Are we or we not? Traits of Mexican identity from Roma

¿Somos o no somos? Rasgos de identidad mexicana de Roma

Somos ou não somos? Traços da identidade mexicana do filme Roma

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Abstract: Mexican identity links to different conceptions related to the national governments in turn, whose traits have been portrayed in the cinema produced in the country. Because of the international success of a Mexican film like *Roma* (2018) by Alfonso Cuarón, it becomes essential to distinguish which characteristics the audience identifies in the movie regarding *Mexicanidad*. Hence, this research is a qualitative study about young Mexicans' perceptions of *Mexicanidad* in *Roma*, comparing them with a textual analysis of the film. The discussion of this representation allows emphasizing two Mexican traits: the importance of the family and classism. Although the film's conversation highlights those issues, it also generates a series of contradictions among participants' perceptions concerning those topics, the film industry's status, and *Mexicanidad*. The point of convergence is a possibility to build a more competitive cinema closer to Mexicans and their identity.

Key words:

Cultural identity, Mexican cinema, Mexican identity, Mexicanidad, national cinema, Roma

Resumen: La identidad mexicana se vincula a diferentes concepciones relacionadas con los gobiernos nacionales, cuyos rasgos han sido retratados en el cine producido en el país. Debido al éxito internacional de una película mexicana como Roma (2018) de Alfonso Cuarón, se hace esencial distinguir qué características identifica el público en la película con respecto a la mexicanidad. Por lo tanto, esta investigación es un estudio cualitativo sobre las percepciones de los mexicanos jóvenes sobre la mexicanidad en los romaníes, comparándolos con un análisis

textual de la película. La discusión de esta representación permite enfatizar dos rasgos mexicanos: la importancia de la familia y el clasismo. Aunque la conversación de la película resalta esos problemas, también genera una serie de contradicciones entre las percepciones de los participantes sobre esos temas, el estado de la industria del cine y la mexicanidad. El punto de convergencia es la posibilidad de construir un cine más competitivo más cercano a los mexicanos y su identidad.

Palabras clave:

Identidad cultural, cine mexicano, identidad mexicana, mexicanidad, cine nacional, Roma

Resumo: A identidade mexicana está ligada a diferentes conceções relacionadas aos governos nacionais, cujos traços foram retratados no cinema produzido no país. Devido ao sucesso internacional de um filme mexicano como Roma (2018) de Alfonso Cuarón, torna-se essencial distinguir quais características o público identifica no filme sobre Mexicanidad. Portanto, esta pesquisa é um estudo qualitativo sobre as perceções dos jovens mexicanos sobre a mexicanidade em Roma, comparando-as com uma análise textual do filme. A discussão dessa representação permite enfatizar dois traços mexicanos: a importância da família e o classismo. Embora a conversa do filme destaque essas questões, também gera uma série de contradições entre as perceções dos participantes sobre esses tópicos, o status da indústria cinematográfica e a Mexicanidad. O ponto de convergência é a possibilidade de construir um cinema mais competitivo, mais próximo dos mexicanos e de sua identidade.

Palavras-chave:

Identidade cultural, cinema mexicano, identidade mexicana, Mexicanidad, cinema nacional, Roma

1. Introduction

In the first shot of *Roma* (2018), a water puddle reflects the sky. What comes next to that reflection is an implicit mirror, not only of an era but of Mexican identity (Bautista, 2019). The path to defining a cultural uniqueness has proven to be intricate in a society immersed in globalized processes (Jasson, 1999). As communication has transcended borders, experiences

rooted in a different cultural context may be available to anyone with just one click (Hinojosa, 2014). Hence, when cultures mix, either as a result of the media immediacy or due to migration processes, countries resort to a constant quest to find their essence and achieve a differentiation (Morley & Robins, 2002). Consequently, it is common that the media stories produced in a country present a national ideological and cultural discourse (Kellner, 1995).

In Mexico, governments have linked national identity to political and social changes since the end of the Revolution, in a cultural project to build and define what it means to be Mexican (Monsiváis, 1987). In that sense, culture, including cinema, has aimed to unify Mexicans around a single identity (Gómez, 2015). However, the process has not been constant. The various crises that Mexican cinema has suffered have led the industry to reinvent itself over and over to reach its audiences (Matute, 2011). In the last decade, Mexican cinema has reached a climax not only at the box office (Redacción Heraldo de México, 2018) but also in international recognition. In that tenor, *Roma* has become the symbol of a so-called "second golden age" for Mexican cinema (Kuehler & Rice, 2019). The story of Cleo, an indigenous domestic worker, who serves a middle-class family in the Mexico of the '70s, achieved a global acceptance that brought with it questions about the industry and Mexican identity (Nolen, 2019).

This research aims to identify the features of national identity perceived by Mexican audiences and how they transcend the film, eliciting a collective imaginary of what it means to be Mexican. The study also pays attention to professional expectations triggered in young Mexicans by *Roma*'s triumph. The proposed route to achieve this goal is an analysis of previous concepts of cultural and Mexican identity, as well as the evolution of Mexican traits depicted by national films. Next, it is necessary to understand *Roma* from the audience's perspective and the features they identify and discuss. Finally, it is essential to contrast this vision with the images and events presented in the film to recognize the points of convergence.

2. Literature review

Shaping a national identity in a globalized world requires taking into consideration multiple factors. One of those aspects is the historical understanding of previous attempts at building it. In the case of the Mexican identity, the history of how the government influenced this concept is closely related to the Mexican cinema history itself. Films tend to change how people perceive their identity. It occurs because these images resonate with the audience on two levels: a

personal one (previous individual experiences) and a collective one (national imaginary) (Walsh, 1996).

2.1 Being part of the group. The creation of a cultural identity

Human identity relates to the act of recognizing oneself through interaction with others. When an individual takes a group of human beings as a point of reference is possible to understand the norms, rules, and behaviors expected of him or her (Mead, 1934). This identification provokes a sense of being part of a group (in-group), which sets the principles to evaluate similar or different people from us (Tajfel, 1982). "We fit ourselves and other people into labels that we develop in our cultures […] and then think about ourselves, and about them, differently because of that" (McKee, 2003, p. 40). If interactions are at the core of human identity, then it is necessary to take into consideration the media's role in contemporary society (Kellner, 1995). Because we live in a world where technology mediates our daily interactions (Cool, 2010), the content available on platforms/media sets a series of constructs that can be adopted by an individual:

> Media culture also provides the materials out of which many people construct their sense of class, of ethnicity and race, of nationality, of sexuality, of "us" and "them". Media culture helps shape the prevalent view of the world and the deepest values […]. Media stories and images provide the symbols, myths, and resources which help constitute a common culture […]. Media culture provides the materials to create identities.
> (Kellner, 1995, p. 1)

Kellner (1995) and Dunn (1998) defy a modern conceptualization of identity. They propose a struggle against alienation, defining "we" through a post-modern interpretation, suggesting a oneness driven by a liquid concept, "[...] the source of identity has historically shifted from the internalization and integration of social roles to the appropriation of disposable commodities, images, and techniques, selected and discarded at will from the extensive repertoire of consumer culture" (Dunn, 1998, p. 65). This transition from an identity characterized by social interactions to a one based in cultural consumerism, presents a human being continually evolving and adopting roles based on media patterns (Dunn, 1998). Migration flows add another layer to the concept of cultural identity, "[…] people never experience an entirely homogeneous and stable cultural identity […] cultural communities, perceived as networks, are rarely unitary in themselves [...] every individual is, to some extent, involved in more than one single interpretative community" (Jasson, 1999, p. 11).

However, when cultural identity faces multiculturalism, Hall (2014) points out that, far from a multiple oneness, the concept expands, incorporating or reinterpreting experiences, events, or values. Huang (2011) indicates that individuals from a country living in a different one, consume content that brings them closer to their roots, preserving points of view related to their culture. For a community, the experience of recognizing themselves in the films, series, or television programs, has become a necessity (Denzin, 2012). In this sense, the media have served to build a national brand, relating its content with specific traits (Huang, 2011). Cultural identity refers then to national identity because both set boundaries that serve as a distinction from other cultures/countries (Morley & Robins, 2002).

"We invoke national identity as an anchor that provides emotional stability, historical durability, and a strong sense of ontological security" (Malesevic, 2011, p. 287). National identity emphasizes the transmission of an implicit ideological discourse and a sense of solidarity among members (Malesevic, 2011). Andreouli and Howart (2013) indicate two factors to build this national sense: the daily representations with which individuals interact and the governmental policies that reinforce, delimit, or transform that construct gradually.

According to Inac and Unal (2013), public policies influence citizens' attitudes towards out-groups integrating or excluding them from the country's decisions. These authors indicate a significant challenge that faces the concept of cultural identity in the current era: a struggle between our uniqueness as a nation and the urgency of building bridges with other cultures. Hence, defining a specific national identity, as in the case of the Mexican one, requires tracing the evolution of the concept of *Mexicanidad*.

2.2 A fragmented history. Towards a definition of Mexican identity

The end of the Mexican Revolution brought with it an in-depth analysis of what it meant to be Mexican, as a strategy to recover from a devastating period for the country (Hurtado, 2016). These reflections led to the adoption of a national cultural plan in Mexico to promote unity under the same language and an official history (Pérez, 1999). Some of the objectives of this project were recovering the indigenous traditions in a *mestizo* population, as well as to vindicate the *pueblo* (the ordinary people):

> The strategy was selective; that is, it favored and reproduced the motives and cultural symbols of central Mexico, especially the Aztec past. The integration of a multi-ethnic society is, therefore, motivated by ethnic memories encoded in mythical narratives, and by the fact of highlighting the virtues of civic heroes or "invented traditions".
> (Gutiérrez, 2012, p. 31)

Hence, much of the art produced in Mexico focused on cultural homogeneity. With the arrival of media such as cinema or TV and the impulse of the academic research of the *Mexicanidad*, the hegemonic groups in the country developed a concept of identity (Bartra, 2014). Media in Mexico became a vehicle to economic growth, reinforcing the national identity through its content and artists. García-Canclini (1993) expands the previous assumption: "Even the most internationalized actors at that time... impelled us to buy national products and spread the knowledge of our own" (p. 24).

During the '50s, a duality of ideology's laid the foundations of the Mexican identity (Parra, 1996): a modernist perspective, linked to industrialization; and a historical-culturalist one searching for cultural liberation (Gutiérrez, 2012). In the modernist vision, Octavio Paz (1950) indicates the Mexican as a victim of historical circumstances, who continually returns to the wounds of the Spanish conquest as a justification for their misfortunes. He explains that a Mexican is an entity of dualities that, at the same time, mocks death and pays tribute to it; a Mexican who needs to close their wounds facing modernity. While José Revueltas (1950) blamed the ruling economic class for imposing this Mexican discourse as a way to favor its interests. Unlike Paz, Revueltas offers historical analysis and social interaction as measures to establish a *Mexicanidad*. This division of thoughts remains in contemporary Mexico, finding a single point of coincidence: developing a national identity from the political and economic elites' perspectives (Cansino, 2012; Dresser, 2014). The social division makes a true unity *impossible*:

> In Mexico, the critical sense is zero. Expressions such as *malinchista, chairo,* naco*, agachado, esquirol, chayotero, acomodado*ᵢ, and many more are used continuously in different forums to highlight that in Mexico, nobody is neutral. Either one is in favor and conformist, or one is against and, therefore, is a misfit.
> (Domínguez, 2018, p. 28)

In modern Mexico, says Arredondo (2005), the concept of national identity no longer fits. He explains that it is replaced by the term *Mexicanidad* in which "symbolic forms of representation are framed, whose origin is rooted in the sediments constituted with the primitive worldviews of our cultural pasts and new collective symbols that allow us to reinterpret this new reality" (p. 15). Thus, continues Arredondo (2005), *Mexicanidad* incorporates an indigenous sense of the world, a religion that dictates values, modern cities as spaces to solve social problems, and the individual relationship with death. These concepts remain constant and, thanks to the media, they mix with new ones that evolve from the same culture and with those coming from other nations (Arredondo, 2005).

Casas (2005) points out how media contents handle this change. In her analysis of Mexican telenovelas, she indicates how this genre portrays new behavioral patterns of female and male characters influenced by a more cosmopolitan vision of the country. The themes show a more considerable resemblance to everyday Mexican life. However, family values and experiences related to traditional Mexican identity continue being part of plots, in a hybridization of two different moments of Mexico.

Mexicanidad is a fluid concept. It integrates values and ethereal experiences that bring together people from the same social class, generally the middle one, and from an urban environment, leaving aside rural populations (González, 2018). In this lack of definition of *Mexicanidad*, globalization fosters the adoption of other cultures as part of the Mexican one and creates a distance from the political and economic elites' perspectives (García-Canclini, 1993). Nevertheless, the Mexican government, for the 2019-2024 period, returned to a national identity similar to the one developed just right after the revolution. They recognize a series of generic values for Mexican society, such as honesty or peace preservation, that should be standardized (Presidencia de la República, 2019). In this coming and going of the Mexican identity, it is worth asking how cinema has transited through these stages to represent, through national stories, what *Mexicanidad* means.

2.3 Learning from role models: Mexican identity and national cinema

The cultural nationalism developed by the post-revolutionary governments influenced the Mexican artistic creation, which emphasized the national history and idealized the figure of the ordinary citizen through an ideology that represented daily life (Gómez, 2015). Mexican cinema was not exempt from that process:

> […] many moments of the Mexican filmography in the last eighty years had an ideological tone between the filmmakers and the state policies. They were films that achieved identification of the values of the different groups through consensus; that is, in the construction of an imaginary that was accepted by the public.
> (Gómez, 2015, p. 23)

However, the film industry slowly adopted this process. The first Mexican productions were documentaries dramaturgical works from other countries, diminishing the nascent creation of original films. It was until Lázaro Cárdenas's term in 1930 that they started increasing (Dávalos & Ciuk, 2011). He brought the idea of reinforcing the Mexican image

through film, supporting an industry that could compete with Hollywood's, which during that period exceeded the national production (Noble, 2005).

With the emergence of the so-called Golden Age of Mexican cinema, from the mid-30s to the mid-1950s, the referent of the nation began to prevail (Monsiváis, 1987). In this period, after the adoption of genres and Hollywood's language, the cinema produced in Mexico sought to impose a unified image anchored in symbolic elements such as spaces, social practices, structural systems, and archetypal characters (Silva, 2011). A *Mexicanidad* centered on the most popular classes as a way of creating a sense of belonging through stereotypes (Pérez, 1999):

> This is how national stereotypes were constructed to synthesize what was identified as "typically Mexican." In spite of the varied range of regional cultural manifestations, both indigenous and *mestizo*, the film tendency of the period consisted in the application of somewhat excessive stereotypes: the bully *charro*, drinker, gallant, violent, virile; the *china poblana*, submissive, enamored, beautiful and obedient.
> (Silva, 2011, p. 24)

The population took as own the actions portrayed by these stereotypes to shape many of their daily activities, in a constant dialogue between what they saw on screen and what was happening outside it (Monsiváis, 2003). It occurred not only in Mexico but also in other Latin American countries (Castro-Ricalde, 2017). *Allá en el Rancho Grande* (1936), the inaugural film of this period, established a model of community that would be replicated recurrently. In it, the race drew a hierarchy suppressing the indigenous, the rural was idyllic, a man was an example of courage, a woman of self-denial, and the family was the center of values and social principles (Díaz López, 1996).

After the decline of the Golden Age due to the recovery of Hollywood production and the deterioration of the quality of national cinema, viewers stopped consuming Mexican films (Matute, 2011). This event resulted in the film studios' bankruptcy, the loss of foreign markets, and the production of movies that used other aesthetic/narrative resources (such as erotic themes) to recover the audience's attention (Dávalos & Ciuk, 2011). Facing the hegemony of Hollywood cinema again, new Mexican filmmakers integrated the sordid elements into themes closer to the audience to create "a set of films that captures, develops, makes its viewers aware of sensations, sentimentality, psychic violence, and desire of not being alone in bed" (Monsiváis, 2006, p. 513).

In contemporary cinema, the national imaginaries constructed in the Golden Age are under a constant reinvention. García (2010) points out that among the inherited characteristics is the iconicity of national heroes and their lessons. He also identifies a camera that describes rural

Mexico exalting the countryside landscapes. Finally, the stylistic resources of this new cinema move away from the characters to exemplify the transience of faces of a non-stereotyped identity. In these films, the Mexican accepts the duality of his behavior, uses the language as a weapon, sees sex as natural, practices risky behaviors as a modus vivendi, and lives an unhappy reality without hope (Monsiváis, 2006). This cinema left aside the popular classes not only in the discourse's representation but also in the film's exhibition. It occurred, according to Matute (2011), because of an increase in the ticket's cost and the openness to screen American movies dubbed into Spanish. Finally, this cinema provoked a total disconnection with the public when it focused on "festival audiences," leaving aside the Mexican viewers (Ruffinelli, 2011).

Hence, the Mexican film industry set a debate between a capitalist model of supply and demand and a need to protect the culture emanating from national productions. It leads to the government again to support the industry looking for different proposals, a cinema more competitive in the local market (Reyes, 2019). This decision had a positive impact as nine of the ten Mexican highest-grossing films were produced after 2013 (Redacción Heraldo de México, 2018). This success implied looking for new audiences with more acquisitive power and portraying their daily life's events without the same graphic violence as the films produced in the previous stages. As Hinojosa mentions: "These new films use characters from a Mexican high socioeconomic level, family issues, social inequality resolved in a lightly and friendly manner; no criticism, no violence, no sex predominate, just humor and a positive message" (Hinojosa, 2014, p. 18).

In this continually evolving context, *Roma* impacted beyond Mexican borders and achieved a success that does not compare with other domestic films. The film elicits questions about different dimensions of what is being Mexican (Bautista, 2019; Nolen, 2019).

3. Research questions

The cinema in Mexico has been a tool for the construction of national identity, projecting locally and abroad a series of characteristics related to *Mexicanidad*. It gains more relevance when the viewer identifies with what happens on the screen because it influences their beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors (De Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders & Beentjes, 2009). It is during adolescence where the identity's formation is more susceptible because of the perception of external representations, no matter where you live (González, 2018). Due to that fact, coupled with a

blurred Mexican image and its description, and given the success of *Roma*, it is crucial to know how a youth audience recognizes itself in the film:

RQ1: What are the characteristics of the Mexican identity perceived by Mexican and Mexican-American young adults in *Roma*?

RQ2: Do those features have a relationship with the traits of their identity? The audience is attached to a process of cultural identity in which one needs to differentiate oneself from other cultures through the experiences of our peers (Hall, 2014). Then, it is worth asking if the professional success of a Mexican crew in a global industry has an impact on the recognition of individual limitations and possibilities:

RQ3: Does the international success of *Roma* influence Mexican and Mexican American's professional expectations?

4. Method

The study applies two methodologies to solve the proposed questions: focus groups and textual analysis. A focus group allows an interactive process that facilitates the construction of a collective meaning through the expression of ideas, emotions, or attitudes around social issues, allowing participants to form their discourse (Brennen, 2013). The textual analysis allows direct interaction with the object of meaning in light of the contextual process from which it emerges, focusing of its particularities and how they give sense to reality (McKee, 2003).

Two focus groups were conducted involving students from a university in western Mexico and a university in the southwest of the United States. The recruitment in both universities consisted of an announcement publication through the institutional bulletins and a snowball sampling, in which students in each institution invited others. The only restrictions for participation were Mexican nationality and having watched *Roma*. Both focus groups occurred in the facilities of the respective universities, and participants were informed of the procedure and the research's objective before signing their consent. The discussion focused on four themes: Mexican cinema, Mexican identity, *Roma,* and participants' professional expectations. A total of 15 questions were asked for each group. The group in Mexico was made up of 11 participants (four men and seven women), and the duration of the session was 2 hours and 10 minutes. While ten students formed the group in the United States (seven men and three women), and its length was 1 hour and 25 minutes. The participants' age was in a range between 18 and 24 years. Both

focus groups were conducted in Spanish. Only one hand-held recorder was used to capture the information in both groups, at the end of which the transcription and the themes' identification were carried out. Only the data cited in the article was translated from Spanish to English.

Concerning *Roma,* a total of 81 scenes were identified and grouped under family, traditions, customs, classism, discrimination, love, violence, and everyday life labels. Some of the scenes are addressed during the analysis to contrast or emphasize participant's arguments.

The study was approved by the Human Research Protection Program, which authorized the procedures used in the recruitment of participants and the collection of data. In the same way, it had the approval of the Mexican university to carry out the procedure.

5. Findings

The relationship between the participants' perception of their identity and the Mexican traits portrayed by the Mexican Cinema was the outcome of two general questions: how would you define being Mexican? And what characteristics does Mexican cinema present about Mexicans?

This discussion highlights the ability of Mexicans to make fun of themselves as a principal characteristic of their idiosyncrasy. Cristóbal, a 20-year-old Mexican-American, says, "Our humor [the Mexican one] is very different from everyone else [participants agreed]. We laugh at something the movie shows, and no one else apart from Mexicans will understand it." Andrés, a 23-year-old Mexican, indicates that "a Mexican laughs of every situation, no matter if it is tragic." Thus, comedy is the genre that dominates the box office in Mexico (Hernández, 2019). However, despite its success, participants recognize that Mexican comedy is "vulgar," "without values," and fraughted with stereotypes. María, a 19-year-old Mexican student, mentioned, "if you want to represent posh people, they are all the same. *Nacos* [uneducated people with bad taste] are going to have similar features. Every character in Mexican films is always a stereotype".

Even so, participants justify the production of Mexican comedies. Julia, a 19-year-old Mexican student, indicates that they present a different view of Mexico to international audiences that "shows them how we are cosmopolitan in Mexico". Given the social problems the country faces, the participants indicate that comedies are an escape valve, says one of them, Maria:

[...] when a family man arrives from his shift, he will not want to see a violent film. News is already indicating how many people are killed, how many disappeared. He will not want to watch movies about the same context. In our cinema, commercial films are for a break. Obviously, they do not give us anything valuable, but who wants a movie about five murdered girls, when it's what you live every day.

For participants, comedies misrepresent Mexicans, but other genres also do it. For instance, people relate dramas with violence and sexuality. Tomás, a 20-year-old Mexican-American, points to drug trafficking as one negative theme in media content. He mentions that "there are many series that the only thing that talks about is drug trafficking in Mexico. It is like the vision of the American citizen who does not know Mexico." Melissa, a Mexican-American of 24 years, claims a similar opinion about sex, "[…] from what I remember when I saw many movies in Mexico, they always have very horny characters [the group laughs], many sex scenes; there are people naked, and I don't think we're like that".

In this context, participants conceived *Roma* as a film that does not fit in the mentioned stereotypes. Ana, a 20-year-old Mexican girl, elaborates:

I do not like much Mexican cinema. Comparing the contemporary one with the old one, I think it has a deficient quality. The films of the Golden Age and the old ones are very good. They have more quality, and right now, all the Mexican cinema is very commercial. It does not seek to transcend because it is already a formula that sells. The audience likes to consume that, and they do not ask for anything else. Those are Sunday movies that you enjoy, but they are never going to win an Oscar. If you compare a film from nowadays, *Casese quien pueda,* to *Roma*, then *Roma* could be classified as an older film because it sought a profound message.

Roma allows the participants to speak about a different kind of cinema. Fernando, a 20-year-old Mexican student, says, "*Roma* is not a movie for all audiences. You have to like movies a little".

Even when a Mexican comedy is a blockbuster in Mexico, and the participants admit to watching it, they seem not to be satisfied with the representations comedies give of Mexicans. However, in *Roma*, the effect is different. Participants identify two points of discussion. On the one hand, they recognize a positive feature in the value of family and its traditions. Gonzalo, a 24-year-old Mexican-American, mentions: "I feel that the values of the family and the support of Mexicans from one to the other is something that identifies us". On the other hand, participants realize the differences between social classes as one of the most significant defects of Mexicans, according to one participant, Cristóbal, "Mexicans are not racist; they are classists".

5.1 Cleo saved us. Can we have a banana smoothie?

During the climax of *Roma*, Cleo [the maid] saves two kids [Paco and Sofi] from drowning. She kneels in the sand recovering from the accident. Sofía [the mother], as well as Toño, and Pepe [the siblings] approach to find out what happened. There, the six merge into an embrace with Cleo juxtaposed against a sunset that delineates her face. Sofia kisses her on the head while comforting her around that group hug. "We love you so much, Cleo".

Galaz (2011) points out that the family is a point of reference for the Mexican culture since it identifies as the core of traditions and customs. Further, he indicates another family characteristic, self-denial, through which a person is subject to a control structure that is based more on affection than on power. It makes the concept of the family a liquid one, in which an emotional bond makes anyone part of a family. Gonzalo, one of the participants, emphasizes the importance of his Mexican family even living in another country:

> I feel that the values that our parents bring from Mexico are stricter and more influential. The Mexican family man always supports the children [male and female]. Many American families, for example, when their children reach 18 years old, encourage them to leave their house. As a Hispanic, as a Mexican, you can live up to 30 years [general laughter] with your parents, and they will still welcome you well.

For the participants, *Roma* is the portrait of a conventional Mexican family. Clara, a 22-year-old Mexican participant, remembers that she heard the director Alfonso Cuarón mention it. This fact is plausible to the extent of causing participants' identification with the family the story presents, even though the film is set in the '70s. Tomás, one of the participants, points it out:

> I feel related to everything that happened in the movie except when the dad left them because my dad did not aband us [general laughter], but it's the same. My mom always kept crashing the car. I lived in Mérida, so my maid spoke Maya. It was something very cool to see.

In that sense, a stronger identification occurs thanks to one of the characters, Cleo, and the role she plays in the family. Participants mentioned the figure of the domestic worker in several anecdotes triggered by the film. Luis, a 21-year-old Mexican American, explains it: "I had a nanny too. She also helped me grow up and took care of several cousins, several relatives of mine growing up. She had been working for the family for 20 years". Another participant, María, explains that Cleo's integration as part of the family is a characteristic of the Mexicans' "human quality":

> It's like that quality that the Mexican family provides to external people. No matter what social class you are or what you do for the family, in the end, they also treat you and return the same love. As in Roma's ending, when Cleo saved Sofia, it was as if "she did it for me," and they genuinely thank her eternally.

Alicia, a 20-year-old Mexican woman, complements this assertion indicating that a family is not formed necessarily by blood ties, but by being present at the most critical moments. This fact causes the domestic employee to be perceived as a second mother, explains Mario, a young Mexican of 21 years,

> In my city are [...] [He could not say, domestic worker or maid] homemakers who help you. She is a person very close to you, is a person that, when I arrive, instead of saying "hello" to my mom, I first greet her or hug her. Because she is the one who feeds me, and when I was younger, she used to cuddle me until I felt sleepy, and things like that.

In the Mexican context, domestic service, despite the perception of the participants, is not frequent but a characteristic of a favored social class (Goldsmith, 1998). Female domestic workers have a common origin in rural areas or indigenous populations. They migrate to the big cities hoping to change their economic conditions. There, their relationship with a family has several nuances. On the one hand, as an irony, in the process of female liberation, housewives, now free from housework because of the movement, hired these women to perform the domestic labor (Saldaña, 2013). On the other hand, an emotional bond occurs when the relationship between "employers" and "employees" seems to be homologated to the degree of involving them in familiar events in a reciprocal manner; however, an employment relationship underlies this apparent equality (Howell, 1999).

In *Roma*, Cleo is not part of the family. A patio divides two worlds, the spaces that Cleo uses for her most basic needs are in "her" side of the terrace: her bedroom and her bathroom. In one of the scenes, the family gathers around the television. Cleo glances at the screen and continues with her activities. She takes a seat. Her assigned place is a cushion next to the sofa. It denotes a difference in height between the family and the employee. Paco, the younger children, hugs her and caresses her head, more like a pet than a human being. One of the participants, Ana, refers to this relationship to emphasize how it resembles real-life events:

> The wife says, "Hey, sit down with me, and let's talk, but first, clean." I love the people who have worked at my house, but in the end, you will not invite them to have a meal with you or something like that.

The same participant recognizes that the family in the film has an emotional attachment with Cleo, but this does not make her part of the family. In the discussion, one of the participants uses the term "owner" to denominate the relationship between Sofia and Cleo. Once the participant notes her mistake, she accepts that the film portrays a working relationship more than

a familial one. Another participant, María, complements this idea: "[…] they say to Cleo, 'we love you and protect you, but you are our employee'".

Despite their affection for their domestic worker, *Roma*'s family knows nothing about Cleo's personal life. Teresa, the grandmother, accompanies Cleo to the hospital; Cleo is about to give birth. A nurse asks Teresa about Cleo's information, but she does not know nothing about her. Something similar occurs with those participants who point to an affinity with the film because of recognizing their own "Cleos". Luis, one of the participants, indicates how his nanny went every weekend to her town, but he does not know which or where it is.

Cleo saves the life of Paco and Sofi. While the children tell this feat to their grandmother, Sofi asks Cleo for a banana smoothie. Maintaining family stability is also part of Cleo's work. When Sofia's husband leaves her, she blames Cleo for not cleaning the dog's poop. After slapping her son, Sofia accuses Cleo again for not stopping the child from listening to her conversation. If Cleo had not saved the children from drowning, the blame would fall back on her. The family expects that Cleo also saves their lives as a part of her work. Andrés indicates: "[...] and at the end of the movie, even when Cleo saved their life, she still does not reach a family member level. Do not you believe that Cleo is alone?"

5.2 Leslie scares me. She makes me feel like I stink

Domestic service hints the inequality gap that exists between different social sectors in Mexico, where the most unprotected classes serve the most privileged (Jiménez, 2001). Since the revolution, the Mexican cultural project used miscegenation as a symbol of *Mexicanidad*, but other factors, such as economic disparity, favored the segregation by social classes (Urías, 2014). This classism is compounded by the discrimination that still exists in Mexico due to skin color. The lighter the skin, the higher their educational, work, and social mobility opportunities (Martínez, 2018).

One of the participants, Andrés, indicates this topic in his daily life, "We say from the "Calzada" [a Mexican city's street] to beyond[ii] . It is a physical division, and you know what kind of people you will find on both sides [of the city]." Participants recognize a tendency in Mexico to "categorize" people according to "lifestyles," creating a perpetuation of "stereotypes" by society. They illustrate this situation with everyday examples, such as bypassing the use of public transportation to avoid being judged by friends. Alejandra, a 19-year-old Mexican

American student, notes that social classes' portraits are more common in contemporary Mexican cinema:

> Obviously, in *Roma*, you can see that with the two women, one is more like a middle class and the other one a poorer one. You've also seen it in many movies recently, such as *Nosotros los nobles* made it. They are rich, and suddenly, they have nothing. So, social classes have been seen [in Mexican cinema] more recently.

In this sense, another participant, Andrés, uses the film *Mirreyes contra Godínez* (2018)[1] as an example to indicate how these nicknames come from the Mexican reality, "[...] they are the stereotypes that we, as a society, have been putting on them".

In *Roma*, the domestic servants live behind a barrier imposed by the dominant social class. Cleo tours the house turning on and off different lamps in a daily routine. By the time she arrives at her room, she requests Adela [another domestic employee] to turn off the only light they have. The reason, Teresa probably observes them from the other side of the patio, "taking care we do not waste electricity." During the New Year's Eve party at Larsson's house, Cleo accompanies Larsson's domestic worker in a descent to the service room, where the ones similar to them can celebrate. Rich and poor do not coexist. Gloria, a 23-year-old Mexican, elaborates on this:

> That difference between social levels is a bit delicate because it highlights a lot about how you live here, in Mexico. Because it is still exactly the same and is something very real. So, the film talks about a defect in Mexico, something we have to work on. Poverty is not going to end, rich people are not going to end, but maybe we can get along in that situation. We can look for ways to improve or change something.

Besides identifying classism as a Mexican defect, some participants in both focus groups accept that *Roma* also emphasizes discrimination against indigenous communities. Melissa mentions it:

> He [Alfonso Cuarón] brought to the center that identity crisis that sometimes exists in Mexico. We have many traditions such as the Day of the Dead that come from the Aztecs, or certain functions in our culture that are in an indigenous way, but we tend to despise the indigenous people.

Participants refer to not having commonalities with indigenous communities, besides some traditions, such as "the Day of the Dead". Gustavo, a 21-year-old Mexican, emphasizes: "We are not related to indigenous populations; the only relationship I have with them is that I

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[1] The title of the film makes a reference to two specific groups of the Mexican population. Mirrey is a selfish rich person that lives with extreme luxuries without a social conscience. Godinez is a pejorative term used to describe to the Mexican worker class whose task is inside an office under a strict schedule.

sometimes see them in the streets' intersections selling things." The film does not question the relationship between indigenous communities and Mexican society in an open manner. Still, outside the screen, its leading actress was a victim of some discriminatory attitudes. Yalitza Aparicio, the Mexican actress who plays Cleo, was insulted by other members of the Mexican acting community after her Oscar nomination. Ana, one of the participants, points out this situation:

> I heard the news about an actor who said that [a racist comment]. Then, I came to class and listened to a classmate who expressed attitudes about her in the same way, calling her a "fucking aboriginal". I thought it was a thing of social media, but I realized that it was also an attitude of people more educated.

Nervous, some participants reported sharing memes that were mocking of Yalitza. They noted that many of their friends were annoyed because of "a person like that" represented them. This discomfort happened mostly in their social networks. Luis, one of the participants, admits not changing his perception of Yalitza until he saw the film. Other participants remarked the inclusion of an indigenous person as a way to highlight the conditions of this population in Mexico and raise awareness of the changes that should be made by society to integrate them. Alicia explains:

> How cool is that a person without any preparation is given the means so she could highlight and give voice to the kind of people she represents. I had not felt so close to the incomprehension or ignorance unleashed by the fact that a film represents someone who is not you.

Even though Alicia's comment is positive, it also shows how people continue not to consider indigenous communities as a representation of Mexico. Participants emphasize: "they are different from us".

In Mexico, racism is an issue related to foreigners' discrimination against Mexicans. However, Mexicans do not recognize it as a regular practice among them (UNAM GLOBAL, 2018). *Roma* suggests this social differentiation through some dialogues, for instance, when Fermin (Cleo's boyfriend) calls her a "fucking maid." It also occurs in conversations that involve a nonnative person discriminating against Mexicans, as when Sofi says that Leslie, the Larsson's American mother, makes her feel that she stinks. Society exercises this discrimination cycle in a general way. Though there is a possibility to start working on it, thanks to a film like *Roma*. Ana says: "We always have someone to represent us; Yalitza is representing us. She came out in Vogue Mexico, and she's everywhere, giving them [indigenous people] a voice and saying that

they can do something". Nevertheless, this final thought still implies this distinction between "us and them".

5.3 There's going to be changes, and it's going to be an adventure

Changes in Mexico's economic policies, including the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), influenced the Mexican cinema's production and exhibition. Because of this, in 1997, films made in Mexico fell to 20, of which even some failed to be exhibited (Hinojosa, 2014). In 20 years, the Mexican industry managed to recover, turning 2018 into the year in which more films were produced, even breaking the Golden Age record (Hernández, 2019). In this environment, *Roma* marked a milestone in the Mexican film industry due to the awards received, being the most reliable indicator of a possible second Golden Age of Mexican cinema (Kuehler & Rice, 2019). For the participants, *Roma*'s triumph is essential, says Silvia, a 20-year-old Mexican woman:

It feels great. You hear who won the best director this year, Alfonso Cuarón, for a film about Mexico. It feels good to know that other people outside Mexico also like it or are interested in stories based in Mexico.

According to the participants, the film's success outside the country serves to show what Mexican talent and creativity are capable of. Additionally, participants recognize that the film improves the image of Mexico abroad. Alejandra, one of the participants, explains:

I'm pleased that Mexico is going ahead and that it continues doing good things, winning awards, and making art that is recognized worldwide. Mainly because many tensions are happening in the country and outside it, even with their neighbors. I'm proud that there is even something we can celebrate and also share the joy with these people [indigenous populations] and recognize them.

For Mexicans living in Mexico, *Roma* is the beginning of a different way of making films. Due to its triumphs, they see several open doors that benefit their professional future. Alicia, a participant, indicates a radical change in her point of view:

> I told myself that if I want to do scripts, I cannot be in Mexico because I'm going to starve, or I'm not going to do anything. Suddenly, it is announced that the Netflix offices will be opened in Mexico City. Things have been falling into place and make you say, "if I have professional expectations, I do not necessarily have to go abroad to do something that I like".

The participants of the Mexican group agree the film's success will bring a more competitive industry and a boost in local talent. However, this not occur in the U.S. focus group.

There, even when participants recognize the promising outlook for the Mexican cinema and *Roma* as "motivation", they also indicate that the film's triumph does not change their professional expectations. Gustavo, one of the participants of this group, develops this idea:

> If we only see the cinema's point of view, I would say "let's go to Mexico", but there are factors outside of movies that influence our decisions. I would love to go back, but there are other factors. When it won the Oscar, everyone said it was cool. Then you start seeing other factors, and you say: "well, hmm, yes, it's cool, but no".

Participants who live in the United States see more job opportunities abroad than in Mexico, especially in other areas not related to the film industry. Thus, although they desire to return to the country, their professional development limits them. Silvia explains:

Because what I'm studying, and what I want to do once I finish my degree, the best options are going to be here [the U.S.]. Because there are more options than in Mexico, unfortunately. There is a part of me that says, "I want to come back where I was born, where I grew up", but there are external things that influence or make me stay here.

Hence, Mexican participants found in *Roma* an open door that gives them the possibility of developing their talent without emigrating to other countries. For them, the film symbolizes the success of a Mexican product in global markets. Consequently, they believe that their professional expectations can be fulfilled in the Mexican industry. In contrast, participants of the U.S. focus group recognize that the film's success is not the whole picture. Although they accept a possible positive repercussion in the Mexican film industry, they also indicate their chances of success increase if they are part of a global market. Both groups express their emotional attachment to Mexico, but in professional expectations, those who have left the nation do not see it as a viable option to return.

6. Conclusions

"Today and as a response to cultural globalization, a need for self-affirmation of their identities is growing among peoples, struggling to preserve and recover those historical-symbolic elements. Mexico needs to understand what is 'their own'" (Acle, Burguete, Santos, Claudio & Carmona, 2018, p. 177). The Mexican identity is a complicated labyrinth to resolve fueled by government policies changing every term, and, at the same time, is something necessary to give life to its cultural products (García-Canclini, 1993). The participants who gave voice to this research identified a series of virtues and defects that they consider typical of *Mexicanidad*

according to their daily interactions and experiences. One participant, Alicia, explains *Roma* as a catalyst: "I feel that the film helps me to remember where you come from and what it [Mexico] represents for you." The film proposes a review of the properties of *Mexicanidad* without claiming to become the Mexican film per se. In that sense, Reséndiz (2018) indicates the viewers may take *Roma* with an analytical moderation, understanding what it proposes and not taking it as an accurate portrait of the country. Thus, the reflection offered by the participants becomes not only a discourse of identification but of recognition and internalization, of comparison, of awareness. An ambivalent conversation at times, but consistent with that vision of the Mexican who laughs at death, as he pays tribute to it.

Besides, the film proposes a reflection off the screen about the film industry in Mexico and its social function. On the one hand, the film's perception is an opportunity to expand indigenous inclusion in the national culture (Rocha, 2019) and the chance to increase the Mexican cinema's visibility and quality (Reyes, 2019). On the other hand, *Roma* presents a point of view which indicates its triumph as empty, without value for the Mexican industry, as it comes from an individual effort supported by foreign capital (Paz, 2019). Moreover, some critics have seen the film as an isolated case related to an industry's decline where movies do not have a guarantee to recover investment or to be exhibited (Arena Pública, 2019). In that dichotomy, participants find a common point to extend the awareness of what it is to be Mexican and develop a more refined critical analysis. Claudio, a 19-year-old Mexican participant, elaborates, "I feel that people are not going to settle with less. People are going to ask for the same quality or more [in the films produced in Mexico]".

Towards *Roma*'s ending, Cleo goes upstairs to the house's roof, to a clear and bright sky, no longer a water's reflection. Even after all Cleo lived through, it would seem that nothing has changed. However, that sky is now real. Maybe what comes for the Mexican identity will also happen to be true.

7. Limitations and future research

The initial approach of this study was a comparative examination between Mexicans and Mexican Americans. Nevertheless, the group recruited in the U.S. is comprised of a particular kind of Mexican Americans. They were born in the U.S. but lived most of their lives in Mexico, returning to the U.S. for their professional development. Furthermore, the majority of them were

part of the same high social class, which indicates the necessity of a broader analysis of the social class relationship and the influence in their responses. Since only two focus groups were performed, future research in this regard needs to include various social classes, both in public and private universities.

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i *Malinchista* refers to a person who prefers other cultures instead of their own. *Chairo* is a pejorative word used to describe a person who has a strong left political ideology. *Naco* is a derogatory term employed to depict people with a bad taste and no education. *Agachado* refers to a conformist. *Esquirol* is a Spanish term used to refer to the people that work instead to support those on strike and even does their job. *Chayotero* is a Mexican term used to describe people that receive money for the government to talk good about it. Finally, *acomodado* is an Argentinian term used to describe someone privileged by their personal relationships, no because it corresponds to them.

ii This phrase is equivalent to the one used in English "on the wrong side of the tracks." It implies that people in a disadvantageous economic situation populate a specific part of the city.