the ongoing celebration. Everyone there is clapping, shouting, waving their flags around, and honking the horns of their cars. For a moment, it feels like you are in Mexico City, but it always feels like home. This collective effervescence that Émile Durkheim explains in his book Elementary Forms of Religious Life, is present in Bristol as it creates a safe space where a community who is often hyphenated and ignored can create unity and belonging (Durkheim, 1995). It also reveals a much more complicated relationship between the Chicanx communities in Southern California and the rest of the nation, as we continuously battle for our right to exist and practice our inherited culture.

These sections throughout the thesis narrate this reality and add validity to the experiences of those I interviewed, and in turn, to many more who experience similar struggles with identity. The first four sections show how especially within immigrant communities, soccer serves as both a connection to their cultural roots and a way to navigate their place in a new society. The U.S./Mexico rivalry often highlights this tension, as fans wrestle with allegiances influenced by upbringing, diaspora, and social media. At the same time, elite soccer clubs and other institutions reveal to us how identity is shaped and impacted by limited access to resources and opportunities. Finally, Women's soccer among Chicanas gives us a view of the unique challenges women face as they struggle with ethnic and gender norms.

In all, soccer provides a venue in which we can "contest meanings of place, belonging, and citizenship" (Alvarez, 2018, p.53). My thesis argues that Chicanxs, through selective acculturation, maintain their allegiance towards their cultural background through soccer. Soccer does not only become a source of affection but becomes a tool to combat complete aspects of

assimilation. This is why selective acculturation matters, because it does not deny them the ability to live and participate in both cultures, but rather enables them to pick and choose which cultural aspects best suit them. Context allows us to understand that most Chicanxs manifest their identity and resistance through soccer because of its social significance in Mexican culture. Every other aspect and way of living may be contested, but soccer remains intact as their way of displaying ethnic attachment. This concept battles with the idea of an incomplete conquest by the American government and by other entities and people who through Americanization concepts wanted to force them and other minority groups to fit-into American norms. In other words, by embracing soccer, Chicanxs affirm their identity while challenging the idea that loyalty to the United States requires abandoning their cultural traditions. Today, Mexican Americans continue to resist to retain their culture and traditions, even if it means rooting for a nation they do not fully know, but who through their parents, friends, and the broader diaspora, have grown to appreciate.

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