

Second-Generation Immigrants and Queer Identity

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Abstract

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The population of openly queer second-generation immigrants is rising and its increasingly necessary to understand their experiences and identity formation processes. Though several studies offer theories about second-generation immigrants or queer young adults, this intersection of identities is less understood, especially in more recent contexts. Thus, it is critical to examine how queer second-generation immigrants interact with competing and cross-border cultural frameworks now, given recent cultural and political shifts in U.S. culture. In this study, I ask: how do queer second generation immigrants navigate their sexuality or gender identity within the context of their immigrant families? Further, how does this cultural negotiation influence the processes and timing of acceptance of identity and coming out? To understand these questions, I completed 25 in-depth interviews with 14 queer Mexican second-generation immigrants and 11 queer non-second-generation immigrant participants for a comparison group. My study reveals three key themes that exemplify the competing tensions participants experience: 1) national political and cultural landscape; 2) nuclear family dynamics; and 3) the role of extended family. Ultimately, these findings indicate a certain level of cultural transnationalism among participants, and emphasize the need for social resources during young adulthood that are attuned to these cultural distinctions.

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INTRODUCTION

In the past several years, the number of young adults in the United States who openly identify as queer has dramatically increased. Currently, about one in six adult members of Generation Z (those born 1997-2002) consider themselves to be something other than straight (Jones 2021). Though openly identifying as queer is more common in the U.S. than it has been in the past, it still may come with several challenges. Some of these difficulties may include coming to terms with this identity and revealing this identity to family and friends. The latter process, colloquially known as “coming out,” can be an important step of sharing personal identity with meaningful people in a queer person’s life. Coming out can be a significant phase towards establishing identity as a queer person, integrating different aspects of life, asserting maturity, renegotiating power within family relationships, and testing the strength of ties (Beeler and DiProva 1999).

However, the context in which acceptance of identity and coming out occurs differ depending on a variety of factors. Though these processes may be necessary to developing an identity as a queer person within different facets of society, there may be considerable risk in doing so. Fears of physical harm, of social disapproval, and of social avoidance by others are just a few of these potential costs (Corrigan and Matthews 2003). One of the most concerning risks for many queer youth is how their parents and families will react to their coming out and how this may potentially change their relationships (Beeler and DiProva 1999).

Although these concerns are relevant for many, those who identify as queer and who are also a second-generation immigrant may encounter different challenges in their identity formation process. Second-generation immigrants belong to a unique socio-cultural location, growing up among overlapping, and often conflicting, cultural frameworks. These cultural frameworks include those of their immigrant families, but also those of their peers, educational

settings, media, and local communities. Their experiences reflect a complex negotiation of multiple, intersecting cultural scripts, rather than a simple binary between “home” and “host” cultures. Cultural scripts ultimately shape how these second-generation immigrants understand and express their identities, and in this case, their queer identities. Because second-generation immigrants’ parents may not have grown up in the United States and/or are still tied to their home culture and traditions, their reactions or level of acceptance to their child being queer may differ from parents who are both native-born. How accepting or non-accepting one’s parents seem to be may influence the identity formation process for queer youth (Merighi and Grimes 2000).

This project seeks to understand not just familial dynamics on the micro level, but also the broader cultural negotiations queer second-generation immigrants experience when navigating competing cultural scripts. By examining this population specifically, we can gain understanding into how identity formation and processes unravel at the intersection of multiple cultural systems. At this intersection, traditional values around gender roles and sexuality as understood by immigrant parents may differ from those purported by U.S. institutions and communities. This identity formation reflects not solely this intersection of cultural scripts, but also an active participation with varied values and norms across social contexts.

Though many second-generation immigrants may face difficulties within their families, these challenges may be exacerbated for specific groups of second-generation immigrants. Rather than understanding these dynamics solely through the lens of assimilation into a singular U.S. culture, it is important to consider how second-generation individuals simultaneously navigate multiple cultural frameworks, including those tied to religion, race, gender, geography, and familial heritage, that intersect in various scenarios. In particular, parent country of origin

may shape how second-generation immigrants construct their queer identities both internally and in relation to others. Ultimately, how do queer second generation immigrants navigate their sexuality or gender identity within the context of their immigrant families? Further, how does this cultural negotiation influence the processes and timing of acceptance of identity and coming out? In this sense, I use queer to mean someone who identifies as non-cisgender and/or non-heterosexual. Thus, this includes gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and other identities; however, it is important to note that most literature typically only refer to gay and lesbian identities.

While existing literature addresses the intersections of sexuality and immigration, few studies examine how second-generation queer individuals negotiate identity across multiple cultural frameworks, particularly how parent country of origin may shape these negotiations and experiences. Moreover, studies that do discuss these dynamics provide key insights about second-generation immigrants in particular, but they are relatively outdated. Given drastic changes in overall social attitudes towards queer people in the past two decades in the U.S., these studies may not accurately reflect current dynamics within immigrant families, and in general. Further, few studies employ a comparative method between different immigrant groups in comparison to native-born groups, thus making it challenging to determine what it is about the immigrant experience specifically that is impacting this identity. As a result, it is prudent to provide an updated and comparative analysis of these forces and how they impact young adult second-generation immigrants and their identity formation process today.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Queerness and Identity Formation

Though many facets of an individual's experience bears influence on overall identity, issues of queerness and sexuality are deeply intertwined with the process of delineating a personal identity, particularly among young adults (Netting 1992). Thus, it is necessary to understand how queer identities are formed given various societal and personal factors. A few major theories hypothesize how this process typically occurs for adolescents developing their queer identity.

Homosexual Identity Model depicts six separate stages of this identity formation process. These stages are identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis (Cass 1979). Coming out to family and friends typically happens after stage 4 (identity acceptance) in either stage 5 (identity pride) or stage 6 (identity synthesis). The Homosexual Identity Model is linear and does not necessarily budget for individual environmental differences.

Another theory, developed by D'Augelli and Dark (1994), outlines six developmental tasks in accepting queer identity: exiting heterosexual identity, developing a personal gay identity status, developing a gay social identity, becoming a gay offspring, developing a gay intimacy status, and entering a gay community (D'Augelli and Dark 1994). When applying these theories to second-generation immigrants, it is clear that for both these models, the timing of each stage or task is different for each person, depending on personal differences and environmental variation, which includes familial culture.

McCarn and Fassinger (1996) extend these theories and posit that queer identity formation happens within two separate, but reciprocal, developmental tracks. One track highlights the individual process of acceptance of same-sex or non-heterosexual preferences, while the other track highlights a group membership identity process that involves the acceptance of membership of an oppressed group (McCarn and Fassinger 1996). The former

often precedes the latter, but neither track is linear and acknowledges variation among individuals.

These theories offer valuable insight into how queer identity development is a contextually tactful process. But, these models do under-theorize the role of the intersection of cultural frameworks (cultural hybridity), particularly in the context of second-generation immigrants. In these contexts, individuals must navigate contradictory values and norms across borders and cultural frameworks. Thus, this work extends these models to assess how these tensions between cultural frameworks, including the values of immigrant parents and the dominant U.S. ones, shape the process of coming out and achieving full authenticity within queer identity.

Perhaps most convincing comes from Irvine (2009)'s identity formation theory rooted in constructionism and sexual cultures. According to Irvine, social construction theory definitively inserts culture as the key factor for understanding adolescent sexuality and suggests that we examine the culture(s) that adolescents have been socialized within to fully understand gender identity and sexuality. In general, constructionism in identity formation is fundamentally not static or linear, as these meanings provided by various cultures change with context and in combination with other cultures (Irvine 2009).

Irvine continues by applying the theory of sexual scripting theory to link culture and the individual psyche. Utilized in this way, scripting theory attempts to fuse the historical and social constructions of sex and sexuality with individual psychology and the negotiation of daily experiences (Irvine 2009). Simon and Gagnon (1986) suggest that the scripting of this behavior is examined on three distinct levels: cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripts, and intrapsychic scripts. Cultural scenarios are defined as collective patterns that specify appropriate sexual goals,

objects, and relationships, and serve as guides for the performance of sexual roles (Simon and Gagnon 1986; Irvine 2009). Individuals reconstruct the relevant particulars of cultural scenarios into interpersonal scripts and thereby are able to function in specific social situations (Irvine 2009). These cultural scenarios vary across cultures in general, but also among other axes of identity, such as race. The scripts of each culture delineate different sets of norms and imperatives (Irvine 2009), and misalignment with any of these scripts can lead to social marginalization in the family, coethnic community, school, or otherwise.

Moreover, Irvine identifies nine major axes of constructed domains within a particular gender/sex system: gender relations, sexual identities, reproductive strategies and behavior, sexual language and public discourse, the role of the family, nonreproductive sexuality, the purpose of sex and the role of pleasure, knowledge, and meaning of the body, and sexual violence. The cultural scripts that arise in each of these arenas within the schema of sociosexual diversity may vary widely depending on the population and the particular intersection of identities the population occupies (Irvine 2009). Ultimately, it is imperative to understand the profound impact that the dominant culture has on the definition and regulation of sexual meanings and behaviors (Irvine 2009). Further, the dominant sexual meanings of the white heterosexual middle class infuse the cultural discourse as assumed universal standards, which may or may not be the case for second-generation immigrants (Irvine 2009). Power dynamics, as perpetuated through religion, law, medicine, education, and other institutions of sociosexual control, determine which ideologies are considered normal and which ideologies are considered deviant. For second-generation immigrants, the dominant culture present in their lives could be the U.S., but also the culture(s) of their parents, depending on how strong ties to the home

country are. The dominant cultures and the definitions and regulations that arise out of it could be in tension within second-generation immigrants.

As Griswold (2012) emphasizes, culture encompasses norms, values, beliefs, expressive symbols, and practices. Through each of these, dominant ideals of sexuality and gender standards are perpetuated and reified, being received, interpreted, and expressed by each individual. Culture is not objective and cannot continue to exist without these ongoing processes by the members of the culture (Griswold 2012). It is important to note definitions and regulations of sexuality are constantly evolving and changing, given current social, historical, and political climates, and even changing among towns, schools, families, etc. (Griswold 2012).

For instance, more recent changes in U.S. political and social landscapes have contributed to heightened public acceptance and broader visibility of queer identities, both through legal means, but also through mainstream media and discourse. The legalization of same-sex marriage, in addition to increased media representation of queer identities and stories, have reformed how queerness is understood in a broader sense (McInroy and Craig 2016; Goldberg and Smith 2025). These larger socio-political shifts have contributed to greater acceptance of queer people in general, and especially in liberal and/or urban contexts (Lewis et al. 2017). While much of this literature focuses on general population trends, less is known about how these cultural shifts may influence attitudes within immigrant families specifically.

Ultimately, the level of connection to various dominant cultural ideologies and the level to which an individual ascribes to them allows them to have varying degrees of capital (largely social and cultural) that may lead to varying degrees of power within their community as a whole (Bourdieu 1986). For instance, if a second-generation immigrant identifies as openly queer but the dominant culture they are a part of does not accept that as legitimate, then they may lack a

level of capital within their broader coethnic community, leading to differences in interactions and resources. For queer second-generation immigrants in particular, failing to align with the norms of either their immigrant community or dominant U.S. ones may result in unintended marginalization, and these potential risks as a result of these dynamics are essential to understand how they impact identity formation and expression.

In this sense, through sexual scripting theory and other aforementioned definitions of culture, the meanings that culture provides for identity, specifically queer identities, guides how these identities are formed and ultimately expressed. The extent of how each family assimilates and the connections to local coethnic communities may which dominant regulations and norms are received and reified the most by an individual second-generation immigrant. It is crucial to note that when viewing sexuality through an intersectional lens (for second-generation immigrants, this could be through the lens of multiple cultures and their dynamics overlapping), second-generation immigrants and this identity formation may look unique specific to the socio-cultural location they occupy. The scripts that may be typical could be disrupted based on the intersection of cultures second-generation immigrants experience. As Cerulo (1997) underscores, “Gender scripting attitudes, behaviors, emotions, and language, and treating these scripts as natural signals, ensures that social members both succumb to and recreate the ‘armor’ of gender identity stereotypes” (Cerulo 1997). It is prudent to understand what this scripting and formation process looks like within second-generation immigrants.

When considering other religious, cultural, ethnic, and racial dimensions, it is evident that there is a general struggle of integrating sexual identities with other dimensions of the self (Stevens 2004). Ultimately, environmental contexts and other personal identities play a crucial role in fully understanding queer identity and the timing of the aforementioned stages of

development. For instance, those in an accepting, socially liberal environment may reach different stages much earlier than those in a more traditional, socially conservative environment. These environments include school, college, friend groups, etc., but also familial and home life (Stevens 2004). The presence of traditional family values is related to a youth's ability to accept and handle their queer identity (Newman and Muzzonigro 1993). For second-generation immigrants, environmental contexts at home given parent country of origin may be an important factor on the timing of the development of queer identity and the eventual acceptance of this identity.

Though identity formation is not linear nor uniform for every person, acceptance of an integrated queer self is typically evidenced by coming out to family and/or friends. Though this happens at different times with different people, coming out in general is indicative of a somewhat developed queer identity, moving past individual reconciliation and towards public expression. On the contrary, coming out and openly expressing queer identity may not always be the ideal next step. Visibility, in certain areas and environments may serve to be problematic. As Thomsen (2021) discusses, visibility of queerness in rural areas, for example, can uphold systems that perpetuate homophobia. Living openly in "queer rurality" may ultimately be more dangerous and problematic than holding queer identity more privately (Thomsen 2021).

However, for other queer people, coming out to friends and people outside of family can certainly be influential in being more open with self-identified queerness. But coming out to family, and parents in particular, can often be a major hurdle that is more challenging to confront (Mosher 2001). Since most parents identify as heterosexual and a part of older generations, their worldviews may often be affected by heterosexist biases and values (Ben-Ari 1995). Their conscious or unconscious expectations or desires for having heterosexual/cisgender children may

influence reactions of denial, shock, anger, guilt, shame, or rejection if their child comes out (Ben-Air 1995; Mosher 2001).

More importantly, perceived parental attitudes about sexuality impact the child's willingness to come out; if parents' attitudes are formed by less accepting cultures, it may be more difficult for the child to be willing to come out (Floyd et al. 1999; Mosher 2001). The child is often aware of how their parents' potential reactions will either negatively or positively impact the coming out process, as well as how this may affect future conditions within the family (Floyd et al. 1999; Mosher 2001). For second-generation immigrants, these perceived parental attitudes may be a key determinant of when to come out, and how.

Regardless of these fears of rejection and disturbing the dynamics in the family, children do come out to their parents much more often than not (Mosher 2001). The motivation for this is to be honest about one's life and develop an authentic and stable sense of self (Legate et al. 2012). Family acceptance and support has been shown to be related to higher self-esteem and greater perceived social support (Ryan et al. 2010; Corrigan and Matthews 2003; Denes and Afifi 2014). In addition, family acceptance has been found to be negatively associated with depression, suicidal thoughts/behaviors, and substance abuse (Ryan et al. 2010; Needham and Austin 2010; Denes and Afifi 2014). Therefore, a crucial step in coming out is gaining acceptance in order to help maintain familial relationships and manage negative health impacts (Denes and Afifi 2014).

Second-Generation Immigrants and Assimilation

Children of immigrants often feel a stronger burden than their native peers to maintain agreeable relationships with both their families and their coethnic communities (Fuligni and Pedersen 2002; Ocampo 2014). These feelings of burden and pressure to feel connected to family and the

coethnic community may be exacerbated for queer children of immigrants. Queer children of immigrants may feel less inclined to come out to their parents for fear of losing the niche social and economic support from their families and coethnic communities (Ocampo 2014). In addition, second-generation immigrants may be more concerned with how their gender presentation or queer expression impacts their family's status within the larger ethnic community and how their relatives who are still at home may view them (Hom 2007; Ocampo 2014). As a result, there may be more nuanced pressure for second-generation immigrants to carefully navigate their identity within the context of their immigrant family and immigrant community. However, the extent to which this occurs may be reliant on which countries the parents are from.

This particular navigation of identity could be considered a form of assimilation. For second generation queer immigrants, how integrated they are within the family specifically and the local ethnic community can be viewed as a more localized "context of reception," which is largely dependent on country of origin (Ocampo 2014; Portes and Rumbaut 2001).

Portes and Zhou (1993) drive forward their theory of segmented assimilation through differing modes of incorporation for each nationality that are shared by all members in the group (Luthra et al. 2018: 30). These modes of incorporation rely on three different features: policies of the host government, values and prejudices of the receiving society, and the characteristics of the coethnic community (Portes and Zhou 1993: 83). The outcomes of each feature create a matrix with cells that represent varying combinations of these outcomes. As a result, each immigrant group's country of origin belongs to one of these cells, indicating an individual mode of incorporation. Portes and Zhou particularly emphasize the possibility of downward assimilation into an underclass for certain nation's groups, dependent on skin color, location of settlement, and absence of mobility ladders (all traits belonging to the host nation and not the country of

origin) (Portes and Zhou 1993: 83). Ultimately, "...assimilation may not be into mainstream values and expectations but into the adversarial stance of impoverished groups" (Portes and Zhou 1993: 85).

According to Ocampo (2014), understanding how the gender ideologies of these different contexts affect how well-integrated gay men are with the immigrant family and community calls for the analysis of localized contexts of reception. This same notion can be applied to the overall development of queer identity within these contexts based on country or region of origin. The policies of the host government, values and prejudices of the receiving society, and the characteristics of the coethnic community may all contribute to the development of queer identity and the decisions for acceptance and expression of this identity. This segmented assimilation theory helps to contextualize how immigrant families and coethnic communities can shape the circumstances in which second-generation queer individuals navigate their identity formation. In the context of my study, the theory helps explain not only if these individuals come out, but also how, when, and to whom, given potential emotional and material consequences.

Besides race and ethnicity, a key component of some immigrant families is religion. For instance, Mexican/Central American and Filipino families often practice Catholicism (Ocampo 2014). Since the Catholic Church's stance on homosexuality is generally perceived as negative, this can make it difficult for children to feel comfortable with coming out to their religious parents and family members. There also may be a heightened sense of denial in fear of religious repercussions (Merighi and Grimes 2000; Ocampo 2014). Moreover, more traditional and religious cultures associate effeminate and gender transgressing behaviors with violating patriarchal norms and infringes upon homophobic attitudes (Ocampo 2014). An example of this would be "machismo" within Latin American cultures. Any man who does not appear to be

strong, manly, etc. is violating these long-standing norms and is seemingly threatening the power dynamics within society (Ocampo 2014). Many parts of identity are influenced by various immigrant contexts.

It is evident that race, ethnicity, religion, gender, etc. each can play crucial roles in queer identity formation and the timing of the coming out process. However, I am seeking to understand how much the second-generation immigrant experience and the countries/cultures their parents are from specifically influence how individuals navigate their queer identity and the coming out process, in comparison to native family counterparts. Because these contexts can vary so much across second-generation immigrants (e.g. Latin American families vs. Middle Eastern families vs. Western European families), it is necessary to understand how much each of these contexts impact the processes and timing of acceptance of identity and coming out.

Though the aforementioned studies provide important insights into the intersection of queerness and immigration, there remains a notable gap in research that considers how the specific cultural contexts of immigrant families, shaped by their countries of origin, influence the identity formation and coming out experiences of their children. For queer second-generation immigrants, this process is highly contextual and formed by conflicting cultural scripts that can influence the timing, visibility, and manner of expressing queer identity. As such, I seek to answer: how do queer second generation immigrants navigate their sexuality or gender identity within the context of their immigrant families? Further, how does this cultural negotiation influence the processes and timing of acceptance of identity and coming out? Through centering the potential influence of the parental cultural script, my study underscores how differing cultural contexts influence not only when and how queer identities are expressed, but also the conditions in which these negotiations occur.

METHODOLOGY

There are several regions for countries of origin to narrow my focus, but for this initial project, I focus primarily on Mexico. Mexico serves as a particularly compelling case study for this project because it allows for a distinct exploration of how national cultural norms around gender, sexuality, and family may shape the experiences of second-generation queer immigrants.

Mexico's dominant cultural frameworks, such as strong family loyalty (*familismo*), traditional gender roles (*machismo* and *marianismo*) (Terrazas-Carrillo and Sabina 2019; Pescatello 2010), and the influence of Catholicism, can all deeply affect how queerness is perceived and negotiated within immigrant families in the U.S. Additionally, because Mexico was the leading country of origin for young adult immigrants in the 1990s (Pew Research Center 2015), many of their U.S.-born or U.S.-raised children are now at a life stage where questions of identity formation, disclosure, and familial acceptance are especially salient. Focusing on Mexican-origin families therefore not only provides access to a robust and relevant participant pool, but also offers an opportunity to better understand how cultural legacies from the parent country intersect with migration and generational shifts to shape queer identity development.

In this project, I sought to understand the second-generation immigrant experience in comparison to that of native counterparts (i.e., third generation or beyond), with particular attention to the specific nuances shaped by different relationships to parents and ethnic communities. I recruited participants who shared as many characteristics as possible with participants in the other groups, aside from their second-generation status, to allow for meaningful comparison. To capture the complexities of identity formation in relation to parents and ethnic communities, I conducted 25 semi-structured, in-depth interviews. While aggregate

quantitative data can offer valuable context, I found that in-depth interviews were essential for uncovering the layered, personal dimensions of these experiences.

Ultimately, I conducted 14 interviews with queer children of Mexican immigrants and 11 interviews with queer children of native-born Americans (see Table 1). Because queer identity is so fluid and people can often still be negotiating their sexuality and gender, as well as the extent they express these identities, I kept gender identity open-ended so as to not exclude important members of queer communities. However, since many variables can influence queer processes, I limited my study to participants who have grown up in or have lived long-term in major West Coast cities, largely because all these cities have similar cultural, political, and economic structures. As discussed by Brown-Saracino (2018), the way sexual identity is lived and expressed is largely shaped by characteristics of the city in which one lives. Each place provides a geographically specific way of conceptualizing, relating to, and talking about a facet of the self (in this case, queer identity). Although each city where I conducted interviews inevitably shaped queer identity in distinct ways, I sought to minimize location-based differences by selecting a few relatively similar cities.

Second-Generation Immigrant Group				
Pseudonym	Age	Sexuality	Gender Identity	Location
Carolina	26	Queer	Cisgender woman	Los Angeles, CA
Cassie	26	Bisexual	Cisgender woman	Bay Area, CA
Chris	26	Gay	Cisgender man	San Diego, CA
Danny	27	Straight	Transgender man	Seattle, WA
Diego	25	Gay	Cisgender man	Bay Area, CA
Jamie	25	Bisexual	Cisgender woman	Portland, OR

Javier	28	Gay	Cisgender man	Bay Area, CA
Jesse	27	Bisexual	Cisgender man	San Diego, CA
Joe	29	Gay	Non-binary	Seattle, WA
Julien	24	Gay	Cisgender man	Seattle, WA
Maria	28	Queer	Gender non-conforming	Seattle, WA
Nico	27	Gay	Cisgender man	Seattle, WA
Tino	23	Gay	Cisgender man	Seattle, WA
Tristan	25	Lesbian	Cisgender woman	Portland, OR
Comparison Group (Non-Second-Generation Immigrant)				
Pseudonym	Age	Sexuality	Gender Identity	Location
Aubrey	27	Bisexual	Cisgender woman	Seattle, WA
Alex	26	Gay	Cisgender man	Portland, OR
Delaney	26	Pansexual	Cisgender woman	San Diego, CA
Drew	25	Pansexual	Non-binary	Seattle, WA
Jay	25	Gay	Cisgender man	Seattle, WA
June	27	Bisexual	Cisgender woman	Seattle, WA
Lauren	25	Lesbian	Cisgender woman	Seattle, WA
Matthew	26	Gay	Cisgender man	Los Angeles, CA
Max	28	Gay	Cisgender man	Seattle, WA
Sierra	25	Lesbian	Cisgender woman	San Diego, CA
Zachary	28	Gay	Cisgender man	Seattle, WA

Table 1. Participant Demographic Information

To control for potential generational effects, I interviewed participants who were similar in age, focusing on individuals from the late millennial generation or early Generation Z (born

between approximately 1995 and 2002). For recruitment, I tapped into my own personal queer communities as well as through Facebook groups that serve queer or immigrant populations. When necessary, I also employed respondent-driven sampling, as participants often knew other eligible queer individuals who could be recruited for the study.

My interviews typically lasted between one and two hours, during which I asked a variety of questions covering topics such as demographic information, participants' parents' immigrant experiences, ties to their parents' home countries and coethnic communities, the strength of their connection to U.S. culture, their queer identity and the process of accepting that identity, and their coming out process to friends and family.

FINDINGS

As existing literature demonstrates, queer identity negotiation can be particularly intense within competing cultural contexts, and are shaped by many external factors. To build upon broader theories of segmented assimilation, as explained, my findings underscore that for queer second-generation immigrants, assimilation is not solely about general integration into mainstream U.S. culture. But, it is additionally about the negotiation of localized contexts of reception both in their own families, and in their broader coethnic communities. Thus, I identify three key themes that exemplify these competing tensions: 1) national political and cultural landscape; 2) nuclear family dynamics; and 3) the role of extended family. Throughout each of these findings, I explain the contrasts between the experiences of the comparison group against the experiences of the queer second-generation immigrants. In this, I demonstrate that these cultural tensions are less burdensome for queer individuals whose families had been in the U.S. for at least a few generations.

National Political and Cultural Landscape

Throughout respondents' stories, the shifts in the national political landscape, like the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2015, materialized as a distinct generational marker. Without being prompted, several participants brought this specific legal event up. For most respondents, 2015 coincided with a key time in adolescence, and often while they were coming to terms with their queer identity. Thus, this legal shift offered a broader cultural shift that allowed them to feel a greater sense of possibility within their queer identity, at the same time as processing this within themselves. Many participants explained they felt a greater sense of safety or acceptance within the broader U.S. society, even if they still had to remain somewhat cautious in the context of their own families.

For instance, Nico, a 27-year-old second-generation immigrant gay man from Seattle explained, "After same-sex marriage was legalized, I felt a little less ashamed and scared about being gay. It felt like something I didn't have to hide as much anymore... like even my parents would see that it was something other people were getting used to." Julien, a 24-year-old second-generation immigrant gay man from Seattle similarly described, "I think my mom kind of became more open-minded about gayness which made me reconsider how I thought she would always be about it..." He went on to say, "I grew up believing that because of our culture and how she talked about being gay with our family and stuff she would never really accept it, but seeing her kind of change around that time made me realize that those deep cultural ideas maybe weren't as fixed or rigid as I thought in the past." These reflections from Nico and Julien capture a pattern among many participants. In this sense, while the legalization of same-sex marriage did not immediately make their parents accepting or transform how their families thought about sexuality, it did open the door for a more open-minded shift. This offered hope that acceptance of their identity, and true authenticity within their family context, might be a possibility in the

future. These national and cultural shifts challenged what participants previously thought of as fixed cultural frameworks, and instead offered areas of opportunity for small changes towards being more open. These cultural frameworks, then, are not rigid. They evolve and mutate in response to external forces, including broader U.S. political and cultural shifts.

Although more explicit conversations about these general shifts in society were somewhat rare among participants and their families, changes in U.S. media and wider representation of queer identities did still subtly influence family dynamics and considerations about these topics. Media like television shows, news segments, and others that highlighted queer representation, parents' more static views began to soften and be more receptive for tolerance and acceptance. Jamie, a 25-year-old second-generation immigrant bisexual woman from Portland, described watching *Schitt's Creek* with her mother, an experience that indicated some of this evolution in her views. She detailed, "When we were watching the scene about David explaining he was bisexual through talking about which wine he prefers, I genuinely think it was the first time she even understood what [being bisexual] was, and she loved his character so I think it opened her mind up a little more." Though it took a few more years for Jamie to come out, she noted that this moment stuck with her and made her slightly less scared of her mother's potential reaction.

Other participants explained that media in the U.S. contained more queer representation than the Mexican media their parents often consumed. This greater queer representation provided a crucial pathway for their parents to begin understanding their identity. Ultimately, this suggests that parents' cultural frameworks are not rigid across borders, but rather susceptible to changes through exposure to new or different representation within the context of the U.S. These participant experiences exemplify that these small, passing moments of queer representation,

through media that was relatable, suggested openings for understanding that were inherently more natural and casual, and thus less threatening, than direct conversations about queerness. Though these shifts were quiet and more subtle than those of what these direct conversations would produce, participants understood that their parents were mostly “doing their best” within the limits of their own inherited cultural frameworks. Though confusing for participants and their parents alike, these shifts still marked an important change towards love and acceptance through gradual adjustments.

In contrast, the comparison group participants indicated that these broader cultural and political shifts were less impactful in changing how their parents understood queerness and representation. Through this sense, these familial dynamics tended to reflect a more individualized approach towards them and their queerness, rather than being reflective of these broader societal changes. “For my parents, it didn’t really seem like that big of a deal when same-sex marriage was legalized,” explained Alex from the non-second-generation immigrant comparison group, a 26-year-old gay man who grew up in Portland. He went on to say, “My parents were already pretty chill about things like that. It felt more like the country was kind of catching up to things we already knew... and it wasn’t something I thought would change a lot about how my family [would] see me when I did eventually come out.” Alex’s experience demonstrates how, for some participants from these longer-established U.S. families, national political shifts like the legalization of same-sex marriage often confirmed existing attitudes about queerness and LGBTQ+ rights, rather than eliciting major changes in familial acceptance. Thus, while queer second-generation immigrants still had to navigate some of these inherited cultural scripts from Mexico through their parents, the U.S. social and political landscape helped encourage small changes in broader acceptance and tolerance within their familial dynamics.

Navigating the Nuclear Family

Experiences of acceptance and resistance to queer identity vastly varied within participants' nuclear families, often indicative of how strongly their parents were still tied to traditional Mexican cultural expectations, particularly around gender, sexuality, and familial honor. Though some parents were more able to gradually accept their child's identity, other parents still maintained firm expectations that made coming out or open expression challenging for participants. Diego, a 25-year-old second-generation immigrant gay man who grew up in the Bay Area said, "My mom did tell me she loved me no matter what [when I came out]. But, I still knew it was hard for her. She said all the right things, like 'I just want you to be happy,' but that was kind of the extent. She didn't ask about my dating life in the same way she did with my straight brother and sister. It's like she accepts it and knows it, but she's still figuring out how to be comfortable with it."

This somewhat partial acceptance and acknowledgement seemed to be the case for many participants. Jesse, a 27-year-old second-generation immigrant bisexual man from San Diego described, "When I first came out to my dad, he didn't really react with much, like just kind of nodded and then changed the subject... But like almost a year later, he started asking more questions about my dating life and who I was seeing since he knew I was at that point. It wasn't like he was super invested, but I think it was his way of showing he was somewhat okay with me seeing a guy... I think he did just need time to wrap his head around it, especially with how he grew up thinking that being gay was wrong." Stories like Jesse's show that acceptance within the nuclear family was sometimes an uneven process. This process was shaped by the parents' renegotiation of their own inherited cultural norms and values in conjunction with their relationships to their queer children.

For participants who were more defiant with their gender expressions and resistance to typical gender roles and expectations, they often encountered more resistance from their parents than those whose gender expressions were more in line with these expectations. Many respondents indicated that even if their parents were able to accept them with a same-sex partner, they did struggle more with these deviations from typical gender presentation. This suggests that gender deviance still remained a disruptive force among families and their overall acceptance. Maria, a 28-year-old second-generation immigrant gender non-conforming person from Seattle, explained, “My mom honestly didn’t care if I was dating a girl, but she really could not get behind me shaving my head or not wanting to wear a dress to Christmas mass. Like she just could not understand why I didn’t want to be seen as feminine. Even now she is still kind of uncomfortable with it.”

In a similar sense, Nico indicated that his mom made a big deal about him wearing nail polish to his high school prom. He said, “She got really mad and upset... saying it was ‘too much’ and that my friends wouldn’t think I was a ‘real man.’ I think being gay was one thing, but not being masculine was another. Like it was a bigger problem because of how much she still cared about machismo.” Maria and Nico’s accounts exemplify a broader pattern in which deviations from expected gender norms, separate from sexuality, presented a deeper battle for ultimate parental acceptance, revealing the persistence of gendered cultural scripts within these immigrant families.

In contrast, comparison group participants often detailed familial reactions as more individually centered, rather than charged by wider cultural expectations. Although some still did encounter challenges within this, it was more often based on personal misunderstanding or generational misconceptions, rather than being explicitly connected to cultural scripts. “My

parents did not really care when I came out,” said Lauren, a 25-year-old non-second-generation immigrant lesbian woman from Seattle. “It wasn’t like they were against it because of tradition or religion or anything because I didn’t grow up religious... But they didn’t really know how to talk about it. They said they were happy for me in the moment, but sometimes it still feels like they keep a little distance from it, like they’re still not sure what to say.” Lauren’s experience was similar to many comparison group respondents. While acceptance was not always complete or without some challenges, it was less tied to particular cultural expectations. Thus, identity negotiations unfolded more as individual and specific familial dynamics, rather than as a result of broader cultural scripts.

This section’s findings suggest that queer second-generation identity processes and formation is not shaped exclusively through assimilation into U.S. cultural norms, but rather through a continual negotiation of multiple, and conflicting, cultural frameworks. Within these immigrant families, acceptance and tolerance of queerness was more typical when it coincided with traditional gender expectations like machismo. But, when participants deviated from these Mexican cultural norms, it often reflected a deeper resistance in the path to full acceptance, adding an additional layer of negotiation. Thus, this acceptance is tied deeply to inherited cultural scripts and transnational ties. In this sense, to reconcile these competing frameworks, participants had to create a separate space for self-expression of their queer identity within families that engaged with U.S. cultural norms to an extent, while simultaneously maintaining traditional Mexican cultural beliefs.

Extended Familial Burdens

Besides the nuclear family, the extended family played a critical role for respondents, highlighting the complex nature of true authenticity within a broader familial dynamic.

Participants often noted that their parents' reactions and responses were not exclusively based on personal beliefs, but they were also strongly influenced by potential negative perception of their child's queerness by grandparents, aunts, uncles, and the more general coethnic community. For example, Julien explained, "My mom was fine with me being gay... but she told me last year to not bring my long-term boyfriend to Christmas with my grandparents because she didn't want to deal with my extended family's thoughts and reactions. I kind of get it, but I feel like I can't really be like my true self around them because they can't even meet my boyfriend." In a similar sense, Cassie, a 26-year-old second-generation immigrant bisexual woman from the Bay Area, stated, "I don't think I'll ever come out to my grandparents [who still live in Mexico]. I feel like it would be a rejection of my culture to be openly queer in front of them and it's not worth risking that relationship when they have limited time left. They're really Catholic and believe in stereotypical Mexican gender roles, so I don't want to ruin their idea of me. They thought my ex-girlfriend was my friend for like 3 years and that hurt. But I feel like it's what I had to do." These accounts exemplify how these expectations from extended family members forced participants to decide whether to maintain the peace and prioritize an unproblematic relationship through cultural belonging, rather than fully expressing their authentic selves.

In several instances, parents who were slowly becoming more open to their child's queerness in private nuclear familial settings, still encouraged, or even required, their children to hide their identities and subsequent expression in extended family settings. This requirement caused pressure for many participants and maintained the idea that their queer identities were only acceptable under certain conditions, enforcing that acceptance is tied to continued conformity to traditional cultural expectations. As a result, participants had to employ various strategies to navigating this pressure among extended familial settings, like feeling they had a

dual persona or only disclosing their identities to certain people. Some participants were quite hurt at having to hide core parts of their identities in order to protect their family's reputation, while other participants understood the generational differences and viewed this concealment more indifferently. "It's like I'm two different people depending on who in my family is around," said Carolina, a 26-year-old second-generation immigrant queer woman from Los Angeles. "My immediate family knows, so I can mostly be myself, but when we're with my grandparents and aunts, I have to tone my queerness down. So like no talking about dating, no mentioning anything about being gay. It does suck because I feel like I'm kind of lying in a way, but I know it's the only way to keep the peace with everybody." Carolina's experience highlights how navigating queer identity between transnational familial dynamics typically requires maintaining several cultural frameworks. In this sense, communal acceptance is contingent on balancing outward conformity to traditional norms and being one's true self. This negotiation indicates the complicated balance of competing cultural scripts along with external shifts in the surrounding society.

An interesting account came from Javier, a 28-year-old second-generation immigrant gay man from the Bay Area. He explained that he grew up with a gay uncle, and his entire family always ignored his love life and never discussed him being gay. He recalled, "It's like they already had a system or something for dealing with it. They just didn't talk about it. Nobody was mean or anything or said anything like bad, but it was clear that certain topics about him were off-limits. So when I came out, I was scared but it wasn't a huge deal, but it also wasn't something we really acknowledged for a while." This familial dynamic exemplifies a different mode of negotiation. For Javier, identity and expression management was affected less by broader coethnic community reputation, but more by an individualistic approach of quiet

omission, which ultimately did not require confrontation nor concealment. Different to the cultural pressures other second-generation immigrants described, Javier's account demonstrates how queerness could be catered to through implicit acceptance rather than through direct conflict. These kinds of distinctions demonstrate that these liminal spaces encourage participants to develop tailored emotional strategies to navigate acceptance within their families.

In contrast, comparison group participants seldom described these kinds of pressure ties to their reputations among their extended family or community. Though, of course, familial tensions existed for some participants, they did not belong to a tight coethnic community, eliminating some of the stakes of coming out or expression of their identity. Thus, this allowed for greater ownership of this expression without as many potential negative consequences. "My extended family wasn't really part of the conversation," explained Drew, a 25-year-old non-second-generation immigrant nonbinary participant from Seattle. "I came out to my parents a while ago, and that was kind of it. I don't think I've ever told my aunts or uncles. I just don't think we have that kind of relationship where it would matter..." Other participants also noted the less closeness they had to their extended family, indicating that comparison group respondents did not have the same broader concerns of identity negotiation within their familial context. Therefore, while all participants certainly encountered some challenges with their identity negotiation with their family, queer second-generation immigrants encountered additional layers of complexity. They not only had to negotiate their parental expectations within the nuclear family, but they also had to negotiate communal expectations in a broader cultural sense that was more tied to maintaining typical Mexican cultural values.

All together, these findings suggest how the experiences of identity formation among queer second-generation immigrants are deeply influenced by complex layers of cultural

negotiation within both nuclear and extended family contexts. Though broader U.S. cultural and political shifts in acceptance of LGBTQ+ rights did allow these frameworks to be less rigid and allow for greater acceptance and tolerance in general, the persistence of traditional Mexican cultural norms, particularly around gender expression, sexuality, and familial roles, still provided boundaries on just how fully respondents could be themselves through their identities, especially within familial spaces. Even when parents were seemingly open towards their children's identities, this openness often shifted when wishing to manage certain outward appearances or maintaining the potential judgments of extended family and the broader coethnic community.

Differently, the comparison group of queer non-second-generation immigrants were generally less burdened by these kinds of cultural expectations and outward appearances. This demonstrates how cultural hybridity across borders influences the stakes and strategies of queer identity formation and negotiation for second-generation immigrants. Ultimately, this forms a distinctive and often constrained pathway for legitimacy in identity, as well as full authenticity and belonging in familial and communal contexts. Yet, parental attitudes are not fixed, as demonstrated. These can shift over time in response to external cultural and social factors, as well as through conversations with their children and otherwise.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study extends and contributes to the growing body of literature that understands queer identity formation in varying contexts. My particular focus of queer second-generation immigrants demonstrates that this unique identity development is profoundly shaped by the transmission of multiple cultural contexts and values, within the family and also through broader societal shifts. This constitutes a liminal space that participants occupied. One that requires a continuous negotiation between personal authentic expression and larger cultural belonging.

Their experiences show how queer identity development unravels through encounters with norms and conventions around gender and sexuality diverge across cultural systems, as well as through generational lines. However, this divergence is malleable and changes in response to political and social shifts, life experiences, etc. throughout this identity formation and expression process.

In general, each of my findings underscore and extend the concept of cultural transnationalism. Transnationalism, broadly, is defined as the continuous cross-border social, political, economic, and cultural connections that immigrants maintain between their country of origin and their country of residence (Waldinger 2013). In the context of this study, this particular cultural transnationalism occurs for the parents of the queer second-generation immigrants, but also extends to the children themselves as they understand how to express their identities within this specific space between cultures. In contrast to the comparison group, second-generation immigrants feel a distinct pressure to balance the cultural values of their parents and extended families, while simultaneously understanding and expressing their identity in a different cultural, social, and political setting. Thus, this study extends the understanding of cultural transnationalism, demonstrating how cross-border cultural frameworks are not only balanced by first-generation immigrants, but further actively reinterpreted by their queer children, as they navigate identity and belonging within complex familial and social contexts.

Though the parents of these queer second-generation immigrants demonstrated a particular set of challenges when coming to terms with their children's identities and expression, this cultural transnationalism also indicates that there is the opportunity for malleability and change for the parents in how these cultural values are interpreted and upheld in response to external shifts and values. For instance, with more recent sociopolitical shifts like the

legalization of same-sex marriage, this complicates the cultural frameworks that were previously embedded as fixed and rigid, creating opportunities for parental reinterpretation and softening of norms to encourage greater acceptance and comfortability for belonging. Further, this study extends the literature on these more recent sociopolitical changes in the last decade or so. Existing literature, as explained, focuses largely on general trends within public acceptance of queer populations, whether through legal pathways or through traditional media representation. But, less is known about how this influences the malleability of cultural scripts as experienced by queer second-generation immigrants and their parents. My study builds on this gap by examining whether, and how, second-generation queer individuals experience shifts in familial acceptance within the context of these evolving political and cultural conditions.

While most existing studies and established theories about queer second-generation immigrants focus on the children themselves and their experiences, this study expands these conversations by understanding the parents' cultural transnationalism as well. While their children are developing their identity and sense of belonging within these layered contexts, the parents are simultaneously navigating their own sense of identity and belonging within cross-border cultural frameworks, co-ethnic communities, and shifting social norms in their resident society. The parents, too, are figuring out how to balance competing and evolving values and expectations, complicating their own experiences, as well as how they respond to their children's.

Broader implications of this work identify the need for queer support systems and structures that are culturally representative and sensitive to these layered and complex experiences. Programs and interventions that prioritize the coming out processes on the individual-level risk the communal and cross-cultural dimensions that deeply influence queer

second-generation immigrants and their identity formation, belonging, and feelings of authenticity. As such, programming, services, and policy initiatives must reflect that for many queer people, the journey to personal acceptance and expression can be complicated by powerful cultural and familial forces. Efforts to support and affirm queer communities must account for these forces and provide resources that are attuned to these potential dynamics.

Though this study provides broader understandings of queer second-generation immigrants in general, it is important that this analysis is expanded in the future to explore how different immigrant groups and contexts, such as Middle Eastern, African, or Southeast Asian families shape queer identity formation and expression differently. Also, studies that capture a broader population of where participants are located and grew up in the U.S. would be important for understanding how these cultural frameworks alter across regions. In addition, longitudinal studies could capture how these dynamics change over time throughout a queer second-generation immigrant's adulthood. Further, similar studies should be completed in the future to understand how these negotiations shift in response to continually changing political and societal developments.

Ultimately, this study underscores the complex reality of queer second-generation immigrants. It highlights the need to understand intersectional identities and how they interact with each other within specific environments, moving beyond individualistic models and theories of identity development. Rather, this encourages a shift towards understandings that recognize the ongoing negotiation of full authenticity within cross-border, intergenerational, and sociopolitical contexts.

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