Was the joke on us? Negotiating Mexican identity in transnational Mexican comedy blockbusters since 2013

by

Gabriel Domínguez Partida, B.A.Com. M.F.A.

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Approved

Kent Wilkinson, Ph.D.
Chair of the Committee

Megan Condis, Ph.D.

Robert Peaslee, Ph.D.

Scott Baugh, Ph.D.

Mark Sheridan, Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

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ABSTRACT

In times where globalization, transnationalism, and free-market forces have encouraged the formation of pan-identities, the role of cultural identities has been downplayed to the extent of claiming that they are no longer relevant in media consumption. However, when looking at a specific context, this assumption does not provide straight answers to the success of what is supposed to be local narratives. For example, the economic hits of Mexican comedies since 2013 in Mexico have raised questions regarding the audiences' preferences that neither industrial nor textual analyses had provided answers to. Indeed, Mexican audiences have remained absent from academia by implying assumptions about them by just looking at the prevalent movies in the country.

Conducted during turbulent times and through a virtual context due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this dissertation gives voice to the Mexican audience identified as the avid consumer of Mexican films, young professionals/students from 18 to 25 years old, who participated in focus groups and in-depth interviews. Their responses suggest that cultural identity is still a compass to navigate the current media landscape despite all the forces converging in promoting more globalized content. Thus, this study vindicates the individual agency of spectators as a fundamental characteristic in shaping their identity and selecting media content by discussing three main topics: how this Mexican audience define their Mexican identity, why they consume Mexican comedies, and how they negotiate their identity as Mexican facing the (mis)representations available in these films.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The year 2013 marked a milestone in the Mexican film industry when two films, *No se aceptan devoluciones* (2013) and *Nosotros los Nobles* (2013), obtained revenues never before seen in the Mexican box office and even in the United States for a non-English film. However, the prevalence of comedies in Mexican cinema is not something new as it was also a recurring genre during the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema (1932-1960). This modern comedy brewed in the Mexican film industry since the 1990s has become the cornerstone of the industry. The popularity of Mexican comedies, coupled with the international recognition of Mexican filmmakers and productions worldwide, has made some critics and scholars propose that Mexican cinema is living its "Second Golden Age" (Aguilar, 2016).

However, theoretical explanations to understand the popularity of these comedies have left aside Mexican audiences, describing them as mere ticket buyers. Through this oversight, academic research downplays two fundamental goals achieved by cinema during the Golden Age: the democratization of audiences and a sense of unity under a Mexican identity (Monsiváis, 1995a; Noble, 2006). Considering audiences is a way to understand the popularity of these comedies and their function in contemporary Mexican society.

Prior to this study, when researchers have focused on comedies, the function of these films to narrate or build an identity is entirely minimized. As Sánchez Prado (2014) indicates, these movies commonly renounce any recognizable Mexican identity traits. He also notes that comedies' light narratives have appealed to the audiences' affect instead of their intellect. This somber assertion does not explain why comedies have become the most

profitable genre in Mexico. Nor does it elaborate on the current bonanza experienced by Mexican cinema and expressed through an increase in various indicators such as film production, the number of theaters, the number of spectators, and the box-office profits (Hinojosa Córdova, 2019). Thus, textual analysis of Mexican comedies falls short of explaining why audiences support this particular genre and its references, themes, representations, and archetypes.

One consequence of globalization in worldwide film industries has been discarding the role movies play to form identity. As García Canclini (2000) notes, globalization has shaped societies by connecting them with multiple nations and involving them in processes where it is impossible to locate a center. In addition, globalization has expanded capitalism as an economic system, as well as neoliberal policies. These ideologies have influenced and altered every social construction and system, imposing a free market in which institutions are replaced by companies and citizens by consumers (Hermans & Dimmagio, 2007). Thus, changes introduced by neoliberalism have affected nations by redefining their borders, have influenced representations by including and mixing images that are no longer rooted in a specific culture and have populated the social imaginary of individuals with global symbols. Following the previous logic, some theoreticians conclude that cinema no longer carries specific cultural symbols, and audiences are no longer attached to territories. Then, it is possible to argue that the industry's primary goal has transformed into reaching as many spectators as possible. However, although this perspective presents valid claims and illustrates how some industries operate, this is not the entire picture regarding the Mexican film industry.

Three academic traditions intertwine in shaping the current media industry landscape: film studies, political economy, and audience studies. As film studies have

suggested, it is a fact that, following this idea of reaching as many audiences as possible, film industries have relied on co-production efforts between deterritorialized and decentralized companies, facilitating the competition of their content in different markets simultaneously (Alvaray, 2013). Thereupon, multiple cultural contexts overlap. Nevertheless, the political economy of companies forces media producers to carefully select symbols familiar to these audiences and transform them into commodities (Mayer, 2003). These commonalities provide unity because people identify them as part of their identity, but they serve companies' economic purposes (Piñon & Rojas, 2011). It is crucial to notice that the local and the global still interplay in that process. Indeed, in the overlapping of both, audiences play a critical role in identifying, selecting, consuming, and adopting some contents as referents of their culture or identity. That's why, as Higbee and Lim (2010) explain, disregarding the local contextual conditions, any effort to understand the role of culture in globalization is unfruitful. Thus, overlooking what a series of films could tell us about a cultural context denies that there are still traces of a specific culture in them, a culture appealing to a group of spectators.

In addition, it is critical to consider that one specific genre has become popular among Mexican audiences: comedy. In the formation of a genre, spectators also play an active role because they can recognize a series of narrative devices as defining of a particular genre and set their expectations according to them (Neale, 1980). Moreover, the consumption of media representations often encourages audiences to engage in a self-recognition process. As Hall (1997/2013a) explains, it occurs because, in the exercise of interpreting any representation, individuals are required to place themselves in a position proposed by the text. Taking that position facilitates a spectator to make sense of the text. By doing this, they are also becoming subject to the text's "meanings, power, and

regulation" (p. 40). Thus, intrinsically, individuals engage in identification, which is tied to what the representation is portraying and the diverse characteristics of spectators who engage in a constant process of comparison. In this juxtaposition of what the text depicts and the spectator's identification, the presence and absence of characteristics are equally relevant. Also, it is in this interaction where the term identity enters the stage as a "point of suture" that can tie both concepts, identification, and representation, together. Hall (1996) explains identity as:

> …the meeting point, the point of *suture*, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to "interpellate [sic]," speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be "spoken" . . . Identities are, as it were, the positions which the subject is obliged to take up while always 'knowing' (the language of consciousness here betrays us) that they are representations, that representation is always constructed across a 'lack', across a division, from the place of the Other, and thus can never be adequate - identical - to the subject processes which are invested in them. (pp. 5-6).

Thus, it is possible to argue that the construction, development, refining, and negotiation of identity depends on how representation and identification are defined and interact. For instance, a representation that relies on a national/cultural category invites a spectator who is part of that culture to take certain positionalities because the traits presented in that content refer in one way or another to their contextual conditions, describing characteristics of their in-group or/and other out-groups that coexist within that culture. Consequently, people seek to discern between a series of features that speak of their own identity and those that speak of the Others' identity (Hall, 1991/2019). In doing so, they rely on diverse positionalities that are continually evolving and, sometimes, challenging, resisting, or negotiating other positionalities (Hall, 1996). From these propositions, we could infer that identity becomes an individual and joint exercise. Texts invite spectators to self-reflect on the characteristics that resonate or are absent in their

identity; simultaneously, the text refers to a collective imaginary defined by a series of symbols constantly used and reinforced by discursive practices (Hall, 2013a). Due to the social nature of individuals, we cannot conceive ourselves without that correspondence between the self and the group. Therefore, the dissonance between the representation and identification forces a person to negotiate with portrayals of their culture. Hence, members of a cultural group can adopt those depictions' traits or challenge them (Hall 1996).

This negotiation is fundamental and becomes the variable that allows us to understand how identity can be redefined by the same traits that have been used with various ideological purposes once spectators appropriate and deconstruct them. The existence of this negotiation is more evident in the individual. That is why this dissertation aims to vindicate the value of the audiences to understand why a cultural marker, such as the Mexican, is still alive and necessary in a context where technological advances have facilitated communication, exposing the individual to different cultural stimuli (Dissanayake, 2006). It is critical to pay attention to audiences because they have an important role in forming, shaping, negotiating, and giving meaning to cultural identity. Identity, nowadays, has become in a "co-production" in which the individuals select what they consider fundamental pieces for the identity of all the available sources of representation (García Canclini, 2002). As Hall (1996) explains:

> Identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured, never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices, and positions (p. 4).

Despite the fact that comedies are considered a transnational product without traces of a particular culture, audiences have the last word about the value of these representations to portray their culture. Therefore, this research aims to generate greater knowledge regarding the success of these Mexican comedies and their function in the process of

identity formation by looking at the audience that has been identified as the most avid consumer of comedies, middle-class[1] students/professionals between 18 and 25 years old (Hinojosa Córdova, 2015). Through their practices, audiences can teach us their natural process of creating meaning about the text and themselves. As fandom studies have illustrated, audiences' agency turns the act of selecting media content into a political action that speaks about their identity as individual spectators and as a cultural group (Sandvoss, 2005).

The study's primary goal is to illustrate how avid consumers of comedies construct their Mexican cultural identity by consuming a series of comedies identified as Mexican. Consequently, through their identification, this audience defines the different dimensions of their Mexican identity. In the process, they give hints about the success of these comedies and how to construct accurate representations of their culture that respond to a more globalized context. Focusing on their responses, we can better understand the global implications of consuming these films.

It is critical to stress that this audience is not the only one in Mexico. As Hinojosa Córdova (2016) recognizes, these students/professionals between 18 and 25 years old have become an elite because the Mexican economic disparities make it difficult for a large part of the population to attend a movie theater or subscribe to a streaming platform to watch

[1] The middle-class concept in Mexico is problematic in many ways as most of the population (61%) identify themselves as part of that class. However, as Ríos (2020) explains, only 12% of Mexicans fulfill the indicators to be considered part of this class. The main problem of this misconception is that it limits the creation of a political force that implements policies according to the country's economic reality, favoring the concentration of wealth in only a few families. In her studies, Hinojosa Córdova is cautious about calling this young audience part of the middle class; however, she constantly indicates that Mexican popular cinema is produced targeting specific audiences that pertain to this class. In this regard, she presents several interviews with producers and IMCINE's officials who support this assumption by mentioning that young people from this "middle-class" are the ones that have more access to Mexican cinema (Hinojosa Córdova, 2016). However, we must be careful about taking this for granted as the socio-economic characteristics of this class are never specified. As will be addressed later in the literature review and the results' discussion, the concept has no precise definition nor determined specificities for scholars or participants.

Mexican films; paying the monthly fee for a streaming platform represents a luxury that most Mexicans cannot access. Even so, by focusing on the highest-grossing Mexican films, this research elucidates this most extensive group of consumers. This segment of Mexican elites sustains the Mexican film industry by consuming comedies through both cinemas and streaming platforms. However, the constant use of streaming platforms does not imply that the collective experience of watching a film is in decline. Indeed, this way of consumption has become regular in how these participants engage with media content in general. Still, as we will notice later, they depend on family or peers to decide which film to watch, making the group selection a critical factor determining their consumption.

Thus, this study relies on fourteen (14) focus groups conducted in the Mexican states where the most Mexican cinema consumers are concentrated: Mexico City, Jalisco, Nuevo León, Baja California, and Veracruz. They are complemented by twenty-two (22) follow-up interviews in which participants reflected on their Mexican identity, their practices of consumption of Mexican comedy films, how they make meaning of those films, how they conceive the traits that those movies portray about Mexico and Mexicans, and, finally, how they identify or not with the comedies' representations.

Cultural identity formation is a constructive process that requires simultaneous consideration of historical references, the present, and the future project (Hall, 1996). What audiences can tell us about their identity not only serves to more clearly define the term "Mexican" but also to build the contextual conditions in which that identity can develop. In the process, the cinema will continue providing material for negotiating/shaping that identity, and the audience will use it in multiple ways that the producers of Mexican films do not imagine.

This dissertation is the first step in a larger project to incorporate the Mexican film audiences' voices in the academic literature through a book that compiles not only the avid consumers in Mexico but also Mexican diasporas in the United States and worldwide that have been fundamental in the transnationalization of these comedies. In addition, this research project provides arguments to reconceptualize the popular texts' role in negotiating identity and realize how they give sense to the Mexican label through media consumption practices. Although engaged in co-production and capitalist forces, Mexican comedies are still portraying identifiers used by Mexican audiences to construct, define, and shape their cultural identity. Moreover, the dissertation opens the door to understand the factors highlighted by Mexican audiences, particularly these avid consumers, to make comedy such a popular genre in the country and notice which audiences' expectations are fulfilled by this genre. If, according to the national and international press as well as the figures reported each year by government agencies, we live in the second Golden Age of Mexican cinema, the spectators interviewed here will support or refute this assertion.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter examines how identity, representation, and identification have interplayed in Mexican audiences' engagement with popular culture texts like domestically produced comedies. First, I review the different historical approaches used to define a Mexican identity. Next, I explain the transition from national to transnational films in the Mexican cinema industry and its consequential impact on Mexico and Mexicans' representations. Finally, I develop how the existing literature has framed the role of the agency deployed by Mexican audiences to define and negotiate their identity by supporting or rejecting Mexican portrayals available through Mexican films.

Pursuing an identity: *Mexicanidad* or Mexican identity?

According to Vergara and Vergara (2002), the concept of identity for Mexico and other Latin American countries has relied on four mutually exclusive paradigms: Indigenism, Hispanicism, Westernization, and Cultural Miscegenation. Each of them establishes a perspective that privileges some specific traits and contextual conditions. For instance, Indigenism argues that every region's autochthonous populations are the true identities of society, and their colonization disrupted their purity. According to this premise's logic, the authentic Mexican identity only exists in the native civilizations and customs before the Spanish conquest (Vergara & Vergara, 2002). For its part, Hispanicism implies a strong colonizing effort supported by placing Spain's heritage as the main force shaping the real Mexican identity. Similarly, Westernization privileges the role model of the American and European cultures, including other countries besides Spain and Portugal, in forming an identity. Likewise, it stresses an urgent need to eradicate indigenous

civilizations so countries can genuinely engage in modernity, evolving "from a barbaric state to civilization" (Vergara & Vergara, 2002; p. 83, author's translation). Finally, the Cultural Miscegenation paradigm aims for an emancipated identity from the colonizing forces. It recognizes the purity of autochthonous communities and the power of colonization in the social imaginary, stressing that the identity is a consequence of a mixture. In the case of Mexico, Cultural Miscegenation ascribes influence on the blend of Spanish and indigenous people.

These four paradigms have been part of the institutional and individual attempts to define a Mexican identity, particularly after the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917). As Corpas (2011) explains, Mexico's revolt and war for its independence (1810-1821) signified the commencement of the journey to establish a nation. Consequently, the Revolution, a century later, marked a moment of transformation and re-foundation in which government institutions consolidated by attempting to build a national identity. The post-revolutionary cultural and academic movements marked a watershed in developing a sense of a unified Mexican identity. Each emergent movement adopted one of these four paradigms to support their arguments (Hurtado, 2016).

Unsurprisingly, the main driving force to define this identity was the government. The post-revolutionary Mexican government's goal was to forge a national canon imbuing literature, philosophy, and social policies with a sentiment of affinity to stabilize the country and make it grow as a unified culture (Arizpe, 2011). This effect resulted from several years of national social fragmentation between the wealthy class and the popular one during Porfirio Diaz's dictatorship (1876-1910). During and after the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940), these endeavors were more visible, predominantly through cultural manifestations such as cinema.

This relationship between the government and the concept of identity is not surprising at all, considering Anderson's (2006) definition of a nation as an "imagined political community" (p. 6), limited, and sovereign. Following the principles expressed by this notion, the Mexican state promoted the affinity among an indefinite group of people called Mexicans and contained within the country's geographical borders. This community should serve the homeland and create fraternal ties no matter their underlying differences. The resultant identity was called *Mexicanidad*. The government efforts were a natural consequence of a radical transformation of a political system, as Antonio Gramsci (1930/1970) elaborates on his ideological hegemony theory. The democratization of a state through a revolution does not seek to overthrow a dictatorship but rather to replace it with an ideological one in which the ruling class imposes a system of ideas that silences and deceives oppositional voices to the degree of making them participate in an official discourse that they adopt as if it were their own. Thus, as Gramsci (1930/1970) explains, the ruling class's leadership is consented to by the populace since its influence permeates both in civil society (private organizations such as schools, clubs, et cetera.) and political society (the public institutions). After the revolution, in the Mexican case, the governing ruling class's efforts centered on building a discourse that spread through civil and political society.[2]

[2] Many scholars have recounted how artists from that period were fundamental to materialize the government's attempts to widespread this sense of Mexican unification and its paradigms not only in Mexico but abroad. Such is the case of Rosa and Miguel Covarrubias, a marriage of artists whose careers in the United States offered glimpses of the Mexican identity in diverse media outlets. In addition, the pair of artists promoted increasing attention to the Indigenous roots of the Mexican culture among their fellow Mexican artists, aligned with the interests and supporting the endeavor of the Mexican government. Instead of criticizing the current Mexican social context, the couple focused on promoting series of characteristic symbols of the Mexican identity (Williams, 1994).

According to Gramsci's principles, controlling communication and cultural organizations is fundamental to consolidating this imagined community. In Mexico, the use of cinema to promote and portray images that brought to life that official national project became notorious. Peredo (2008) illustrates that the films in that time depicted the population's traditions and customs. For instance, de los Reyes (2001) notes that *¡Qué viva México!* (1932) by Grigoriy Aleksandrov and Sergei M. Eisenstein was an influential movie of that period since it established landscapes, symbols, archetypes, and traditions related to the Mexican identity that many other films during the Golden Age will use as referents. Simultaneously, the government placed popular communities at the center of the identity's definition because the *pueblo* should be the principal beneficiary of the Revolution (Montfort, 1999). The repetition of these cultural tropes reinforced a series of recognizable traits of Mexican identity, emphasizing historical-religious characteristics that elicited an affective connection among individuals (Peredo, 2008). As will be discussed in more detail below, some of these traits are still relevant for Mexicans, despite the nation's many social changes. No matter how noble the task of unifying the country seemed, the group in power drove it, seeking to consolidate a more manageable population. As Montfort (1999) states,

> The result was a somewhat immoderate tendency toward certain national stereotypes such as the *charro*, the *china poblana*, the *indito*, or the *pelado*, to reduce to a more or less governable, or understandable, dimension that multiplicity that jumped to the view at the time of enunciating any matter related to that indefinable "Mexican people" (p.183, author's translation).

Those images of historical traditions and customs prevailed during the 20th century, especially during the Golden Age of Mexican cinema. In addition to these cultural manifestations of *Mexicanidad*, there were also essential philosophical discourses that promoted an imagined community (Canal, 2013). *Mexican Anatomy* by Roger Bartra

(2014) compiles the historical reflections of some of these Mexican intellectuals since 1900[3] such as Emilio Uranga, Octavio Paz, José Revueltas, Michael Maccoby, Carlos Fuentes, and Carlos Monsiváis. They aimed to find those essential and fixed characteristics of the Mexican identity shared by Mexicans across the different historical and social changes: nostalgia, *malinchismo*[4], and a profound sentiment of inferiority. The goal of these essays was to determine the fixed Mexican traits, relying on each one of them in different paradigms such as Indigenism, Hispanicism, Westernization, and Cultural Miscegenation to define them.

Both senses of *Mexicanidad* were "splattered with populism, developmentalism, anti-imperialism, anti-Americanism, Indigenism, and paternalism" (Cansino, 2005; p. 68, author's translation). These political standpoints privileged the *mestizo* as the true heir of the Spanish and indigenous Mexico, whose destiny was to achieve a state of modernity (Vergara & Vergara, 2012). Consequently, the paradigm that resonated most in this realm was Cultural Miscegenation, and the principles and traits of *Mexicanidad* relied on it. This standard served to justify public policies and media representations, which shortly became stereotypes, models of performance, and ways to exploit the culture (Montfort, 1999).

Although these two perspectives of *Mexicanidad* relied heavily on the Cultural Miscegenation paradigm, it is vital to make a distinction. On the one hand, hegemonic

[3]Although Bartra published the first edition of this book in 2002, we need to recognize that there are still contemporary philosophers, scholars, and public figures elucidating discourses about the fixed traits of Mexican identity. However, this dissertation does not aim to compile all the, sometimes contradictory, attempts to define the Mexican identity from this approach because several of them have been refuted by scholarly sources.

[4] Paz (1947/2014) explains the term *malinchismo* as a concept linked to La Malinche, an indigenous woman who served as an interpreter for Hernán Cortés during his time in Mexico and facilitated the country's conquest. Paz points out that Mexicans recognize in this event a betrayal to Mexico. Thus, *malinchista* refers to those Mexicans who prefer foreign customs. Paz calls these Mexicans as children of La Malinche, or colloquially, children of la *chingada*. This latter term is pejorative in Mexico and symbolizes, according to Paz, that these individuals are the fruit of the Mexican culture raped by the Spanish one; their mothers have been raped by the Other aiming to destroy the Mexican roots.

institutional powers fostered the cultural representations that promoted this term. These groups built a cultural discourse with a strong ideological burden (Cansino, 2005). They formed a national identity, providing an imagined community in the wake of a fractious and bloody revolution. However, making a national identity prevalent entails a profound risk, implying the people's submission to a hegemonic elite's official discourse, which used the national identity to shape a massified population according to their interests (Gramsci, 1930/1970). Therefore, preserving these referents made it easier for a hegemonic group to remain in power, promoting a nationalist sentiment that posited the nation as an "absolute value" and distorted its multiple realities and silenced its critics[5] (Cansino, 2005). By privileging miscegenation, the project of *Mexicanidad* excluded other groups within the nation. For example, the government bombarded indigenous populations with messages encouraging their modernization and promoted replacing native traditions and practices with urban populations' customs. They became the Other at the margins of the national project; as Gall (2004), indicates, "to be Mexican, you have to be mixed" (p. 243, author's translation).

On the other hand, if *Mexicanidad* related to national identity and shared manifestations of nationalism from a cultural standpoint, the intellectual attempts to define it from fixed traits relied in part on social identity theory. From this perspective, individuals look for traits that differentiate their group from other cultures. One significant distinction between national identity and the social identity theory principles emerges from the *Mexicanidad* definitions provided by Mexican intellectuals; for social identity theory to

[5] Guillermo Bonfil Batalla (1987) is one of the many Mexican intellectuals who retrieve through his work how the homogenizing national discourse of modernity was an unrelenting attempt of elites to dismantle and segregate indigenous people and identities, forcing these populations to reshape and adapt their culture to survive. He concludes that only through a pluralist perspective that recognizes the value of indigenous populations is it possible to face hegemonic forces from other cultures.

exist requires an exaltation of the positive group traits (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007), but, according to the essays that Bartra (2014) compiled, *Mexicanidad* mostly appealed to negative characteristics. For the intellectuals that developed this concept, Mexican people can only be defined through their defects. This approach makes it impossible to achieve a national project for two reasons. First, by stressing a series of negative attributes, the national project becomes unappealing to those whom these properties seek to define. Second, and more critical, as Hurtado (2016) notes, clinging to the existence of invariable features is to deny the complexity of the multiple discourses that build an identity.

Neither mindset, the one driven by the government nor the one propelled by the intellectuals, recognized the influence of different cultures in the concept of Mexican identity, including the regional and local ones (Hurtado, 2016). As Bartra (2014) underscores, any attempt to define Mexican identity must be aware of the country's internal fragmentations. For instance, he examines the contemporary landscape and mentions that the current Mexican identity should incorporate how local cultures interplay with concepts such as globalization, capitalism, and the United States' influence in the region. For these reasons, a cultural identity paradigm represents an alternative for conceiving the Mexican identity. According to Hurtado (2016):

> To talk about Mexican culture as something shared by each Mexican refers to fiction—unless we restrict the definition of "culture" to exclude all the differences among the diverse ways of life, uses of language, customs, intellectual references, moral principles, etc. The Mexican culture exists neither as something different nor above all of the array of diverse Mexican cultures (p. 284, author's translation).

A Mexican identity based on cultural identity principles should consider the juxtaposition of different cultures and their dominant aspects (Vergara & Vergara, 2002). It also needs to include the individuals' agency to define their identity through the negotiation with an ever-increasing diet of multiple representations that have crossed geographical

borders (García Canclini, 1996). From a cultural identity perspective, we may conceive identity as made by overlapping layers, some of them contradictory, but each one necessary to shape it (Wiley, 2004). Only a cultural identity approach could integrate all those diverse social and ethnic variables: this is why people's agency to reinforce, reframe, and refine their identity's traits and performance is fundamental for building the Mexican one (Gutiérrez & Núñez, 1996). According to Hurtado (2016), to form an identity considering the principles mentioned earlier, we should discard traits used by Mexican intellectuals or the government's national projects to privilege the current contextual conditions and positionalities that converge in the Mexican society. By relying on fixed traits aiming to find the authentic within the culture, these intellectuals exclude from the Mexican identity local groups that do not identify themselves with those characteristics. Moreover, an approach based on firm attributes does not consider the people's identity negotiation while engaging media representations or the role of globalization and how it alters the individuals' identity configuration by privileging some cultural portrayals over others. Furthermore, as the individuals' voice is absent and irrelevant in these paradigms, they are incomplete. In defining the Mexican identity, it is necessary to incorporate the individuals' identification process and the traits they recognize as essential for becoming who they are. This dissertation addresses this goal by asking participants about the characteristics they perceive fundamental to define themselves as Mexicans and identify their culture in the popular Mexican cinema they consume. By doing so, they engage in a self-reflection and a collective discussion of their identity, causing them to recognize themselves and the Others as Hall (1996) suggests.

Nevertheless, we must recognize that, although the intellectuals' and government's attempts to define a *Mexicanidad* were flawed, the Mexican traits fostered in those first

years after the Revolution were recurring in the cultural movements of the 20th century, such as the Golden Age of Mexican cinema and *muralismo.*[6] They were at the center of the collective imaginary intended to define all Mexicans' identity (Gutiérrez & Núñez, 1998), and many of these characteristics are still relevant for many Mexicans to define their identity.

The contemporary battleground to define a Mexican Identity

The attempts to define an inclusive Mexican identity remained stable for most of the 20th century. The stability of these discourses relied on the perpetuation of a dominant elite sustained by the intellectuals' reflections and a strong political ideology. Canal (2013) explains that the imagined Mexican identity did not modify its substantial foundations; its essence remained intact, even when new characteristics were added to the definition. This consistency aligns with the political and economic steadiness of Latin America from the 1930s to the 1960s. The urbanization and economic growth of Latin American countries were constant when most of the nations were involved in World War II, as combat by Latin American countries was limited, and a subsequent recovery (Retis, 2019). Mexico was one of the emerging economies that benefited by the postwar capitalist system in which government and the private sector worked together to build a national discourse through media. This period is called "Stabilizing Development" (1954-1970), characterized by a more than 3% increase in the Gross Domestic Product due to the stability of prices (Tello,

[6] The *muralismo* was an artistic movement part of the first cultural program after the Mexican Revolution during the Álvaro Obregon´s term (1920-1924). It followed the principles of cultural unity and highlighted the role the revolution had to achieve a Mexican Identity. As Mandel (2007) explains, muralists recognized the importance and need of reclaiming a historical past. Simultaneously, they aim to portray the effects of this past on the Mexicans living in the current context. In other words, it was a tool to foster cultural identity and collective memory.

2010). However, this development only benefited company owners or members of the political system.

As several scholars note (Basáñez, 1990; Tello 2010), the inequalities and discontent among the Mexican population were evident, no matter if the economic development said otherwise. As Canal (2013) mentions, understanding the changes in the media representations of the Mexican culture requires noticing the social transformation that was initiated in Mexico in 1968. During this year, Mexican university students, propelled by the spirit of protests around the world, demonstrated against the government to illuminate social inequalities. These protests culminated in the Tlatelolco Square massacre (October 2, 1968), where paramilitary units assassinated, kidnapped, disappeared, and tortured hundreds of students just prior to the Olympics celebration in Mexico.[7] In response to this crisis and to secure their participation in the worldwide economic trends, the Mexican government increased the country's involvement in the international arena to grow their industrial competitiveness, justify capitalist economic policies as a supposed way to fix the underlying economic and social problems, and prepare a terrain that helped them to perpetuate its power.

These government attempts to reform the country's path provoked as a side effect a fragmentation of the relationship between the private sector and the government. Consequently, at the end of the 1960s, the government, private sector, and civil society engaged in an ideological disagreement regarding the national project. This fact does not

[7] In 1971, Elena Poniatowska published the chronic of the events of these years of social transformation, *La noche de Tlatelolco: Testimonios de historia oral* [The night of Tlatelolco. Testimonials of oral history]. Her work is a seminal ethnographic piece to understand the social movement. She compiles newspaper articles and interviews with young demonstrators that participated in the protests until the bloody events in Tlatelolco, where they faced incarceration and torture by military and police forces. The book concludes with the testimonial of many survivors looking for their peers that, until now, are still missing.

imply that the state's strength diminished, but the crisis made visible the contradictory nature of the government's purposes. Basáñez (1990) explains the fundamental discourses that supported the ideology of the aforementioned actors. The most significant contradiction, referring to the Mexican administrations of Díaz Ordaz (1964-1970), Echeverría (1970-1976), López Portillo (1976-1982), and de la Madrid (1982-1988), was basing its actions in a supposed democracy for the people but committed to a capitalist vision: a "hegemocracy" (Basáñez, 1990; p. 28). The government used a unifying discourse to legitimize itself among the population; the same strategy applied since the Revolution and perpetuated by the governments of the ruling party (PRI) in Mexico during most of the 20th century (1928-2000).[8] This perspective aims for social cohesion in theory, but it does not provide the necessary conditions for its development in practice. For its part, the private sector relied on economic principles to sustain its ideological discourse, a capitalist standpoint that claims to benefit the masses but places companies' interests first. Finally, the civil society's ideological discourse focused on the conflict between a privileged sector and the popular masses and promoted access to more opportunities (political and economic) for the most unprotected sectors as a solution to this disparity.

The government and the private sector's actions responded to a trend Sánchez Ruiz (1998) calls the "modern global system," a tendency towards globalization that implemented a free market and the internationalization of capital. This globalization, as Appadurai (1990) explains, despite its appeal to share resources among different nations without restriction, implies an inequality between the countries involved in this process:

[8] The Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) ruled Mexico from 1928 to 2000 uninterrupted, first as Partido Nacional Revolucionario from 1928 to 1938, then, as Partido del la Revolución Mexicana from 1938 to 1946. Finally, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional was refounded in 1946 and currently exists as the third political force in Mexico after the Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional (Morena) and the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN).

> The critical point is that both sides of the coin of global cultural process today are products of the infinitely varied mutual contest of sameness and difference on a stage characterized by radical disjunctures between different sorts of global flows and the uncertain landscapes created in and through these disjunctures (p. 308).

In the Mexican context, due to the inequality in wealth distribution, both the government and the private sector had greater resources to articulate their ideological vision and used the media to achieve that end. This fact explains why, during this period, a media company such as Televisa consolidated and exerted a political influence (Basáñez, 1990). Moreover, as Wilkinson (2006) lays out, the government tried to regulate the private sector's influence on the media by relying on cultural policies that increase its presence and even developing its own media companies. Nevertheless, none of these measures were successful, and, as Canal (2013) points out, the representations of Mexican identity mutated:

> The 'Gaze' produced by the device [cinema/television] lost uniqueness as it could no longer be sustained in the old politically significative structures, because the international context has been modified, as well as the geopolitical coordinates in which the country was embedded. The symbolic-imaginary machinery was no longer the same; themes used for almost a century began to lose efficacy (p. 76, author's translation).

The Mexican media representations were influenced by general and specific economic and political trends. First, the image appealing to a heterogeneous Mexico no longer carried the same relevance due to the state's weakening control in representations as well as the more availability of outside media contents and influences that entered through globalization. In the same way that capital and resources constantly flowed from one country to another, globalization also increased individuals' migration to foreign nations (Retis, 2019). Thus, globalization reformulated the nation-state's concept by making its borders fluid while increasing immigration flows and expanding diasporas, altering the social configuration of communities (Cansino, 2005). At the same time, as Asse

Dayán (2017) explains, another global trend, neoliberalism, was imposed as an economic alternative that promoted economic growth through "free trade, deregulation, privatization, and fiscal austerity" (p. 140), inviting investment from the private sector (local and foreign) to boost the country's competitiveness. In addition to these trends, Mexico encountered a particular initiative that presented new challenges and unique consequences: The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Media representations were also subject to NAFTA's forces, an impact and transformation that will be addressed later in this literature review.

The combinations of all the aforementioned factors in the Mexican context triggered a series of concerns regarding Mexican identity in the face of the constant presence of foreign influences in the country, especially from the United States. For instance, as García Canclini (1996) notes, the United States' participation in many commercial aspects of Mexico reframed, influenced, and broadened many industrial processes and national policies. During this period, three fundamental changes occurred in the country's cultural consumption: the emergence of global cultural industries that replaced traditional means of communication, the increase of private consumption of media, and the privatization of the media industries (García Canclini, 1996). In a landscape in which domestic economic policies and NAFTA benefited the private sector, it should come as little surprise that the civil society, represented by the intellectuals, held debates regarding the impact of these measures on the Mexican idiosyncrasy. Wilkinson (2006) compiles the standpoints of both factions as well as recognizes that, despite the validity of the intellectuals' remarks, they did not have any influence in the formation of cultural policies in NAFTA. From the government perspective, culture was not at risk, neither was it negotiable, and, indeed, the free market was helping to reinforce "cultural sovereignty and national identity" (p. 486).

For their part, the intellectuals exposed three main concerns regarding the influence of NAFTA. First, the increasing offering of technology from the United States would influence the social practices of cultural consumption by making it more individual and private. Second, NAFTA would exacerbate the existing gap between social classes, influencing "the values and cultural traditions" (p. 487) of those not accustomed to American culture. Finally, the supply of media content from the United States would negatively impact the "natural protection provided by the Spanish language and Mexico's cultural idiosyncrasies" (p. 488).

While these debates were taking place, the private sector consolidated its hegemony through the media (Esteinou Madrid, 2000; Wilkinson, 2006). Consequently, the media contents shaped the ideological discourse determining, reinforcing, or suppressing Mexican culture representations according to commercial interests. As Esteinou Madrid (2001) explains,

> With the withdrawal of the public service media model required by the market development scheme, the commercial-private media system has notably expanded in the country [Mexico], becoming the dominant pattern in our cultural atmosphere. With it, the field of the public arena has been privatized. In other words, at the end of the 20th century, the public and collective cultural policies elaborated in our society are built from the corporate needs of the reproduction of capital . . . (p. 203, author's translation).

Transferring some hegemonic power from the government to the market interests led to the logical outcome of transforming some of the Mexican identity referents into commodities. It did not imply a renunciation of the properties of previous conceptualizations of Mexican identity. On the contrary, the market understood that these traits are still needed because they are fundamental to the goal that drove the post-revolutionary Mexican government to define them. Thus, the goal was to generate a sense of unity to reach as many markets as possible (Asse Dayán, 2017): a homogenization of

cultural media content consumers. In other words, the market used the historical and archetypical conventions attributed to a particular cultural group to create commodities that congregated consumers as ethnic niches (Dávila, 2012). The difference from niches produced by the Golden Age of Mexican cinema or telenovelas was the standardization of these commodities across the Mexican media industries and the goal of reaching audiences not only in Latin American but worldwide. Retis (2019) recognizes this homogenization of consumers of media content as a natural consequence of globalization, neoliberal policies, and the free market. Nevertheless, as this work will argue later, there is a paradoxical principle operating in the contemporary Mexican media, including cinema, in which contents appeal to a homogenous target audience but are produced by multiple companies with diverse interests that do not necessarily aim for the same audience. Alvaray (2013) clarifies this assertion,

> It would be unrealistic, however, to think of such unification as a homogenizing force. If we consider the production alliances and the kinds of audiovisual products being made, there seems instead to be a dynamic multiplicity, an ongoing reconfiguration of hybridizing forces taking place (p. 71).

If a sense of unity is still required according to companies' interests and some symbols of previous conceptualizations of Mexican identity still prevail, then globalization has not eroded the strength of prior Mexican representations in the imagined national community. Individuals have used these symbols to negotiate their identity in the presence of global cultural depictions relying on "sentimental nationalism," the nostalgia about portrayals of the past (Monsiváis, 1996). It is a strategy to stay connected to their culture after the privatization (and internationalization) of Mexican cultural industries. Nostalgia is also a vital principle for Mexican diasporic communities, especially in those in the United States. They use historical tropes related to their "motherland" to make visible their

concerns and problems in a culture that misrepresents them or avoids their portrayal (St-Georges, 2018). In so doing, the market forces have appropriated symbols from religion, language, solidarity, and traditions from popular culture, mainly available through the media, to foster a sense of connection between Mexicans and Mexican diasporas (Monsiváis, 1996). These factors help to explain why Mexican diasporas have maintained strong ties with their "motherland" culture. For instance, Mexican diasporas have appealed to tactics of adaptability, imitation, and assimilation, emphasizing historically rooted traits of their "motherland" in negotiation with their contextual conditions (Monsiváis, 1996). It is then possible to argue that Mexican individuals still called 'Mexican' those cultural products in which particular traits relate to or resemble the nostalgic characteristics. According to Arizpe (2011), Mexicans scan the media content searching for images presenting Mexican rural landscapes, the modernity of their "motherland," the historical symbols of pre-Hispanic civilizations, independentist or revolutionary times, as well as communal rites and traditions. Thereupon, media representations, mostly from film and television, still deploy these Mexican traits' vestiges so Mexicans and their diasporas can recognize themselves (Zavala, 2019).

We must be cautious regarding the exclusivity of these Mexican traits and emphasize how media companies consider them as commodities. For instance, the fact that a film could incorporate some or all of these traits does not mean that it only refers to one specific culture. Indeed, following Alvaray's (2013) assertions regarding the duality of these contents, to appeal to a broader number of spectators, these media products also implement other narrative devices that appeal to more than one niche. For instance, it is usual that contemporary narratives could have some symbols from one culture, but at the same time, they are framed in a non-recognizable cultural context. This mixture crafts

transnational products. They implement similar aesthetical devices, touch upon global issues, and incorporate symbolic commodities that could appeal to one particular culture (Higbee & Lim, 2010; McClennen, 2018). Therefore, there is always a dialogue "between the local and the global, taking place at the site of representation" (Alvaray, 2013; p. 62). Contemporary transnational productions are sprinkled with some specificities from a particular culture, but these are more prevalent than other global features within the narrative, making these contents more accessible to broader audiences. As this dissertation will elaborate, scholars recognize that Mexican comedies appeal to transnational audiences, but Mexican spectators recognize some traits relevant to their culture and identity.

The role of diasporas in defining a cultural identity

Consideration of diasporas illustrates how homogenization and heterogenization are struggling within media representations. Latinx diasporas in the United States come from diverse national/cultural origins (including more than 60 percent from Mexico), making them different from each other. However, from an industrial point of view, those differences are overlooked when their traits are transformed into mass commodities (symbolic capital), creating a pan-*Latinidad* (Piñón & Rojas, 2011). As market efficiency requires the prevalence of a homogenized population, pan-*Latinidad* is a way to reach broader communities with multiple characteristics (Dávila, 2012). Consequently, some Latin American symbols have been reinforced and legitimized as "authentic" expressions of *Latinidad*. Pan-*Latinidad* is necessary to represent "Latinas/os as a stable, long term, and economically viable demographic group distinct from other U.S. ethnic and racial groups" (Molina, 2006; p. 236). Moreover, this pan-*Latinidad*, or, as Rodriguez (1999) calls it, Latino panethnicity, aims to reframe a new niche through ethnic similarities and undefined national roots. Three traits characterize this pan-*Latinidad*: a common language,

bilingualism, and deterritorialization (Rodriguez, 1999; Piñón & Rojas, 2011). Mora (2014) indicates the most relevant characteristic of a pan-ethnicity such as the pan-*Latinidad* (or pan-*Hispanidad*) is ambiguity. The fluidity of a cultural identity allows diverse conceptualizations to coexist, reduces contention between "ethnonational" groups, and fosters collaboration between different social actors and media industries.

Aiming to compete in global markets, the media industries of different nations hinge on similar aforementioned strategies of panethnicity. They renounce certain particularities to fall back on universal codes (Alvaray, 2013; St-Georges, 2018). The homogenization process's core point is to build an identity not attached to a territory but a mental state (de Tirado, 2020). Nevertheless, representations are relevant for individuals to negotiate their identity in transnational settings. They use media depictions to deal with racial and class issues they face; no matter how inaccurate they are, individuals rely on these portrayals, mostly in cultural spaces that do not offer narratives representing them. For instance, Mayer (2003) recognizes how Mexican American females use *telenovelas* to cope with their racial problems in the United States by questioning their contextual conditions and tracing connections between the problems experienced by the protagonist's social mobility and the ones they live in the United States. In this case, although *telenovelas* do not portray the same issue (the process of adaptation of a Latina to the racial politics of the U.S.), female viewers identified with the culture depicted in these narratives can adapt or adopt strategies employed by the protagonists to cope with real-life situations. Thus, pan-representations become relevant when the country's media does not portray some groups that are part of the nation. People trust in cultural proximity to relate themselves to content that stresses some points of convergence with their identity (Straubhaar et al., 2019).

If the previous explanation about the origin of pan-ethnicities resonates as familiar in the Mexican context, it is because, as discerned in this section, within a Mexican media text, cultural and global specificities interplay, appealing to different audiences in and outside of Mexico. Then, it is possible to call this *Mexicanidad* elicited by the contemporary media as pan-*Mexicanidad.*

Among the characteristics of pan-*Mexicanidad*, this project "maintain[s] and essentialize[s] a type of ethnic unity that masks the deep class divisions within Mexico" (St-Georges, 2018; p. 84). The market has more control over the identity than other previous hegemonic forces, replacing the state's ideological discourse for one that emerges from capitalism. In this context, the market aims for people identified as Mexican who are also considered consumers, while Mexican individuals/consumers strive to conciliate their sentimental nostalgia with this pan-Mexican discourse (St-Georges, 2018). Hence, this pan-*Mexicanidad* is distinguished by consumerism more than a sense of social communion.

Because of its configuration and operation, pan-*Mexicanidad* replicates one of the flaws of the post-revolutionary *Mexicanidad* by silencing local and regional cultures. In addition, this pan-identity focuses only on macro differences with the Other, embodied by the United States and its influence. Therefore, media content imbued with pan-*Mexicanidad* perpetuates hegemonic social structures that exclude identities that cannot integrate or adopt that homogenous culture (St-Georges, 2018). It is impossible to consider local cultural groups' specificities using homogenizing narratives, and these populations remain absent from the media representations. Akin to the *Mexicanidad* promoted by the government, in the pan-*Mexicanidad* media landscape, the only viable option for these local cultural groups to conform with those representations is renouncing their particular cultural characteristics and embracing the ones portrayed in the media.

So far, this conversation has centered on the discussion of traditional media platforms such as television and cinema. The introduction and prevalence of streaming platforms worldwide and their algorithm to suggest content has offered the user the chance to access any media production available on the site without being subject to a fixed schedule (Burroughs, 2019). It is the specific attributes of the use of a digital algorithm fed by the preferences of the users and how they interact with the contents (stopping them, repeating them, or even ignoring them) that allows these platforms to select, produce and acquire content that satisfies the demand of its users. As Burroughs (2019) explains, this fact has given rise to an "algorithmic audience" that allows streaming companies to respond to the audience's consumption preferences with content tailored for them. Even though it seems that this could in some way alter the pan-*Mexicanidad* referents to which the audience has access, the way the algorithm operates, and its collection of user-generated data indicate an agency on the part of the viewer. The events "presented as much more reliable a metric of audience engagement with the text" (p. 11) are those that allow identifying those characteristics of a media content that are attractive to the audience. In addition, as Ordóñez et al. (2018) point out, there is a prevalence of Mexican productions compared to the ones produced by other Latin American countries, making more salient a Mexican perspective to define pan-*Latindad*. The availability and spread of streaming platforms in Mexico made them a relevant resource for audiences (and this dissertation) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Streaming platforms brought the possibility to spectators of consuming Mexican cinema even when the government shut down Mexican movie theaters as a measure to contain the disease.

According to numerous scholars, a possible solution to fight against this pan-*Mexicanidad* and endorse a more inclusive identity requires a government willing to play

the same role that privatized media industries perform (García Canclini, 1996). Rather than step aside from the cultural landscape, governments should produce and promote local cultural representations that compete in the available media offer. Otherwise, there is a significant risk that some local groups will be absent from the narratives or underrepresented. In that process, people's participation in reinforcing, reframing, and refining their identity's constituent traits is fundamental (Gutiérrez & Núñez, 1996).

This study aspires to reveal how Mexican film audiences conceive their identity. In addition, this research aims to examine a specific film audience in Mexico to illuminate how it defines *Mexicanidad* by looking at the cinema representations that portray nostalgic images from these viewers' past and current issues as part of their context. Furthermore, the study aims to define the concept of *Mexicanidad* not from previous intellectuals' conceptualizations but from the people that use this concept to describe themselves and others similar to them.

From national to (trans)national: The Mexican cinema cornucopia

Identity is always at stake when spectators consume media representations because media consumption is not passive (Hall, 1973/2006). As Hall (1973/2006) explains, receivers of any message decode it in one of three different ways: accepting the meaning preferred by the sender, discarding it entirely, or negotiating it—recognizing as accurate some particularities of this message but rejecting some others. These readings affect the audiences' identification and, consequently, their identity negotiation in the presence of a media representation because spectators often try to recognize themselves, in one way or another, in those contents. However, as the previous section highlighted, several forces intervene in the production of media representations, shaping the media contents according to the interests of these forces. On this basis, each social context presents different

challenges. In the Mexican case, the previous section explained how the Mexican identity has transitioned from a *Mexicanidad* based on national ideology to a *Mexicanidad* driven by the market. In that conversion, the *pueblo* transformed into consumers and the Mexican symbols into commodities. In both changes, institutional attempts to define and unify this identity traditionally relied in part on cinema. Although these ideological attempts at influencing Mexican audiences have also used other media such as television, cinema has a much longer tradition.

Forming and shaping an identity through cinema

Since cinema's origin, people have used it to portray an image of their world, their desires, and their concerns (Rosen, 1996). It is not a coincidence, then, that cinema representations have played a social function ranging from transmission of an ideological discourse to perpetuation of a series of symbols related to the culture that produces them and how that culture perceives the Other (García Canclini, 2000). Following the paradigms of globalization, these representations have ceased focusing on foundational myths to privilege stories about the individual contemporary experience (García Canclini, 2000; Sánchez Prado, 2014). This transition in the narratives aims at a global audience, looking for the viewers to perceive the cinema stories as glimpses (and guidelines) of their current global condition (Silva Escobar, 2011; Mantecón, 2012). The market interests of reaching a worldwide audience have repercussions by crafting homogenous representations in which the contextual conditions of the societies portrayed may not carry much weight. As Crane (2014) explains, the contradiction resides in the fact that audiences build a more stable and stronger bond with well-defined cultural representations. So, these representations still require adopting some contextual elements such as characters, events, or symbols in their

narratives that resonate in one way or another with the daily life of the spectators, causing the local and global interplay in the media contents.

In this landscape, competing in an international marketplace requires a high investment that situates underdeveloped countries' media industries at a significant disadvantage (Dissanayake, 2006). On top of that, Hinojosa Córdova (2017) explains that Latin American countries do not consider cinema an industry that contributes to their economies. In addition, as Guback (1969/1980) explains, the Hollywood industry has become a monopoly in those regions, controlling how production and exhibition policies operate. Then, it is usual that companies dedicated to producing films in these countries are small and face "unequal competition with the oligopolies of international commercialization" (Hinojosa Córdova, 2017, p. 27; author's translation). As Hinojosa Córdova (2017) indicates,

> The principle assuming that the more competitive the market is, the more perfect it will be, does not operate in these markets. It occurs because the premise of competition does not function as it should in the presence of an oligopoly, so supply and demand do not work equally for the participants in the market (p. 28; author's translation).

Intending to compete in a global market, film companies in these countries turn to multinational alliances formalized in co-production agreements (Yong Jin, 2007). In a globalized marketplace, co-production is a standard tool so two or more companies can use pooling resources, primarily economic, to make a film. It is characterized by deterritorialized and decentralized companies aiming to produce narratives that can penetrate key markets (Alvaray, 2013; Sánchez Prado, 2020). As co-production involves several players, the content produced can reach audiences beyond a specific country's borders; simultaneously, each company establishes a series of boundaries that restrict the film's creative and thematic possibilities (Alvaray, 2008). Baer and Long (2004) delve into

the traits of co-productions: they are "financed by global capital, featuring international casts, shot in several countries and often several languages, and foregrounding the hybrid status of their production contexts in both their formal construction and narrative content" (p. 150). Although different companies combine forces to produce a film trying to reach global audiences relying on government funds and/or private capital, they cannot renounce their own interests and leave aside the needs of the local markets where they have a presence. That is why co-production will always involve overlapping the global and the local.

Indeed, as much as the global market's logic responds to the needs of smaller (local) markets, in parallel viewers search for traits that make them recognize their contextual reality. A successful alternative to achieve both goals is to imitate the dominant cinema's narrative devices in the marketplace and, at the same time, provide some contextual specificity through scenes or events portrayed to engage in local dynamics (Mayer, 2003; Alvaray, 2013). Crofts (1993) and Silva Escobar (2011) also identify the aforementioned phenomenon and indicate how local films use Hollywood genres and styles to appeal to the audience but imbue their narratives with national referents. This contextual specificity has certain limitations, such as reproducing non-identifiable locations and "develop[ing] themes that would resonate with the audience regardless of geography" (Mayer, 2003; p. 481). As Molina (2006) explains, like it or not, the market needs a "syncretic" audience[9] in order to survive, a group that remains identifiable and exerts economic power in a specific region.

[9] Molina (2006) uses the term syncretic to define pan-identity as she recognizes that multiple positionalities, sometimes contradictory, overlap in that definition. Thus, for her, an ethnic niche may share similar characteristics among its members. At the same time, some other opposing traits coexist (for example, sharing a similar language but different customs). So, a syncretic audience relies on both local and global signifiers to generate identification and shaping their identity.

It is possible to say, then, that co-productions involve a mix of two kinds of identity. On the one hand, they rely on a pan-identity to reach a broad market. On the other hand, they present national referents, appealing to specific ethnic identities. A pan-identity is necessary for a society where several identities converge and overlap. This pan-identity fabricates a market by grouping people whose cultures are "similar" and share the same language; a group that, according to the commercial interests (the hegemonic discourse), has particular needs (Piñón & Rojas, 2011; Dávila 2012; Hinojosa Córdova, 2017).

Straubhaar et al. (2019) explain how the goal behind a pan-identity is achieved. Producers of media content analyze the values and beliefs regarding a group of people that they consider commercially expedient and make their products rely on those principles, showing a series of easily accessible representations that serve as a unifying anchor for the group (Molina, 2006; Piñon & Rojas, 2011). This pan-identity has pros and cons. On the upside, it can bring to the surface the particularities of a specific niche by establishing different, innovative, and competitive production, distribution, and exhibition strategies targeting that niche (Dennison, 2013). On the downside, it can also rely on stereotypical images, referents, or symbols from the collective imaginary used to describe that group, provoking a misrepresentation (Retis, 2019). Thus, in co-productions, a thin line separates what audiences of a particular culture consider accurate representations from those which are detrimental. As this subchapter will explain below, after implementing NAFTA in Mexico, co-production became one of the most recurrent financing models in the Mexican film industry. The reason for its prevalence was the government's inability to assume, as in the Golden Age of Mexican cinema, the production costs to compete in an international market as well as a very different economic and technological landscape for the film industry in the 1990s. In this regard, this dissertation contributes by delving into the

connections between what is considered the avid audience of Mexican comedies and those films representations. Clarifying this connection allows us to understand how this group of spectators evaluates Mexican film representations concerning their Mexican identity and how they think these images will contribute to the perceptions other cultures could construct about Mexicans and Mexico. In other words, the dissertation delves into how a particular group of Mexican spectators performs this process of identification.

The emergence of transnationalism in contemporary film production

One of the outcomes of globalization is co-productions, in which hybridity (overlapping the global and the local) is typical. These concepts fall under an umbrella term that is not new in cinema history: transnationalism. Cross-border links have historically been part of the industry's flows of talent, technology, and economy (Shaw, 2013a). As explained above, in an era of globalization, the national label is fluid and insufficient to explain the contemporary cinema industry landscape (Higbee & Lim, 2010). Transnationalism, like co-productions, aims to reach international markets that sustain their profits (Crane, 2014). Higbee & Lim (2010) describe three approaches to define the term transnational: a national/transnational dichotomy in which the national establishes boundaries for the representation and the transnational recognizes the diversity of cultures and economic forces; as a regional reframing of cultural identity, the involvement of local cultures with Others; and as an emancipatory phenomenon to provide traits of identity competing against Western representations and conceptualizations of the nation. These three approaches denote how the national label is still relevant in the transnational context, playing a vital role in how audiences attribute films a designation of origin and how spectators conceive these movies in relation to their identity.

Due to the complexity of the term transnational, Shaw (2013a) breaks it into fifteen different categories that "distinguish between industrial practices, working practices, aesthetics, themes and approaches, audience reception, ethical questions, and critical reception" (p. 51). In this classification, Shaw (2013a) never discards the national. On the contrary, she recognizes the value this term has in the audiences' perceptions of the film properties. Thus, no matter the transnational category applied to analyze a set of films labeled as particular to a culture, or how difficult it could be to locate a center in the forces that shape a movie industry, the local will always be tangible in a film.

Similar to the conceptualization of the co-productions and hybridization, the term transnational requires understanding the interaction between local, indigenous, and peripheral cinemas with the production, distribution, and exhibition dynamics of the region and country. Nonetheless, a transnational strategy does not imply success by itself; what the term entails is a reconceptualization of the nation, appealing to the use of local cultural characteristics easily recognizable in the global market (Dennison, 2013). The best way to measure how well the national traits are performing in foreign markets is to look at how diasporic communities perceive them; these audiences' preferences reveal the transnational dynamic.

As Higbee and Lim (2010) indicate, one of transnational cinema's essential roles is to make visible the dominant ideology of the nation where diasporas relocate, so they can recognize, reinforce, defy, or negotiate with it. Sometimes transnational representations help to reframe or reconceptualize previous portrayals of the local culture to include the diasporic identity and their role within that context. For instance, transnational media content can present symbols, beliefs, values, or ideologies competing directly with the local contents produced in the culture in which diasporas have settled (Keles, 2019). For that

reason, diasporic individuals look for transnational representations to help them navigate the culture of their foster societies because they perceive these portrayals as inclusive of their own identities, no matter their origin. The transnational logic provides hints about the culture resultant from the mix between the local and the global. That is why transnationalism must "be attendant to the dynamics of the specific historical, cultural, and ideological contexts" (Higbee & Lim, 2010; p. 13).

In summary, the concept of transnational cinema is relevant in the contemporary context. It justifies and explains how local audiences perceive a film as an accurate representation of their culture, no matter the hybridization or co-production efforts behind the movie. Now, we turn our attention to the Mexican film industrial context to understand how transnational cinema (especially co-productions) has become the best alternative to compete against the dominance of its major competitor: Hollywood.

The transnationalization of Mexican cinema, a strategy for survival

Films from Hollywood are the ones most consumed in Mexico. The influence and prevalence of the U.S. cinema in the country have turned transnationalism and co-productions into a reliable alternative to compete worldwide and still locally survive among Mexican audiences' preferences. Mexican commercial cinema, especially movies that pursue high profits at the box office, has adapted and applied these devices to target Mexican audiences' preferences as Mexican spectators are more aware and accustomed to the narrative devices implemented by Hollywood films. Simultaneously, the adaptation of these narrative elements allows Mexican films to compete worldwide and implement the same strategies as the dominant cinema. Three factors have contributed to the dominance of Hollywood in Mexico (and around the world): its high concentration of talent and resources; an economy of scale that ensures recovering its costs of production; and a

distribution system that facilitates the exhibition of its films worldwide, restricting the participation of foreign films in the United States as well as fostering policies that make its films prevail in foreign markets (Crane, 2014). As De Propris and Hypponen (2008) elucidate, the technological resources available and the ability of the movie studios to transform into "multimedia conglomerates" facilitate the expansion of Hollywood over other media options.

Hollywood's predominance in Latin American audiences' tastes and the precariousness of Latin American media industries have fostered concerns of cultural homogenization in those nations (Crane, 2014). These conditions lead to some troublesome situations; for example, Hollywood films often relying on a series of stereotypes, prejudices, or misrepresentations to portray the local culture. The more local audiences consume Hollywood narratives, the more these foreign representations of the local culture become dominant and affect how local audiences conceive themselves, their beliefs, values, and ideology (López, 2002; Crane, 2014). However, taking these concerns as the full picture would be ignoring that Hollywood also depends on transnationalism and co-productions. So, in order to have economic success in one particular market, Hollywood requires incorporating tropes, symbols, narratives, or characters that Latin American audiences consider accurate in relation to their first-hand experience (McClennen, 2018). As a result, Hollywood films present a varying degree of accuracy in their cultural context portrayals.

In Mexico, Hollywood has dominated since the beginning of the cinema industry, except for the Golden Age (1932-1960). In the early days, the film industry in Mexico focused on the exhibition and distribution of movies instead of their production (Ramirez-Berg, 2010). However, the panorama changed during World War II. The support of the

Mexican government of the United States' war effort and the proximity of both nations boosted Mexican cinema production, leading to the Golden Age. As Noble (2005) notes, during the Golden Age, there was a considerable decrease in the flow of films from Hollywood and Europe, and most of the American films "tended to be dominated by war propaganda, which held less appeal for Latin American audiences" (p.15). At the end of that period, several economic and industrial crises in Mexico led to Hollywood's dominance again. Because of the Mexican film industry's unstable configuration, it was not able to resist Hollywood (Noble, 2005). The repetition of stories, the growth of a more demanding middle class, and the proliferation of a distribution monopoly marked the end of the Golden Age of Mexican cinema around 1960 (Mora, 2005).

Treviño (1979) explains how private companies interested more in profits than the quality of films fostered a collection of movies that no longer retained the properties that had made Mexican cinema successful among popular audiences. During the 1970s, the panorama for the film industry in Mexico seemed to change. Luis Echeverría's government (1970-1976) provided full support to the cinema industry to recover its prestige, fostering a new generation of filmmakers interested in crafting films impregnated by a sharp social critique (Berg, 2010). However, as Villaseñor (2011) describes, these films did not connect with the popular and middle classes despite their positive critical reception and technical qualities. Consequently, the subsequent administration, headed by José López Portillo (1976-1982), aimed to support a cinema that tried to recover those ignored audiences. Treviño (1979) describes these movies as "more concerned with 'entertainment,' a euphemism for films that do not attempt social or political themes, and many of these films have, predictably, retraced the familiar formulas of sex, violence, and melodrama" (p. 37).

Despite this goal, these productions did not lure audiences back to the movie theaters because of the emergence of home video and cable television, options more attractive, affordable, and accessible to the audiences (Asse Dayán, 2017). Indeed, as Pérez Turrent (1995) indicates, the only two films that were economically successful during that period were *El Chanfle* (1978), a spoof movie starring television comic Roberto Gómez Bolaños "Chespirito," and *Lagunilla mi barrio* (1980), which relied on television melodrama. Thus, although the influence of television was fundamental for these two film hits, other productions emulating these narrative resources did not find the same luck. That is why, during the 1980s, the government's strategy changed to encourage the film distribution process in Mexico, implementing tariffs and screen quotas – but they were not sufficient. NAFTA reversed the small advances by including the cultural industry at the mercy of the free market in the 1990s (Hinojosa Córdova, 2017). Also, entering the free trade agreement introduced a series of significant changes to Mexico's cinema industry, such as deregulation and privatization. These variables were visible in a decrease of the national screen quota for Mexican films from 30 to 10 percent, the emergence of multiplexes with a prevalence of Hollywood films, and the increase in ticket costs (Sánchez Prado, 2014). Although the emergence of multiplexes could be considered a positive impact of NAFTA, Pérez Turrent (1995) explains that while many theaters were opened in urban areas, targeting urban elites as the ideal cinema audiences, many other venues closed in small cities and rural communities. Most of these cinemas that closed were places in which Mexican productions dominated.

The current panorama of Mexican film production

In this context, it is critical to recognize the subsidiary role that the Instituto de Cinematografía Mexicana (IMCINE) has played to promote and manage the government's

funds to support the industry. Throughout its almost 40 years of existence, until the end of President Enrique Peña Nieto's term (2012-2018), IMCINE implemented and strengthened three main programs to support the film production in Mexico: Fondo para la Producción Cinematográfica de Calidad (FOPROCINE), Fondo de Inversion y Estímulos al Cine (FIDECINE), and the Estimulo Fiscal para la Producción Cinematográfica (EFICINE189).

According to IMCINE (http://www.imcine.gob.mx/estimulos-y-apoyos/foprocine/), FOPROCINE was an institutional trust for the production and postproduction of films or television series. The state invested venture capital and was co-producer of projects with a "cultural" and "artistic" value. In its most recent call in 2020, IMCINE established that movies supported should fulfill at least one of the following requirements: having been invited to participate in an International Film Festival, having an international co-production agreement, or being the debut feature of students in any cinema school from Mexico. In addition, IMCINE included television series as possible beneficiaries of this fund, expanding its support to other audiovisual products. An important fact to consider here is that the support for producing a film was capped at 10 million pesos (50,000 USD) or up to 80% of the film's total budget.

For its part, FIDECINE was a government trust dedicated to producing, post-producing, distributing, and exhibiting feature films through venture capital or credits. A movie must have a clear strategy to obtain profits from the box office to be eligible for funding. In any case, FIDECINE does not strictly imply a co-production agreement between the government and the companies behind the film. Companies have a grace period during which to return the amount awarded once the film has been released. In this case, the support granted by FIDECINE should not exceed more than 49% of the film's budget or 10% of the trust's total amount for that fiscal year

(http://www.imcine.gob.mx/estimulos-y-apoyos/fidecine/). It is necessary to stress that despite the importance of these two programs in the production of Mexican cinema, they no longer operate due to the policies implemented by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018-).

Finally, EFICINE, the only of these three programs that still operates, is a 10% tax exemption to private companies investing in the production, postproduction, and cinema exhibition within Mexico. In this case, the tax exemption is for those companies whose principal business activity is not film production but other services or products (http://www.imcine.gob.mx/estimulos-y-apoyos/eficine189/).

IMCINE had offered other programs supporting different stages from a film's preproduction and postproduction process. According to its 2019 Statistical Yearbook, 49% of the Mexican movies produced during that year were supported by at least one of these funds. From this percentage, 25% of the films were supported by EFICINE and 13% by FOPROCINE. Only 1% relied entirely on FIDECINE, and 6% were financed by a mixed model combining funds from the three IMCINE's programs and some other public resources from different states. The low levels of filmmakers' involvement in both programs, FOPROCINE and FIDECINE, suggest that the Mexican government's participation as a founding source for these productions is minimal. The fact that one-quarter of the movies produced in 2019 relied on EFICINE's tax exemption indicates the involvement of companies whose principal field is not the movie industry. Thus, their interests, more than artistic, respond to the free-market logic of reaching broader audiences in local and global marketplaces. A particularity related to this phenomenon must be noted. While film companies perceive the movie as their product, the other companies that EFICINE allows to play a part as co-producers do not sustain their business models in the

cinema production. These companies promote diverse commodities or brands, so their primary interest relies on product placement more than the film itself. Still, both kinds of companies endorse a hegemonic market ideology that encourages consumerism and capitalism, as explained in previous sections. If, as McClennen (2018) explains, the Mexican government's involvement in cinema production implies an influence over domestic production's narratives and representations, its absence can provoke the opposite effect, allowing commercial interests to dictate and shape the stories as well as symbols according to their perspective. As Basáñez (1990) indicates, with the participation in Mexico in free trade agreements, the government did not aim to perpetuate a sense of identity, but rather capitalism and neoliberalism that would allow the government to perpetuate its power and benefit from the market logic fostered by globalization.

In this context, it is relevant to consider the alternatives currently implemented by Andres Manuel López Obrador's administration (2018-) and how they could reverse the previous trend. Although the movies discussed in this dissertation relied on the aforementioned financing schemes, IMCINE's operation will differ from 2021 and on. In September 2020, the federal government approved a reform that would end all institutional trusts. Consequently, IMCINE funds for Mexican cinema production are now available under a sole program, Fondo para la Producción Cinematográfica (FOCINE), which includes twelve categories of projects focused on the preproduction, production, postproduction, and exhibition of short and feature films as well as the creation and preservation of film archives/collections.[10] By concentrating all IMCINE programs in just

[10] Regarding feature films' production, a central matter for this dissertation, FOCINE details seven specific schemes (http://www.imcine.gob.mx/estimulos-y-apoyos/focine/). The first one is the financial consolidation of feature films, granting 250,000 pesos (~12,000 dollars) for those projects targeting children. A second one focused on producing fictional feature films, providing an amount between 5 and 8 million pesos (250,000 to

one, the government can have more significant interference and control in the productions supported by this fund, making it a more influential co-production player that could counterbalance commercial interests. However, the future will show us the pros and cons of this story.

Despite the government's low participation in the production of Mexican cinema and the high prevalence of commercial interests, NAFTA has also enabled producing some of the Mexican film industry's major successes at the box office, as well as the internationalization of talent and films (McClennen, 2018). For instance, Shaw (2013b) recognizes how the changes introduced by transnationalism and neoliberalism have been influential to Mexican filmmakers' success worldwide. This success includes Mexican comedies. Since 2013, nine out of ten of the most profitable Mexican films in history have been comedies. Comedies' success is not new; because this genre integrates many aspects of the local context in which it is produced, audiences engage easily with those texts (King, 2002). Nonetheless, these contemporary Mexican comedies do not follow the same rules that made past films in the genre successful. Sánchez Prado (2014) refers to the same neoliberal and market forces that transformed *Mexicanidad* into a pan-identity as the underlying causes that redefined how the genre operates in Mexican productions. These forces discussed above are embodied in co-production and transnationalism, which in

400,000 dollars) or up to 80% of the film's budget. The third and fourth programs center on producing documentaries and films targeting children, for which the design is the same as the one focused on fiction. One call is dedicated to animated feature films, providing up to 10 million pesos (500,000 dollars) or 80% of the film's budget. A six scheme is available for financing cinema school students' debut films, granting between 1 and 3 million pesos (50,000 and 150,000 dollars) or up to 80% of the film's budget. Finally, the last kind of support centers on those feature films co-produced with other Mexican states in which at least 70% of the crew is from that region and 70% of the film occurs in that place. These movies could obtain 1 million pesos (50,000 dollars) or 80% of the film's cost.

Mexican comedies facilitates their independence from public funding. As Mendéz (2018) explains, Mexican comedies are financially supported mainly through private resources.

It is necessary to mention that despite the replacement of NAFTA in 2018 by the United States – Mexico – Canada Agreement (USMCA), ratified in 2020, cultural exceptions akin to the ones negotiated by Canada were not included to protect the Mexican film industry (Bermejo, 2020). In this way, the disadvantageous conditions imposed by NAFTA regarding the production of culture in Mexico persists. The agreement's name has changed, but its troublesome implications and threats for the Mexican culture have not.[11] For this reason, the influences of the context explained so far regarding the neoliberal and capitalist forces embodied in co-production agreements, and transnational strategies are the same that have shaped commercial film production in Mexico since the 1990s.

Thus, contemporary Mexican movies present an interesting case regarding transnationalization and hybridization. The identifiers in the film texts perceived as Mexican by Mexican audiences are now altered, shaped, or reinforced in multiple ways by commercial interests. The following section delves into the narrative devices employed by comedies.

The dimensions of contemporary Mexican comedies

In the contemporary Mexican film landscape, Hollywood's role in shaping the industrial context[12] interplay with audiences' tastes. This phenomenon is more perceptible

[11] Indeed, McAnany and Wilkinson (1996) compile the upsides and downsides of the implementation of NATFA in Mexico, warning about possible benefits and threats of a relationship where the cultural production was not protected by any clause, was the case for Canada. The origins and different debates around the effects of NAFTA on media industries and audiences are discussed in detail there.

[12] In his book *Film Comedy*, Geoff King (2002) establishes three "points of orientation" from which it is possible to study how films employ comedy in diverse forms and how comic episodes operate within a diverse body of movies. These points help us to research and analyze "the position of individual films, or filmmakers, in terms of (1) their industrial location, (2) the kinds of formal/aesthetic strategies they adopt and (3) their relationship to the broader social, cultural, political or ideological landscape" (p. 2). The formal

when looking at Mexican blockbusters: comedies (Sánchez Prado, 2020). Many Mexican box office movie hits have adapted Hollywood's romantic comedies' tropes and narrative patterns, appealing to audiences accustomed to these formulas in global and local contexts. Such emulation of Hollywood formulas discourages audiences from pigeonholing these films as "Latin American," a label triggering a series of expectations about the film, cataloging it as exotic and crafted just for a small niche of spectators (Dennison, 2013). That is why companies such as Pantelion Films, a partnership between Televisa and Lionsgate Entertainment, have only focused on producing and distributing comedies because these films distance themselves from the Latin American label (Puente, 2019).

One of the most recurrent tactics appealing to global audiences is the use of intensified continuity (Bordwell, 2006): rapid editing, the prevalence of close shots, different lenses, and a camera in constant motion. Such techniques still respect the style principles of early films produced worldwide but rely on technological novelties that facilitate a different application. Adopting these devices enables an unencumbered recognition by the global audience. Langford (2010) concedes that allusionism—the constant reference to previous modes of representation—and transnational mobility, allowing filmmakers to emigrate and produce films in other countries, have influenced the implementation of intensified continuity.

dimension examines the film's narrative process: fabula, syuzeth, style. It means the film's specific resources to present/implement/frame comedy within the narrative. The social, cultural, and historical approach includes the political and ideological dimensions, placing the film in a relationship with their context of production and consumption. King (2002) explains that "particular forms of comedy, or particular tendencies within more general forms, can be understood in the context of the specific times and places in which they appear" (p. 17). Finally, from an industrial point of reference, the film is a product that emerges from different contextual processes that converge in the local industry.

Nevertheless, style is not the only dimension of the narration model affected by transnationalism, but fabula and syuzhet[13] are influenced too. For instance, St-Georges (2018) points out how contemporary Mexican cinema replicates some common characteristics from Golden Age films revisited under the light of modern times. By mixing elements from both epochs, Mexican comedy blockbusters promote a unique reading of contemporary issues in which the present and the past overlap (Alvaray, 2013; Smith, 2019). For instance, analyzing some Pantelion comedies, de Tirado (2020) highlights how they portray the relationship between the United States and Mexico using previous stereotypes regarding ethnicity, gender, and politics. Still, simultaneously, they reconceptualize the term "border."[14] Mixing Mexican symbols from the past with current relevant cultural signifiers broadens Mexican film representations and prepares them for a transnational reading. In another example, Smith (2016) recognizes how popular contemporary Mexican cinema has relied on *telenovelas'* tropes and style, favoring affect over critical discourse. This change in the syuzhet targets a popular audience, privileging an

[13] By fabula, Bordwell (1985) indicates a series of events connected in a logical causal relationship inferred by spectators according to organization principles called schemata. Fabula is what the audience perceives and assumes from that narrative. The syuzhet is necessary to arrange and present the events of the fabula according to a series of principles. Bordwell (1985) explains that syuzhet relies on patterns of events composed of scenes, actions, plot points, etcetera, guiding the audience's reading. Finally, the style uses film techniques such as *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, editing, and sound to present the events that comprised the syuzhet. By relying on these devices, the style can also influence how the spectators perceive the film and interpret it. From this perspective, style and syuzhet can be perceived as competing systems. Both provide cues, emphasize events, and frame in particular ways certain situations; however, at least in what Bordwell (1985) calls the "normal film," style subordinates to the syuzhet. It occurs because the audience can only access the fabula through the syuzhet's organizing principles that regulate the amount of information that can be perceived and trigger some expectations. The style's importance is that it can influence different outcomes in the spectator's interpretation by selecting diverse techniques to present an event.

[14] According to de Tirado (2020), contemporary Mexican comedies that portray the border, especially those produced or distributed by Pantelion, have overcome hegemonic Hollywood narratives presenting the south as primitive and "narratives of pity" that overstress the suffering of migrants. She found in films such as *No se aceptan devoluciones* a third alternative where the border is a mental construct (not necessarily a geographic space) that can be challenged, reinforced, or redefined through the practices/actions of the characters presenting solutions tied to individual behaviors and beliefs, not as a macrostructural problem. Thus, by simplifying these issues, the film could rely on stereotypical images of Mexicans and Americans, as well as solve their cultural differences by mutual understanding.

emotional response from it. Interestingly, this affect not only alludes to *telenovelas* but Hollywood romantic comedies too. Thus, contemporary Mexican comedies promote affect based on universal narratives without contextual considerations and leave aside stories that negotiate the tension between the individual and the different social factors in Mexico (Sánchez Prado, 2014).

Contemporary Mexican comedies are complex productions involving contrasting dimensions. According to Benítez (2008), detractors of comedies have criticized them for focusing on "a society more concerned with their immediate personal conflicts, delimitated by their four everyday walls, than by the great totalizing concerns" (p. 307). Sánchez Prado (2014) recognizes two fundamental characteristics of these movies: the representation of the creative class (characters desiring promises made by neoliberalism) and the "space outside the history" (a utopic place without differences of social classes). Both variables result from the free-market and neoliberal policies influencing the Mexican industry and critical as they shape the audience's expectations. Hence, on the one hand they embody the social aspirations of these spectators. On the other hand, these films present a utopic Mexico that could impact how the Mexican audience negotiates their sense of belonging to the Mexican culture.

In addition, the free market and the neoliberal policies have transformed tropes and symbols available in these comedies that refer to the Mexican culture into commodities. As explained, Mexican romantic comedies rely on tropes about the culture's traditions and values that are familiar and easily accessible for local and international audiences (Asse Dayán, 2017; de Tirado, 2020). Thus, despite the films' transnational traits, the nation remains present in those representations (Sánchez Prado, 2020). Although Smith (2019) agrees with Sánchez Prado's (2014) perspective regarding the absence of a recognizable

geographical location, he notes how these films still address Mexican contextual issues and traits. For instance, in his analysis of two Mexican comedies *Macho* (2016) and *Hazlo como hombre* (2017), Smith (2019) identifies how the locations become fluid and create spaces that are not easily recognizable by spectators. At the same time, however, these films take homophobic and misogynist Mexican ideologies and unfold them on the narratives in ways that Mexican audiences can perceive a reflection of their current context and possible solutions to these discourses.

Additionally, the nationality of the comedies' crews— filmmakers, actors, or actresses—elicit audiences' expectations about the film's cultural scope (Stock, 1995). For these reasons, the 'Mexican' label has become a commodity in Mexican comedies targeting international markets by describing specific characteristics, places, or characters present within a film (McClennen, 2018). However, a caveat must be offered. As Sánchez Prado (2014) stresses, the traits of Mexican identity "no longer carr[y] the same social significance, particularly with the middle-class movie audience" (p. 4). Mexican films competing in the international marketplace cannot embrace the totality of Mexican identity's diversity. While this assertion is true, in a certain way, this dissertation highlights how Mexican comedies still preserve some references that audiences associate with their identity. Simultaneously, the spectators interviewed in this project recognize the limitations of these representations and the impossibility of including all the identities that comprise the Mexican one.

Indicating that Mexican social signifiers do not have the same value as in previous periods of history is an overstatement that does not consider the role audiences play in interpreting and making sense of these symbols. The fact that comedies do not target the wide range of the Mexican population does not mean that they cannot propose different

ways to conceive, symbolize, and experience the Mexican audience's context (González Marín, 2018). As Shaw (2013a) expresses: a "film may not be able to provide access to the truth of a nation, yet there is no film that does not have something to say about the discursive and mythical construction of national identities" (p. 65). That is why a textual analysis of any Mexican film's formal aspects or the sole attention to the industrial conditions is insufficient to understand different strategies used by the audience to negotiate with those movies. Reading these comedies by relying only on the Mexican traits they can provide is also sterile (Sánchez Prado, 2014; McClennen, 2018). The best alternative, and the one this dissertation aims to cover, is the role audiences have to use these comedies to negotiate their Mexican identity.

The discussion regarding the role of transnationalism and co-productions shaping the contemporary Mexican film industry, including comedies, highlighted how Mexico's imagined community is still relevant to understanding the relationship between spectators and movies. Additionally, it showed how companies' interests became the ideological force behind the film, encouraging a pan-identity and appealing to specific formal devices to reach broader audiences. Thereby, as McClennen (2018) also concludes, applying only dichotomic paradigms to analyze Mexican cinema constrains its study and understanding.

That is why, in order to avoid falling into the pitfalls mentioned earlier, this study foregrounds the Mexican audience's role in reading and making meaning from those films, negotiating their identity in the process. Despite the multiple theoretical perspectives presented here, the value of transnational cinema resides not in the text itself but in how audiences, local and diasporic, use it to connect with their conceptualization of identity (Keles, 2019). Turner (1988/1999) recognizes that the audience is actively involved in selecting a film to consume, referring to the act of watching a movie as a social practice. In

that process, various motives drive the spectator to watch a specific film, ranging from escapism to self-identification. No matter the main reason, the audience seeks references in the film that speak to/about them (Christie, 2013). The audience's agency identifies suture points that allow them to refine their identity through the media they consume. A paramount concern regarding this matter has been streaming platforms and the power of their algorithms to constrain the audiences' agency. In this regard, Klinger and Svensson (2018) emphasize the role of human agency deployed by users and programmers. First, each user's interaction serves as input to the algorithm. Then, a group of software developers programs the algorithm to respond according to each users' actions. Moreover, the algorithm is not the whole picture. As Matthew (2020) points out, these platforms' design restricts the audience's agency more than the algorithm. Streaming platforms provide a false premise of personalization while presenting a similar experience for all users in reality. This fact provokes various responses that are neither predictable nor controllable by the algorithm.

The following section delves into the spectators' agency, a topic that has been absent from the academic literature regarding the necessary analysis of Mexican cinema (Hinojosa Córdova, 2019).

The missing piece: The Mexican audience

Researching the media industries and their messages without considering the audience provides an incomplete and inaccurate perspective of how these messages and industries operate in the current global context. As Wang (2008) explains, "the audience has as much power to shape media content through assigning meaning to it as media producers do through creating it" (p. 205). This power allows the audience to rely on their cultural knowledge to interpret the content they consume and give it a meaning aside or

opposite from the hegemonic ideology that shaped it (Green, 2007). As Hall (1973/2006) mentions, three possible outcomes can occur in interpreting media content by the audience regarding the hegemonic discourse: a reinforcement, a challenge, or a negotiation. Thus, spectators can reinforce or challenge certain representations about their identity through their consumption (Higbee & Lim, 2010). In this process, García Canclini (2000) explains, the audience must face some challenges in the contemporary transnational context. According to García Canclini (2000), ideally, spectators should question previous foundational representations by selecting between different kinds of content produced by local, national, international, and transnational outlets. Although this phenomenon is not commonly identified across spectators, their agency is still deployed in selecting media content. Stock (1995) elaborates on this agency by pointing out that, despite transnationalism, when engaging films labeled as national or productions with national stars or filmmakers, spectators tend to read those movies looking for what makes them "authentic"[15] for their culture. As Wang (2008) indicates, people rely on their cultural traits to interpret media content, even when produced by members of other cultures. Those representations can negatively or positively impact the audience (McKinley et al., 2014), but only in the presence of a weak cultural identity or the absence of local media or local culture (Wang, 2008). For these reasons, this dissertation expects that the avid consumers of Mexican comedies interviewed here will look for Mexican traits constituting part of their collective imaginary when watching Mexican films. In addition, it is presumed that they

[15] Stock (1995) explores the application of the term authenticity in transnational films. As she explains, when the audience consumes a movie that refers to their culture or includes national talent, spectators aim to find traits that resonate with nostalgic representations of their culture. This means that the audience relies on its collective cultural imaginary to identify symbols, images, or features that resonate with their own culture's mental schemes. Therefore, media content that presents references to their culture or talent from that country will trigger expectations that the narrative must fulfill to be considered authentic to that culture.

will struggle with those representations that they consider inaccurate regarding their culture or their context and ultimately reject them.

The active role of audiences

Fan studies offer a more detailed understanding of how audiences perceive and make sense of media content. From this perspective, we can recognize how spectators engage in the interpretation process and, more importantly, generate emotional ties with the content they consume. In other words, fan studies make more perceptible the self-reflective process in which audiences engage to identify with a text and define their identity. In this process, when a person uses a popular cultural product to satisfy a specific need, they can defy the dominant ideological discourse by reconstructing its values or traits (Fiske, 1992). For this reason, avid spectators of Mexican comedies could use them to refuse and reconfigure the dominant culture's features through their own personal interpretation. However, the audiences' agency must not be taken for granted, or described as massified, as the spectators' practices are individual (Sandvoss, 2005).

In that sense, it is critical to go beyond the term “use” as it does not entirely pin down the complexity of audiences’ dynamics. Ayaß (2012) proposes the concept “appropriation” to understand this agency deployed by audiences: “the term ‘appropriation’ indicates that, in the creative practice of a medium and the interpretation of its specific meanings, a greater role is played by the recipient” (p. 7). Her explanation centers on how media operate in the social context where they become ordinary in the spectator’s everyday life, without clear boundaries for their use, and easily accessible everywhere. Consequently, the audiences’ interpretation of media content is fixed only to the limits that each spectator sets. Thus, by appropriating the elements of the text, the audience provides meanings and explanations as well as identifies properties in the media content more related to them than

to the producers' original intention, forming "interpretative communities." Ayaß (2012) elaborates, "in these interpretive communities, members acquire media skills, negotiate interpretations, and routinize methods of use. The communities provide a framework as well as a context for media appropriation" (pp. 7-8). Implicitly in Ayaß's definition of interpretive communities is Bourdieu's (1979/1984) conceptualization of habitus:

> The habitus is both the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgments and the system of classification of these practices. It is in the relationship between the two capacities which define the habitus, the capacity to produce classifiable practices and works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products (taste), that the represented social world, i.e., the space of life-styles, is constituted (p. 165-166).

Bourdieu (1979/1984) facilitates our understanding of how individual spectators' interpretative schemes are shaped by the place they occupy in a social group in a particular context. This group is contingent on the role and function deployed by other groups in that society. It means that individuals will use their in-group to define the characteristics and properties that differentiate their groups from others in society. For instance, in the case of social classes, as the participants in this dissertation will formulate, conceiving themselves as part of the middle class requires them to define the other classes in Mexico, such as the wealthy and poor ones, their characteristics, and, as a consequence, the limits of their class. Thus, the group's operational logic will provide referents to interpret cultural products according to a specific taste commonly shared among that group's members. Considering the habitus, it is also relevant to notice each individual's cultural capital and the field in which this person develops. Cultural capital implies the skills deployed by each person to accumulate intellectual qualifications granted by legitimizing institutions (government, schools, and even family), intrinsically related to the person's social class, allowing those in higher positions to acquire more cultural capital. In this respect, the habitus can provide a

more privileged position, facilitating the individuals' access to greater cultural capital. For its part, the field is the interconnectedness that occurs in a specific society between the different forms of capital and the diverse social classes that compete there. Together, the three factors reveal the complex network of social conditions operating in individuals' interpretation. Still, it is necessary to acknowledge that their presence does not determine how audiences use, make meaning, engage and appropriate a text/object. The habitus only provides interpretation guidelines. It does not condition spectators to read a film in only one way, nor make it relevant to the same degree for all the members of an interpretative community (Sandvoss, 2005). For instance, the habitus only provides interpretation guidelines. In other words, each individual will rely on this habitus to different extents, no matter whether they belong to the same in-group. Hence, the act of interpreting a text becomes an individual activity.

As I have emphasized, agency is an individual practice. In this regard, fandom studies provide several examples of cultural products' uses and appropriations by audiences (Radway, 1984; Bancon-Smith, 1992; Jenkins, 1992; Penley, 2013). The central point is that agency is at play in how each person appropriates the media content, going, many times, beyond the media's purpose. Each individual has their own agency, and they use it to select a media product for reasons beyond the commercial interests of that production. More than an engagement with the movie, appropriation allows audiences to use a text and make it part of their cultural referents to create other products such as narratives or memes. This fact is relevant to understanding the relationship between Mexican audiences' consumption of Mexican comedies and their needs, revealing why they consume these movies and how this activity relates to their identity. Thus, this study delves into the

reasons that drive spectators to watch Mexican comedies and how these motivations relate to their identity.

The audience tends to engage with cultural products because of different motivations depending on their contextual conditions (Radway, 1984; Turner, 1988/1999). For instance, Mayer (2003) explains how the audience employs popular cultural texts to cope with racism, sexism, and classism; in such contexts, the audience implements strategies for overcoming their real problems by emulating fictional resolutions available in media portrayals. Mayer's study is relevant because it shows us how a Mexican product such as *telenovelas* can transcend borders and serve Mexican diasporas to negotiate their identity in times of globalization. Moreover, Mayer's research clarifies how audiences trust particular genres to help them escape from everyday issues. As she warns, each media text entangles its spectators with its own set of ties. This phenomenon occurs because of the audiences' appropriation that implies using individual mental schemas to make sense of the particular events that each film presents, provoking an immersive experience in which the spectator can identify themselves with the plot or characters (Turner, 1988/1999). As a consequence, multiple readings of one film can exist, but they are always related to the audiences' habitus, field, and cultural capital. These variables converge in the three possible responses to media texts identified by Hall (1973/2006). They set the stage for decoding media content from three necessary positions: the dominant-hegemonic position that reinforces the status quo, the negotiated position that allows the permanence of some traditional symbols and the refining of others, and the oppositional position that "retotalize[s] the message within some alternative framework of reference" (Hall, 1973/2006; p. 173). These multiple readings serve as one explanation to the success at the

box office of movies; as Alvaray (2013) explains, "high profits confirm that audiences do attend films that will fulfill certain expectations for them" (p. 78).

Because of this contextualized and individualized media content appropriation process, this study focuses on one particular audience: the younger Mexican one. Elsaesser (2013) explains that spectators use previous representations of the nation as a cultural reference that they can reshape in the light of the current context. To fully grasp the dynamic, it is necessary to look at the different films circulating in the nation, the audience's motivations, uses, and appropriations of these movies, as well as the interplay between the audience, films, and context to understand the success of specific texts among the spectators of that region (Higson, 2002).

Additionally, it is crucial to consider, as Higson (2002) points out, "how the actual audience constructs their cultural identity concerning the various products of the national and international film and television industries, and the conditions under which this is achieved" (p. 65). In other words, examining the three locations that King (2002) proposes (the industrial, the formal, and the contextual) provides an incomplete picture if scholars do not recognize the audience's value. Viewing is a "political act" as the spectators are not passive; they are necessary for a meaning-making process. The images represented cannot be interpreted in isolation; they always reference previous images available for the spectator through their experiences, real or mediated (Zavala, 2019).

The absent Mexican audiences

Because cinema served to unify the population after the Revolution, Mexico's first audience embodied a social construct called *pueblo* in the act of attending movie screenings. In the films of those early days, these spectators found a representation that taught them how to adapt to modernity and encouraged them to migrate to the new urban

centers (Noble, 2006). Although Hollywood cinema also fostered the same general purposes regarding modernity, the Mexican films, especially during the Golden Age, were the ones that resonated most with the national audiences and openly promoted their unification. According to Monsiváis (1995b), the high attendance of Mexican film exhibitions and the spectators' adoption of those representations in their everyday behavior signaled the strong bonds between Mexican cinema and its audiences. These films erased the boundaries between social classes under a commonly accepted depiction of Mexican society, or at least that was what can be concluded by the assiduous attendance of spectators. That is why Monsiváis (1995b) and Noble (2006) suggest that cinema during this period was a democratizing spectacle in Mexico in which the movie representations and the social practices that congregate spectators in movie theaters supported the government's efforts at modernization of the nation. This passage resembles, in some ways, the current relationship between Mexican cinema audiences and the capitalist goals of producers. It makes us question the role comedies play nowadays due to their high rates of consumption and the kind of messages endorsed by the audiences who support these films by buying a ticket.

The audiences' preferences were fundamental to the Golden Age of Mexican cinema's existence, as Noble (2006) explains:

> . . . spectators were able to enjoy a reasonably sustained, regular repertoire of films in their language, featuring local songs and music, dealing with issues specific to national cultural identity, which were embodied by a range of stars that were fast becoming household names (p.510).

Most of these spectators belonged to the lower and illiterate classes (Villaseñor, 2011). They tended to perceive the representations on those films as accurate, and, as Monsiváis (1995b) explains, they replicate some of these performances in their daily lives.

Because of this mindset, the government used cinema to modernize the nation, instigate gender roles and institutional values, inculcate a way to conceive the national and foreign identities, as well as create an "urban mentality and rural morality" (Monsiváis, 1995b; p. 149). In other words, the Mexican government used cinema as a sort of propaganda to maintain its privileged position by shaping the *pueblo.* Despite the lack of quality and iterative plots, Mexican cinema retained its audience for years. The close relationship between the audience and cinema during the Golden Age was steady because those films embodied, reinforced, and elicited an imagined community by representing audiences' everyday experiences (Monsiváis, 1995b; Silva Escobar, 2011). Monsiváis (1995b) emphasizes that the Mexican audience wanted to be entertained and recognized themselves in those narratives and characters. However, simultaneously, movies from the Golden Age were also a tool to suppress, educate, and reinsert marginalized groups into the *pueblo*, serving the interests of a hegemonic ideological discourse (Silva Escobar, 2011). This historical context helps to perceive the crucial role of the audience in creating a Golden Age of Mexican cinema.

The relationship between Mexican cinema, the Mexican government, and Mexican audiences changed after the end of the Golden Age. During Echeverría's term (1970-1976), cultural policies stimulated new narratives directed by novel filmmakers (Villaseñor, 2011). These productions lacked marketing campaigns, a star system, and strategies to incorporate the audiences' experiences on the screen, causing disconnection with audiences from middle and low socioeconomic classes who did not accept them entirely. This fact drove López Portillo's government (1976-1982) to implement policies that, again, fostered a cinema with lower production values, assuming that this formula would bring back audiences to the movie theaters (Villaseñor, 2011). However, the audiences' interest in

other emerging mediums, such as playback technologies (Beta, VHS, and DVD) and cable television, were more attractive for those middle and upper classes who only considered attending movie theaters as an option to watch "Hollywood blockbusters" (Asse Dayán, 2017).

Since the implementation of NAFTA, the relationship between the Mexican audience and Mexican cinema has been less promising. As Asse Dayán (2017) notes, audiences have faced an increase in ticket costs, making it more difficult for them to attend. Likewise, this fact has forced Mexican spectators to be more selective regarding which films they view at a movie theater. For its part, the Mexican film industry has confronted an increase in its competition due to the emergence of multiplexes located mostly in urban areas, which have privileged Hollywood productions. In response, to reverse these adverse factors and regain the audience, the Mexican industry has revolved around themes that involve the Mexican population's current concerns. Films that have emerged from this period are targeting middle classes and offering three significant trends as identified by Asse Dayán (2017): "the proliferation of romantic comedies; a new sort of neo-*Mexicanism* that aims at re-writing Mexican history from an upper-class point of view; and films that feature sensationalistic and apolitical violence" (p. 149). If Asse Dayán's (2017) assertion is correct, the perceptions of young audience members interviewed in this dissertation could support that reading by recognizing how these comedies are framing the Mexican identity from an elitist perspective. This dissertation aims to accomplish this goal in the upcoming chapters.

This context prevailing in contemporary Mexican cinema illustrates the options available to the current national audiences. For the Mexican industry, the middle class has become the primary target audience of the films produced in Mexico due to its higher

disposable income levels. However, according to IMCINE's 2019 Statistical Yearbook, only 35% of movie theater attendees in Mexico view Mexican films, and the middle class prefers Hollywood cinema over Mexican options (Villaseñor, 2011). Understanding the middle-class audience dynamics and preferences is more complicated than it might appear.

Straubhaar et al. (2019) offer a way to decipher class dynamics in Latin American countries that may provide some insights to illuminate how Mexican audiences behave. The audiences divide their preferences between national productions and Hollywood narratives. Nevertheless, spectators tend to prefer the latter. The explanation of this phenomenon follows Bourdieu's (1979/1984)) concept of cultural capital. In Latin American countries, cultural capital privileges the media offerings from global cultures, especially from the United States.

In many cases, the more the audiences increase their cultural capital by consuming media content from other cultures, the more they will be contrasting these representations with their local culture (Straubhaar et al., 2019). This is argument seems to contradict the premises underlying cultural proximity that indicate how people will opt for those contents closer to their culture. Nevertheless, it is critical to stress that Latin American countries' cultural capital privileges the culture coming from Western hegemonic cultures.

This conceptualization of cultural capital in Latin America is perceptible in the Mexican context where a middlebrow cinema has emerged incorporating cultural signifiers from the Mexican culture to mitigate this proliferation of Hollywood films, even though these movies emulate formulas from that industry. The growth of a middle-class audience boosts this middlebrow cinema, making the high culture more accessible by refining popular symbols to give them intellectual connotations (Shaw, 2016). This factor is relevant because signs considered part of the low culture can be framed in a way that the middle-

class audience reinterprets them as part of the high culture and accepts them. In this process, the Mexican audience can reappropriate previous nostalgic images from Mexican cinema and consider them relevant for their identity. This strategy can also signify a way to trace or reinforce the boundaries that define *lo mexicano.* By defining these boundaries, Mexican spectators can distinguish which transnational comedies appeal to their cultural identity, no matter how diffuse their Mexican traits are or how similar they are to Hollywood productions. As Shaw (2016) explains, these comedies propose an "easily consumed popular culture with some carefully selected high-cultural references and have added intellectual content through their philosophical musings on the nature of relationships" (p. 108). Thus, Mexican comedies have succeeded in incorporating the middle class's social expectations and tropes from Hollywood films that make them more accessible to that audience (González Marín, 2018). As Shaw (2016) states:

> The Mexican romantic sex comedy allows the audience to laugh, find mild sexual titillation in soft-core representations of promiscuous sex, and see cinegenic actors with disposable incomes in desirable surroundings. All the while, the audience is given enough edifying elements to gain the sense that they are receiving something of cultural value (p. 119).

As explained in the previous subsection, Mexican comedies emerge from co-production agreements between national and international film companies and private funding. This fact allows these films to reach global markets where Mexican diasporas are present (Shaw, 2016). In those places, despite the trivial nature of these comedies, they have started changing the conceptualization of Mexico as a violent and primitive place, and foreign audiences have started perceiving Mexico's inhabitants as "individuals" (Costello, 2005; de Tirado 2020), adding new dimensions to the Mexican identity or replacing existing ones. Likewise, these positive changes are relevant for Latinx communities and diasporas, mainly in the United States, that have accepted these representations as part of

their culture (Molina, 2006; Puente, 2019). The box-office success of these Mexican comedies in both the national and diasporic populations makes it relevant to know more about the audiences that consume them and, at the same time, recognize how the Mexican audiences distinguish a Mexican comedy from those produced in other countries, especially in Hollywood. Hinojosa-Córdova (2019) notes that more than two decades after NAFTA,

> there has been a noticeable recovery of national cinema with a significative increase in production, in the number of movie theaters, in the attendance, and the box-office profits, a straightforward transformation regarding the decade of the major crisis in the recent history of Mexican cinema (pp. 6-7, author's translation).

In 2017, Mexico was the largest Spanish-language film market (Asse Dayán, 2017). In 2018 it occupied fourth place worldwide in ticket sales and movie theaters (Méndez, 2018). However, there is an overproduction of Mexican films facing a complicated distribution and exhibition process that constrains their participation in the Mexican market (Sánchez Prado, 2020). Fewer than 5% of the films produced in Mexico earn more than 100 million pesos (5 million U.S. dollars), and close to 70% of the movies released do not reach 1 million pesos (50,000 dollars) (Méndez, 2018). Also, the distribution of movie theaters in Mexico is uneven. According to the 2019 IMCINE Statistical Yearbook, there are 7,943 movie screens in Mexico; yet, 40% of these screens are concentrated in Mexico City, Jalisco, and Nuevo León, homes of the three largest urban areas in Mexico. Additionally, the figure of inhabitants per screen highlights this disproportion; whereas Nuevo León has one screen per 8,997 inhabitants, the southern state of Chiapas registers only one screen per 50,879 inhabitants. In line with these statistics, the demographics of the Mexican film audiences show a prevalence of middle-class "young people, between 18 and 25 years old, single, professional or student" (Hinojosa Córdova, 2015; p. 18, author's translation). Some of the factors that make films popular among this group are special effects, marketing

strategies, well-known actors, actresses, directors, as well as violence and sex (Hinojosa Córdova, 2015). Regarding the films, Méndez (2018) explains that "romantic comedy is the most profitable genre; just two films each year earn more money than the rest of Mexican productions combined" (p. 161, author's translation).

Despite the success of Mexican comedies among the affluent young adult audience, cinema is no longer a democratizing spectacle. This phenomenon occurs because current popular films focus on some social classes and their needs, leaving outside the representation other social groups.

Additionally, it is worth noting that attending a movie theater in Mexico represents a privilege that is only accessible to less than 20% of the country's inhabitants. An average family needs more than one day's earnings to buy a single movie ticket (González Marín, 2018). Hence, as Hinojosa Córdova (2015) explains, "the audience that goes to movie theaters to watch Mexican films is becoming an 'elite.'" (p. 19, author's translation). With the rise of streaming platforms, this inequality has become more extreme. According to Arias (2021), during 2020, streaming services grew 124% to reach about 23 million people, just 18.8% of the country's households. The three states containing the major urban centers in the country (Mexico City, the State of Mexico, Jalisco, Nuevo León), and Baja California concentrate almost 50% of users who access these services mainly through cell phones. In mid-2021, the platform that dominated the market was Netflix (93%), followed by Disney+, Claro Video, YouTube Red, Amazon Prime Video, and Blim (Arias, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the widespread use of streaming platforms was beneficial for the Mexican industry and audiences alike, transforming them into one of the main sources of audiovisual content and entertainment.

No matter if we talk about cinemas or streaming platforms, the lack of opportunities for many spectators to consume Mexican cinema is a consequence of the disparities among Mexican social classes. Moreover, lower classes are also largely left out of the representations as the industry does not actively consider their preferences. Thus, contemporary Mexican cinema cannot fully represent Mexican audiences (Sánchez Prado, 2014). Scholars such as Sánchez Prado (2014) and McClennen (2019) warn that any conclusion regarding Mexican identity derived from those films is a futile attempt that does not embrace or recognize Mexicans' full complexity and diversity. Their conclusion has some truth; Mexican movies cannot depict in their totality all the dimensions that comprise the Mexican identity. However, the results obtained in this dissertation provide arguments to recognize that it is possible to acknowledge some of the traits that are fundamental for a part of the Mexican audience to describe their cultural identity.

An inclusive cinema representation of the whole Mexican population is a pending matter. Still, the lack of inclusiveness of Mexican audiences is reinforced by Mexican academic studies, which have largely left aside how people select, consume, critique, support, and appropriate the content from Mexican films. Mantecón's (2012) meta-analysis regarding the research on the Mexican audience illustrates how Mexican scholars have privileged textual and historical examinations. She identifies three overarching tendencies regarding the study of audiences in Mexico: 1) the interpretation and influence of Mexican cinema texts and industry; 2) demographics of Mexican audiences; 3) the evolution of Mexican movie theaters. For this dissertation, it is worthwhile to consider the first two.

On the one hand, the study of how audiences interpret those texts has focused on what the films convey. Mantecón (2012) explains how these studies have only identified the use of film by hegemonic elites for ideological, didactic, and secularizing purposes.

From this perspective, the analysis has been top-down, meaning that scholars have been more interested in the representations within the films than audiences' interpretation and appropriation of them.

On the other hand, regarding audience demographics, Mexican scholars imagine the spectator's characteristics by looking at the films on offer and how they include, or not, the Mexican context. Theoreticians have tried to deduce the audiences' tastes from these analyses, but they do not incorporate those spectators in their research.

This dissertation's principal contribution is including the audiences' voices and their engagement as central pieces for interpreting Mexican comedies and negotiating Mexican identity. Consequently, viewers were asked to reflect on the comedies and the emotions they trigger regarding the country and their fellow Mexicans. The few studies attempting to fill this gap have used a quantitative approach, leaving aside the audiences' personal accounts (Mantecón, 2012). Conversely, this dissertation implements qualitative tools, empowering the spectators to define their relationship with these films using their own words. Thus, this research project fills the academic gap by including the perceptions, thoughts, and feelings of Mexican comedies spectators to make sense of how these films address and represent their Mexican identity. Moreover, the dissertation provides arguments to perceive how the process of identification between a Mexican audience and Mexican comedies operates among the forces of transnationalization and globalization.

There is an urgent need to identify how these spectators engage with comedies because Mexican producers rarely reflect upon their representations and the audiences' preferences (Méndez, 2018). As Gónzalez Marín (2018) asks, "What dreams, fantasies, phobias, and acknowledgments have insufflated mood and imagination of the spectators? Who, how, and where are those individuals beyond the numeric mist?" (para. 33). This

study represents a critical first step to address these concerns by looking at the audience and their needs, practices, uses, interpretations, and appropriations of Mexican cinema to negotiate their Mexican identity. The study shines a light on the spectators who have lurked in the dark of Mexican academic literature on film and media for too long.

Research questions

This study addresses a series of inquiries derived from the literature we have just reviewed. We must keep in mind that identity is formed through a process requiring the audience's identification in facing media representations. Mexican identity is at the center of this discussion. Still, the concept currently mixes previous conceptualizations derived from the government's attempts to unify the nation and the current market forces aiming to reach broader national and international audiences. In this process, contemporary Mexican comedies occupy an important place as the most profitable genre at the Mexican box office and, consequently, the one most consumed by the country's inhabitants. These comedies have also mediated the extremes of nostalgic representations and the market endeavors of erasing any trace of cultural specificity so global spectators can consume the film. Between these two fluid processes, the middle-class students/professionals between 18 and 25 years old comprise a group of heavy consumers of Mexican comedies, but they have been overlooked in prior studies. Hence the importance of concentrating on these spectators and acknowledging how they consume and interpret comedies as well as appropriate them to negotiate their identity.

Knowing how these viewers perceive comedies and why they consume them is also central to understanding these films' success at the Mexican box office. We need to remember that people rely on symbolic interactionism to construct their definitions and worldviews. Furthermore, in a landscape where various processes obscure the concept of

Mexican identity, the audiences' voices serve to provide an explanation that goes from the middle-class and up as well as illuminates how Mexicans identify themselves and recognize others similar to them in the films. Thus, the spectators' voices are critical to providing answers to the research questions that will help us address this significant lacuna:

RQ1: How does this audience define their Mexican identity?

RQ1a: What are the traits that they consider fundamental in a person to be considered Mexican?

RQ1b: How have these contemporary traits evolved from previous representations of Mexican identity in Mexican films?

RQ1c: What strategies do these audiences utilize to discern between their identity and the cultural identities of other groups?

RQ2: Why does this audience consume Mexican comedy films?

RQ2a: What is the process that this audience uses to determine the authenticity of a Mexican movie?

RQ2b: What are the audience's strategies to select and mediate their consumption of Mexican comedy films?

RQ2c: What are the perceived advantages and disadvantages in having these films represent Mexican culture in general?

RQ3: How do Mexican comedy films contribute to the process of identity formation among this group of spectators?

RQ3a: What are the films' narrative devices these spectators rely on to link the comedies with their identity?

RQ3b: What are the emotions and thoughts these films elicit regarding Mexico and their fellow Mexicans?

RQ3c: How does this audience negotiate comedies' misrepresentations of the traits they consider fundamental for the Mexican identity?

RQ3d: What role(s) do the audiences see these comedies play according to their identity formation processes?

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This research elucidates how Mexican middle-class students/professionals between 18 and 25 years old interact with Mexican comedies and negotiate aspects of their identity by watching these films. For the sake of that goal, we need to understand these audience members' motivations and agency to engage with those movies (Walsh, 1996). It is vital to look at the process of watching a film because it reveals to the researcher more about the audience than the movie itself (Noble, 2006). That is why this study relies on a qualitative approach to allow the audience's voice to emerge through focus groups and follow-up interviews. At the same time, this study will also include the researcher's voice through active reflexivity. As a Mexican myself, incorporating my voice allows me to recognize and challenge my bias regarding the topics discussed and provide context and clarification to the experiences that participants refer to during their conversations.

The importance of a qualitative approach

We need to consider that through social interaction, people define the meanings of things surrounding them. According to the symbolic interactionism paradigm, these conceptualizations are subject to a context and are constantly evolving. Thus, all human making-meaning activities, including making sense of a film or negotiating identity, are influenced by contextual changes and a continually evolving culture. For this reason, quantitative research applying previously fixed concepts and "stereotypical images provided by theories" cannot adequately encompass the realities of the empirical world because it does not consider the role played by each individual (Blumer, 1969).

It is more appropriate to apply an inductive qualitative perspective that allows an understanding of how people conceive their context and practices, highlighting the elements, variables, and conditions relevant to their development (Jankowski & Wester, 1991). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) argue that qualitative research facilitates the researcher being part of the audiences' everyday processes and "make[s] sense of, or interpret[s], phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p.3). As Geertz (1973/2000) mentions, interpretative research "draw[s] large conclusions from small, but very densely textured facts; to support broad assertions about the role of culture in the construction of collective life" (p. 28). Looking directly at audiences' practices allows the researcher to understand the underlying relationship between spectators and texts. It also facilitates clarifying the connections between spectators and the technical and social/individual experiences of watching a film, as well as the links between spectators and the surrounding ideologies and their positionalities (Noble, 2005). The focus groups and interviews that inform this dissertation encouraged participants to reflect on how they appropriate Mexican cinema and negotiate their identity in the process. Likewise, it also facilitated their recognition of factors influencing this process, identifying the pros and cons of these comedies' representations, the reasons for their production, and their success in Mexico.

The researcher as a participant

Before describing the methodological procedures, I must stress the importance of reflexivity in incorporating the voices of the Mexican spectators engaging with this research topic. Besides being a researcher, professor, and academic, I am also a Mexican spectator like those interviewed in this dissertation who has consumed numerous Mexican films in cinemas, digital platforms, television, or home video since my childhood. My experiences have shaped a series of inner preconceptions and feelings regarding Mexican

cinema in general. Because of this background, active reflexivity allows me as a researcher to interweave my ethnographic observations and the theoretical principles (Wainwright, 1997). More importantly, it facilitates the connection between the participants and me. As Anderson (2006) explains,

> . . . reflexivity expresses researchers' awareness of their necessary connection to the research situation and hence their effects upon it. At a deeper level, reflexivity involves an awareness of reciprocal influence between ethnographers and their settings and informants. It entails self-conscious introspection guided by a desire to better understand both self and others through examining one's actions and perceptions in reference to and dialogue with those of others (p. 382).

As a result, reflexivity makes transparent the research process because the researcher can express their thoughts, feelings, and expectations and reframe, refine, break, or reinforce them by interacting with the participants and their perceptions. My voice and perception will emerge coupled with the analysis of participant responses in the three following chapters, framing the conversation and indicating my perception and bias regarding the issues discussed. I will present my reflections in italics accompanying the main results of this dissertation in each chapter.

I have been an avid consumer of Mexican cinema since I was a child. Without cable television and internet access, Mexican broadcast channels were initially the only option available to consume media content. So, I familiarized myself with popular Mexican comedies, Golden Age movies, and films starring famous Mexican singers during that time, most of them produced by Televicine, a Televisa company. Our weekly family tradition of renting movies supplemented my film consumption needs because many contemporary releases were available to me through video rental stores.

Growing up in Guadalajara, one of the primary exhibition outlets for Mexican cinema has been the film festival. I became a regular attendee at such festivals during high

school, so my knowledge of Mexican cinema expanded. In college, I conducted my first Mexican cinema study focused on the highest-grossing Mexican films and how they represented a Mexican identity. Since then, my Mexican cinema consumption has broadened, but I also became critical of commercial cinema produced in Mexico. This criticism increased when I became a professor in Mexico, encouraging my students to avoid writing narratives emulating those used by Mexican films. I inherited this tradition from my undergraduate and my master's degree studies. During both of these degree programs, we rarely analyzed Mexican cinema. My professors presented European and Hollywood films as the models that we should follow to have a better chance of working in the global film industry. As a consequence, for me, it was logical to emulate that methodology (and related thoughts) in my classes.

Like many Mexicans, my high exposure to American cinema and television led me to compare the media content produced in Mexico with the one from the United States. As an outcome of this comparison, I also contrasted m my identity as Mexican with the American one. As Mexicans, the high prevalence of media content from other countries has conditioned us to see the national cinema as inferior to productions that come from first-world nations. My friends, former students/professors, family, and I commonly complain about the bad quality, the lack of favorable properties, and the Mexican cinema's precarious condition. We apply this bias primarily to commercial cinema, the comedy productions that obtain the highest box office revenues. We harshly judge Mexican cinema by considering it inferior to Hollywood films, no matter that films from both countries share similar characteristics. Overall, we believe that these Mexican comedies are closer to Mexican television productions (*telenovelas*, low-quality TV serials) than to the movies produced by other countries, especially the United States. Thus, for the Mexican middle-

class, Mexican comedies are part of the low culture. This conceptualization of the low culture is aligned to what Horkheimer and Adorno (1944/2020) specified in their early work, a content incapable of producing any critical reflection, based on amusement, and imposed by capitalist attempts at dominance and high rates of consumption.

The current positionality from which I analyze Mexican cinema, as a Mexican living abroad and pursuing an advanced degree, has allowed me to re-evaluate popular films. My conversations with professors who study the value of popular culture and its audiences, the cinema produced in Latin America, and the Latin American culture from different perspectives, have challenged me to rethink these Mexican prejudices. Hence, my experience as a consumer allows me to understand, and sometimes resist, the Mexican audience's reactions, as I have experienced them too. As a researcher, the analysis of my bias and how it is reinforced or contrasted with participants' thoughts has been an ongoing process during the planning, conducting, and writing of this study. I will appreciate the reader's attention as I actively work through this process.

Methods

In addition to this reflexivity, I employ focus groups and interviews to gather data from my fellow Mexicans. Focus groups allow participants to interact as a collectivity to build, discuss, and refine the meaning of their daily practices and experiences. In other words, these groups facilitate the sharing and discussion of the participants' emotions, attitudes, and beliefs (Brennen, 2017). Hence, cultural meaning is produced through this social interaction, generating definitions according to that culture. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005) indicate that focus groups facilitate accessing a large amount of information quickly and may cause a profound understanding of the experience. Likewise, focus groups emulate daily social interaction conditions and broaden the scope of different

social meanings. Finally, focus groups "facilitate the democratization of the research process, providing participants with more ownership over it, promoting more dialogic interactions and the joint construction of more polyvocal texts" (p. 904). This study relies on focus groups to incorporate and vindicate the audiences' voices and their interpretations of the Mexican comedies' representations, as well as to understand how these spectators use images available in these films to negotiate their identity. This method allows the spectators to conceptualize the Mexican identity and their tastes to evaluate the Mexican comedies they consume. As interviewees will refer to in the next chapter, one crucial part of the Mexican identity is a sense of collectivity and fraternity among fellow Mexicans. Thus, discussing identity, representation, and identification through focus groups is an opportunity to foster bonding conversations and safe spaces in which Mexican participants can feel more comfortable discussing these topics. In addition, the fact that I am also part of the cultural in-group facilitates a more open conversation and assertive communication.

Follow-up interviews complemented the data I obtained from focus groups in several enriching ways. Interviewing is a process of gathering information by asking questions or opinions and using them to understand certain situations (Brennen, 2017). In an interview, people can provide meaning to their experiences. This method allows an individual to reflect on multiple points of view and origins, converging into detailed accounts of certain events. Consequently, during the transcription process, the researcher illuminates a kaleidoscopic reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Interviews provide this study a thick description of the particular methods in which a specific audience engages to consume Mexican films and negotiate their identity, illustrating the different nuances of these activities. As Geertz (1973/2000) mentions, this thick description illuminates no only a human process but also all the diverse contextual variables that converge therein and its

relevance for a specific group, making it more apparent to anyone who is not immersed in that culture. Thus, thanks to the interviews, I was able to delve deeper into the participants' utterances to understand their rationale and affective dimension behind their consumption and negotiation processes. In addition, interviews allowed me to select study participants to delve more deeply into topics and issues that were not possible to cover due to time constraints in the focus groups.

By employing these methodological tools, this project explains the different ways middle-class students/professionals between 18 and 25 years old (Hinojosa Córdova, 2015) interact with Mexican comedies. At the same time, this dissertation elucidates on some reasons for the success of these films, offering the Mexican film industry insights into the expectations these viewers have, the needs they fulfill by consuming these comedies, and how it is possible to address traits that will foster a more accurate representation of this audience's identities.

Qualitative research in times of COVID-19

Before explaining my procedures for selecting participants and collecting data, it is essential to consider the limitations of this research project introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the beginning of the pandemic in Mexico in March 2020[16], one of Mexico's governmental strategies to reduce the disease's spread was shutting down all activities conducted in public spaces, including attending movie theaters. However, the shutdown did not mean that Mexican audiences were incapable of consuming Mexican films; what changed were the media outlets used to access them and the viewing context,

[16] It is worthwhile to note that this was no longer the cinema context in Mexico as this dissertation was completed. In May 2021, both dominant movie theater chains in Mexico, Cinemex and Cinépolis, were open again at their 50% capacity after more than one year in which their operation was intermittent.

shifting from movie theaters to digital streaming platforms in viewers' homes. This, in fact, aligned with the participants' usual consumption practices, as they will mention later in the discussion. These platforms have become an alternative to the exhibition of Mexican films in the country, but we need to consider two factors. On the one hand, these platforms' monthly subscription fee is similar to a movie ticket's cost, facilitating broader audiences' access. On the other hand, this potential accessibility is not fully achieved because of uneven access to broadband internet services in Mexico, which placed lower social classes in a disadvantageous position. In consequence, the middle class's privilege remained relevant during the pandemic. Regarding this context, I asked them questions about the consumption of cinema in times of COVID-19 during the focus groups.

Nevertheless, movie theaters were not the only party affected; universities also shut down, and most of them moved to online learning modalities during the fall 2020 and spring 2021 semesters. This fact introduced numerous obstacles and negatively impacted participant recruitment for this dissertation. I will continue the discussion of these unprecedented developments' impacts in the next section.

Data sources

Participants

This research focuses on the avid consumers of Mexican comedies who Hinojosa Córdova (2015) identified in her study about Mexican cinema audiences. IMCINE provides the required data to identify them. In its 2019 Statistical Yearbook, IMCINE divides Mexico into six regions according to their percentage of consumption of Mexican films: Central (24.19%), Western Central (22.35%), Northeastern (15%), Southern (14.21%), Mexico City (13.5%), and Northwestern (10.27%). The states with the highest percentages of Mexican films' moviegoers within these zones are the State of Mexico (14%), Mexico

City (13.5%), Jalisco (7%), Nuevo León (5%), Veracruz (5%), and Baja California (5%) (see Table 1). In accordance with these figures, the study aimed to recruit university undergraduate students/professionals between 18 and 25 years old from the most populated cities in each of the states mentioned above: Guadalajara, Monterrey, Veracruz, Tijuana, and Mexico City[17].

The criteria to include a participant were the following: 1) being currently enrolled as a student of any university in the city, 2) having lived at least six months in that city, and 3) having watched at least five Mexican comedies in the last six months prior the recruitment. I offered an Amazon Mexico gift card of 300 pesos (approximately 15 dollars) as compensation to each participant. Guadalajara was selected as the first city to conduct the study and testing a recruitment model that would be replicable in other cities. It was the most convenient place to start because I was a university professor there, and I have several colleagues working in different institutions across the city. The goal was to contact 30 participants from diverse universities who would be willing to participate in a one-hour virtual focus group.

In a first attempt, I implemented two strategies to recruit informants. First, some colleagues introduced me to contacts from different departments in other local universities. Most of them helped me share the recruitment information by email with the students enrolled in their institutions. Second, I wrote to deans, department chairs, and academic coordinators of communication, humanities, and cinema schools and colleges to request their support in this research endeavor. The first strategy was moderately successful,

[17] It is crucial to clarify that the constant growth of Mexico City has impacted the mobility dynamics of the region, meaning it is common for people living either in Mexico City or the State of Mexico to study, work, and live in both places. For this reason, this region was considered as one.

gathering more than 60% of the participants; however, the universities elected the informants according to their own interpretation of the criteria for selecting participants, not by an open call. The second strategy was not productive at all. Of twelve universities contacted, only two replied two weeks after the first contact. They initially expressed interest and readiness to collaborate; however, they never answered any of my follow-up emails.

Because of these limited results, I deployed two more strategies to reach more participants: posting the information on local Facebook groups and snowball sampling (asking participants already enrolled in the research to invite peers). The two schemes provided a favorable outcome by reaching more than 30 participants in Guadalajara. This procedure allowed me to compile a waitlist which was helpful when some of the participants already registered in one of the groups did not show up for the session nor replied to any subsequent attempt to contact them.

Regardless of the recruitment procedure, each participant enrolled in the study always followed the same steps. First, they wrote me directly requesting more information or expressing interest in the study. Then, I answered them by summarizing the selection criteria and requirements for their participation, including signing the consent form and asking them their preference of day and time to participate in a focus group. Once I received their consent, I shared the Zoom invitation with them. Finally, I sent a group blind email with some particularities regarding the session, such as preferably using hardwire internet connection, having a headset with a mic, and maintaining their camera on during the entire session. The aim was to include ten participants per focus group to maximize the potential for saturation.

Although these four strategies proved successful and complementary in Guadalajara, each of the other regions presented different challenges, as briefly outlined in the following segment.

Civility in recruiting participants in times of COVID-19

After the experience of selecting informants in Guadalajara, I assumed that the same four strategies would bring identical results in the other four cities: Mexico City/State of Mexico, Monterrey, Veracruz, and Tijuana. However, it is critical to consider that my network of colleagues working in those places was much less extensive than in Guadalajara. For some cities, the universities that participated in Guadalajara were very helpful by contacting deans, department chairs, or faculty members at their sister campuses. However, I did not run with the same luck in Tijuana and Veracruz, where there are no filial universities of those involved in the study at Guadalajara, and my efforts to make contacts were less fruitful in many occasions.

In the case of Mexico City, participants were recruited through institutional contacts alone. An email requesting collaboration either supported by Guadalajara campuses or only with my credentials was sent to 25 universities in the region. Although many recipients never replied, those who did allow me to recruit more than the 30 students initially desired. My contact with universities in Mexico City was so productive that even one of the institutions invited me as a guest speaker.

My success in the recruitment process in the first two cities led me to replicate the same method in Veracruz. However, several impediments arose. First, I had only one contact in the region. Second, the websites of universities located in Veracruz lacked contact information regarding their faculty members; in many cases, I obtained just an email address or phone number for general contact information of the university. Finally,

Veracruz's local Facebook groups are private, and they did not allow me access. So, I created a directory with information from institutions that posted their faculty members' data on their web pages. As a result, I contacted seven universities, but I only received response from one.

In a second effort to gain support from these institutions, I communicated with the same faculty members I reached by email now by phone. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, few of these institutions were open. The people who I was able to contact via phone expressed little interest in this study. For instance, one them replied to me that "things don't work in that way" in their institution; they would "analyze the petition," and they will let me know "later." In this case, later meant never. In other institutions, faculty members were unavailable to take my call. Because of these unfortunate experiences, I was only able to conduct two focus groups in the state of Veracruz.

Similar incidences occurred in Tijuana and Monterrey. In both cases, the institutions reached initially expressed enthusiasm about the dissertation and promoted it among their students. However, the turnout was insufficient. In the case of Tijuana, only three students showed up, and ten students in Monterrey. Snowball sampling was a helpful tool to achieve the goal of mustering more informants. The tepid response from local Facebook groups in both cities was similar to the experience in Veracruz, so it was not a recruiting option.

Because these recruiting outcomes in the three cities were not favorable, I implemented a fifth strategy, contacting institutions from towns in the vicinity of the populations initially considered in the study. For instance, in Tijuana, I reached universities in Mexicali. In Veracruz, institutions in Xalapa and Boca del Río served this purpose. Finally, for Monterrey, Saltillo, located nearby in the state of Coahuila, was a source to find

other possible universities. Unfortunately, Mexicali was the only case in which this strategy was successful.

Data Collection

Focus groups

I conducted 14 virtual focus groups during March and April of 2021 in five different regions in which 109 informants were able to share their thoughts. Each participant selected one of four possible schedule options according to their preferences. In Tijuana and Veracruz, participants had more influence over the scheduling. Each session registered between five and 10 participants, and its length ranged from 50 minutes to one hour and 10 minutes.

Each of the groups began with a brief recapitulation of the project's objectives. The informed consent was stressed by indicating that they were not required to respond to all the questions or stay in the session the whole time. At the beginning of the discussion, participants had an opportunity to ask questions or raise concerns about their expectations for the session. In the meeting, informants discussed a series of questions (see Appendix A) related to their perceptions of the Mexican culture, their consumption of Mexican comedy films, Mexico's and Mexicans' traits portrayed in these movies, and the relationship between the representations available in those films and the informants' own identification. Once I asked all questions, participants filled out a control form for university administrative purposes to access their reward (300 pesos [15 dollars] Amazon Mexico Gift Card). I reminded them of a possible follow-up interview in later days. The discussion was conducted in Spanish through the videoconferencing software Zoom (which had come into general use a year earlier), so I used this platform to record audio, video, and written materials in the chat for subsequent data analysis. The Texas Tech University Institutional

Review Board provided the guidelines to protect the respondents' data (see Appendix B). During the examination of the statements, I removed data identifiers to offer anonymity and protect the privacy of informants.

Following each focus group, session transcriptions were made in Spanish to get an overview of the data indicating a possible saturation, meaning that these groups continued until expressions obtained from participants did not vary from the responses received during early focus groups (Hancock et al., 2016). It is interesting to notice that saturation was a recurrent phenomenon by the third focus group in Guadalajara. Later on, concordances between regions emerged in the first focus groups conducted in each of the other cities: Monterrey, Veracruz, Tijuana, and Mexico City. Regarding the transcriptions, I translated only direct quotations used for the final report into English.

During the transcriptions and review process, I selected some respondents to participate in a follow-up interview due to factors explained in the in-depth interviews section below.

Virtual focus groups were the only option because of the constraints imposed by the context at the time, such as the social distancing requirements to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the travel restrictions between Mexico and the United States, and the Mexican prohibitions against gatherings. As Stewart and Williams (2005) highlight, virtual focus groups encourage a more open discussion of topics.[18] This phenomenon occurs because participants generally feel that they are in a safe space and have more tools to interact

[18] Modifying our daily routines to prevent the spread of COVID-19 by promoting social distancing practices has been one of the many consequences that the pandemic brought with it. As Wiederhold (2020) reveals, the use of videoconferencing expanded drastically during 2020; for instance, Zoom users increased to 300 million this year. Thus, ten months after the first infections occurred in Mexico and the United States, we have adopted these digital platforms to conduct social relationships as usual. However, the implementation and use of these technologies are not exempt from this digital environment's specific problems, such as an unstable internet connection or a bad quality in data transmission, causing some remarks to be lost in the process.

through the chat box or emoticons available on the platform. This experience was perceptible during the groups conducted for this dissertation, as participants often relied on the chat to express their thoughts, showing support for other participants' interventions. The chatbox also allowed them to continue their participation when audio and/or video became unstable due to connection issues. As a moderator, I included these comments in the discussion, triggering some other perspectives regarding the themes discussed and calling the attention of other participants to their peers' comments. In some cases, I requested clarifications or further elaboration from the people who commented in the chat to refine or expand their concepts. As Griffith et al. (2020) point out, the COVID-19 pandemic made it necessary to find better ways "to maximize the potential benefits of this data collection medium" (para. 1). These authors add to the previously mentioned advantages of virtual groups creating more inclusive spaces, improving the attendance rate, and eliciting more honest responses because "participants may feel a greater sense of anonymity, and may therefore be more open to sharing personal experiences" (para. 9). For instance, some interviewees disclosed personal experiences or media content tastes that made them feel ashamed. Yet because they perceived the virtual environment as safe, they were able to share these perspectives without embarrassment. In addition, when informants disagreed, it was noticeable how they seldom hesitated to express their counterarguments.

In-depth interviews

Following the procedures explained in the informed consent, at the end of each focus group I briefed participants about a possible follow-up interview. The selection of interviewees based on their ideas and participation occurred once I completed the focus group's transcription. For instance, informants showing a high consumption of Mexican comedies, indicating strong negative feelings towards the movies, or providing contrasting

or less common points of view during the focus group were asked to participate in a virtual interview of 30 minutes. I did not offer any additional incentive for the follow-up interviews.

As Seidman (2006) mentions, an interview "provides access to the context of people's behavior and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behavior" (p.10). Indeed, participants' responses during the focus group provided hints about the different dimensions of the research problem, including topics that were not anticipated in the initial focus group design. During an interview, a participant develops and unravels different nuances of the issues discussed in the context of their everyday practices. People provide personal accounts in which the phenomena analyzed play an essential and distinctive role (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

In this case, participants were asked for an interview once their participation incentive had already been delivered. Most of them were willing to collaborate because they felt "special." A few of them, six participants, never replied to their invitation to participate in a follow-up interview. After two additional communication attempts, I contacted a new interviewee from the same city to request an interview.

The virtual interviews were conducted in Spanish through Zoom, allowing audio and video to be recorded. Although the majority of the questions asked were part of a script designed before conducting the focus groups (see Appendix C), in most cases, new questions emerged from the informants' responses, topics discussed, and utterances during the groups. I did not request any sensitive data during these interviews ranging from 25 to 40 minutes in length. During this research stage, 22 informants were interviewed (six in Guadalajara, six in Mexico City, four in Monterrey, four in Tijuana, and two in Veracruz).

After concluding each interview, I transcribed the discussion and conducted preliminary data analysis in Spanish. Only direct quotations were translated to English.

As with the focus groups, the Texas Tech Human Research Protection Program validated the procedures used to recruit participants and collect data through interviews.

Data Analysis

This study relies on an ethnographic research process allowing scholars to grasp "the shared and learned patterns of values, behaviors, beliefs, and language of a culture-sharing group" (Creswell, 2007; p. 68). To achieve this goal, we, as researchers, must involve ourselves directly in the participants' practices to understand how they make sense of those activities and the behavior patterns they share as a community (Creswell, 2007). Thus, ethnography aims to provide a "thick description" of the phenomenon and its possible diverse implications (Geertz, 1973/2000; Coman & Rothenbuhler, 2005). For that reason, this study relies on qualitative conventional content analysis, which requires grouping the data into different categories and themes as well as describing their properties, avoiding previous theoretical conceptualizations that have not considered the current contextual conditions (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

In order to consolidate those data groups, Attride-Sterling (2001) proposes the use of thematic networks, which can "bring to light the meaning, richness, and magnitude of the subjective experience of social life" (p. 403). The thematic network analysis consists of identifying three kinds of topics: basic (simple premises), organizing (the group of significations), and global (general proposition). In addition, it requires developing a code, identifying the different topics, describing their relationships within the network, explaining how the network operates as a whole, and exposing the patterns discovered (Attride-Sterling, 2001).

Hence, as the research questions presented at the end of the literature review state, three global topics are at the center of this study: Mexican identity, Mexican comedy films, and spectators' identification. These questions derive from Hall's (1996) principles which stress how identity is formed/negotiated through identification and media representations.

Participants' responses were classified under a series of organizing and basic categories using these three global topics mentioned above as a guide. A computer-assisted qualitative analysis software, NVivo, was used to perform this categorization. This software "facilitate[s] data storage, coding, retrieval, comparing, and linking" information according to the researcher's analysis (Patton, 2002).

The resulting thematic networks will be described and analyzed in detail in subsequent chapters of the dissertation. The following is an overview of these categories.

In the first global section, dedicated to Mexican identity, informants' remarks were organized into three organizing themes: 1) traits distinctly considered Mexican, 2) differences between these traits and the ones available in other cultures, and 3) the perceived evolution of these traits from past generations. Regarding the characteristics identified as uniquely Mexican, respondents recognized positive, negative, and ambivalent aspects. A similar pattern was identified when informants delved into the differences between the Mexican traits and the ones present in other cultures. Finally, when participants referred to the generational changes of these Mexican features, they distance themselves from traits represented in Mexican cinema from the past and traits older generations rely on to describe their Mexican identity.

The second global section, focused on Mexican cinema comedies, suggested three organizing topics: 1) common characteristics of these films, 2) audiences' strategies for consuming these movies, and 3) depictions of Mexico and Mexicans available in these

narratives. In the first organizing theme of this global category, participants recognized a series of characteristics that these films have in common, despite their evident differences, and what makes these movies distinctive from the so-called Mexican art cinema. In the second organizing theme, participants elaborated on their tactics to select a comedy, the number of Mexican films they watch, and the outlets used to access them. Finally, participants reflected on the images these films make available to foreign audiences about Mexico and Mexicans in the third theme.

Lastly, the third global section, about participants' identification with contemporary Mexican comedies, centered on the connection respondents traced between the depictions of Mexico and Mexicans prevalent in these films and their definition of Mexican identity. It suggested four organizing themes: 1) the narrative devices that encourage participants' identification with elements of the film texts, 2) feelings and thoughts about the respondents' identity triggered by these films, 3) ways to foster an accurate representation of Mexican culture through Mexican comedies, and 4) the role these comedies play in the process of identity formation of this young audience. In the first organizing category, informants pointed out elements such as plots, characters, and themes, among other factors, that they considered akin to the defining characteristics of the Mexican identity. The second organizing category delved into the informants' sentiments and opinions about the depiction of Mexico and Mexicans stirred by these films. In the third organizing category, participants articulated the improvements and changes they would implement to make contemporary Mexican comedies more precise vehicles for depicting Mexican identity. Finally, the fourth category gathered informants' remarks about the personal connection with these comedies and their function in the respondents' identity formation.

Before moving into the discussion of the results obtained through the focus groups and interviews, it is critical to stress how the trustworthiness of this dissertation is accentuated.

Trustworthiness of the study

Generating trustworthiness in a qualitative study depends on several principles. It is necessary to document all the research procedures, demonstrate the data's usefulness, acknowledge how the researcher influenced the process, and address the study's limitations (Patton, 2002). Qualitative research is valid as long as it provides an account that captures the multiple positionalities that converge in the field and considers the different factors influencing the practices and understandings of that culture (Boellstorff et al., 2012). Although the researcher must observe and interact closely with the people contributing to the study, the virtual nature of this research presented a challenge to accomplish this goal. My experience as a professor using online platforms for delivering a class provided me with the necessary skills to engage participants and mitigate mediation effects. Participants felt comfortable during the conversation, as indicated by their colloquial language. During the interviews, this close engagement was more noticeable when participants disclosed personal experiences and feelings regarding their family, friends, or cinema tastes.

This dissertation's literature review provides a recount of the most salient historical, industrial, intellectual, and social factors that lead to the current context, placing the reader in the spot where a Mexican spectator consumes Mexican films. That context is the background of the audience's narratives and practices. Furthermore, this analysis also includes the researcher as part of the narrative of the cultural group studied. Consequently, trustworthiness is achieved by fully disclosing the events, biases, approaches, and reflections that I, the researcher, experienced in the process. The goal is making the reader

part of this examination in a way that they can consider it verisimilar, "evok[ing] in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; p. 751). In this regard, two concepts are fundamental to heighten trustworthiness in this study: triangulation and saturation.

Relying on just one method to collect data could lead to oversights. Triangulation is a way to avoid this issue. It involves the application of diverse methods, contrasting the data obtained through each one of them. From this comparison, patterns emerge, and the misinterpretation of inferences reduces.

The use of other methods may not lead to a single, totally consistent picture. As Patton (2002) notes, the point is to study and "understand when and why these differences appear" (p. 560). This study's triangulation was assured by implementing two research methods. First, focus groups provided a collective space to discuss the definitions and traits of the Mexican identity, their conceptualization of Mexican comedies, and participants' consumption and identity negotiation practices. Then, interviews deepened into the individual engagement in each of these topics, contrasting, reinforcing, refining, or challenging some of the principles discussed in the focus group. Finally, reflexiveness complemented the previous methods. During the focus groups and interviews, I contrasted my thoughts, practices, and feelings regarding those issues to reconsider my earlier prejudices regarding the Mexican identity, Mexican comedies, and their consumption, as well as the negotiation of my own identity through watching these films.

It is worth pointing out that more than a personal account of events, my role as a participant in the qualitative study relies on a bricoleur quality. This quality means that the researcher incorporates a polyphonic discourse from participants and other multiple fields to make sense of the complexities of the phenomenon under study (Denzin & Lincoln,

2005). Hence, triangulation is achieved by "the simultaneous display of multiple, refracted realities" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; p. 6). A fact that was covered by presenting the historical and theoretical perspectives addressed in the literature reviews and complemented by the analysis of data collected through different methodological tools in the following chapters.

Saturation is also relevant for this dissertation to achieve a trustworthy analysis. It is achieved through constant and daily data analysis, perceiving the iterations of each one of the themes and subthemes among the different groups interviewed (Hancock et al., 2016). The emergence of new nuances and topics indicates to the researcher that it is still necessary to continue conducting interviews. As this research is explorative regarding a particular group of spectators' practices in consuming Mexican comedies and negotiating their identity in that process, there are no previous categories that could serve as a guideline to identify what saturation looks like. In this study, the punctual transcription and preliminary analysis of the data from the focus groups to identify participants for the follow-up interviews served to monitor the iterating themes and concepts. As addressed earlier, saturation was evident in all the regions, no matter their cultural and contextual specificities.

Considering these methodological tools is necessary to understand how the data analyzed in the following chapters were obtained and studied. Thanks to this qualitative approach, it is possible to deepen into the insights of a group of spectators and bring to light their processes of identity negotiation, their motivations and strategies to consume a particular genre, and their identification with a series of narratives. Then, let's hear the audience, as it has much to tell us.

CHAPTER IV

(RE)DEFINING A MEXICAN IDENTITY

Describing and building a Mexican identity in the current era is not an easy task because of its many complexities and nuances. It's even more challenging in a society where both domestic and external media have played fundamental roles in suggesting the guidelines of what is considered Mexican. Since the Mexican government stopped imbuing cultural production with an ideological discourse of unification and the Mexican media producers privileged transnationalization, at least in appearance, previous symbols of the Mexican culture are not as stable in today's media representations.

Nowadays, as Vizcaíno Guerra (2004) mentions, far from talking about a fixed Mexican identity limited to representations of the past, Mexican identity is a work in progress that merges past referents with global symbols. A participant from Guadalajara articulates this idea in this way:

> I don't think that Mexican culture is not as Mexican as before. It seems to me that it has been influenced by other cultures, making it more Mexican than ever. I feel that it is normal for a culture to evolve, and I am sure it [the Mexican culture] will continue maintaining its roots and foundations; however, . . . It is transforming into a different culture.

Thus, answering the first research question of this dissertation revolving around how middle-class students/professionals between 18- and 25-years old define their Mexican identity requires analyzing three dimensions. First, it is vital to recognize the specific traits these participants consider Mexican. Next, it is essential to determine whether this audience perceives these traits have changed (or not) from previous Mexican media representations and social conceptualizations. Finally, as Hall (1991/2019) mentioned, the Other becomes relevant because humans naturally compare their culture with others. In this section,

participants compare what they deem as fundamental traits of the Mexican identity to traits they consider definitional of other cultures, deploying several strategies to differentiate themselves from the Other. From this chapter and on, my reflections are incorporated to the text in blocks in italics.

Let's be together (but apart): the traits of Mexican identity

The positive characteristics of a Mexican identity

I recall that in the mid-'90s, a Mexican television advert for a bread brand said, "This is my country, and these are my people. Good people who work, dream, achieve their goals, and look ahead." That commercial brought together the heterogeneous amalgam of races and places that comprise Mexico. From the indigenous peasant to the young white student/professional, all the Mexicans were there. In that decade, soap operas, songs, game shows, newscasts, and many other cultural products repeated the pride of being Mexican. It was the time when "Gimme tha Power" from Molotov (a Mexican rock band) emphasized, "let the Mexican power feel, all together, all together like siblings." Mexican passion peaked when the Mexican soccer team played in every World Cup or when hundreds of people gathered to rescue their fellow Mexicans from under the rubble caused by earthquakes, hurricanes, or explosions. The Mexican media outlets just echoed what history, geography, and civics elementary school courses taught us: being Mexican is a source of pride. We put it another way: being Mexican is to be a chingón.[19]

Despite the insistence of many Mexican intellectuals on defining a Mexican identity from a negative standpoint or using negative characteristics to describe it (Bartra, 2014), Mexican respondents in this research express their identity using favorable terms or

[19] A brief reminder to the reader that these italicized sections are my own reflections on the topic at hand. In Mexico, the term *chingón* is used colloquially to emphasize that a thing or person is extremely good.

connotations to frame it as positive. Thus, the starting point to answer research question 1a, regarding the traits that this audience considers fundamental in a person to be considered Mexican, comes from a positive standpoint. Participants use words such as "brave," "clever," and "cheerful" to describe a Mexican attitude towards the problems they face in their everyday interactions.

Unconsciously, these terms express a constant current trend. Although participants identify how Mexicans implement a unique attitude and resources to surpass adversity, they also suggest that a Mexican performs in this way because of an unstable and challenging context. For example, when one respondent in Mexico City uses the word "brave," she refers to the journey migrants face crossing the Mexico-U.S. border. In Guadalajara, an informant describes the Mexican cunning as a clever way to "fix anything, because things here [in Mexico] are not always the way they need to be." Interviewees explained the term "cheerful" or Mexican happiness as a strategy to deal with unfavorable situations. These three words, brave, clever, and cheerful, are unified by resilience.

Resilience

Resilience is so ingrained in Mexican culture that when participants define Mexicans as party people, they describe the process of constantly engaging in celebrations as a tactic to cope with their problems. For instance, one particular festivity, The Day of the Dead, makes respondents reflect on how Mexicans celebrate death because they perceive it very close to them in their everyday life. A participant in Mexico City explains this connection, "we throw parties for everything, even for the Day of the Dead. I mean, what other culture celebrates death? So, in all misfortunes, you see us Mexicans singing, always celebrating." Then, for the informants, happiness becomes a tool to "no longer feel pain" and "face life as it comes." One participant in Veracruz uses the line "sing and don't cry,"

from the Mexican folk song "Cielito Lindo" to describe how Mexicans must "find the bright side to the things, even if it is uncomfortable or unnecessary, we always need to laugh or have fun in order not to cry." In the end, happiness is a way to make resilience visible to oneself as well as others.

Celebrations, traditions, and many other mechanisms used to deploy resilience illustrate the strong sense of community in Mexico. Due to the participants' generalized perception of a not very favorable Mexican environment, solidarity and unity are constantly implemented to reinforce the social cohesion. In Mexico City, one interviewee explains: "when bad things happen, we always come out ahead. I remember the last earthquake in Mexico City and how all the people were helping lifting stones and things like that. The culture of helping each other is really awesome." This sense of unity and solidarity causes informants to conceive Mexican culture as "warm," "fraternal," "loving," "affectionate," and "friendly." As a participant from Tijuana points out:

> If a friend of mine starts a business, we all share the news. We all buy from him. We all do everything for him to grow and prosper and be successful. In the same way, if someone hurts a female classmate, harasses her, or something like that, we are all there.

No matter how much of a stranger a person is, a Mexican will constantly be there to help. This fact is addressed by a participant in Veracruz: "I have not seen that someone lost has never received help from a stranger; from lending their phone to give directions, we [Mexicans] have always been kind and willing to help people from our environment."

Progressive ideology

Respondents recognize that all the aforementioned positive pieces of Mexican identity are grounded in two factors: a progressive ideology and the family. They perceive that contemporary Mexican identity embraces a more progressive Mexican ideology than in

the past. In that sense, globalization has influenced their social constructs positively, making them more flexible. In this regard, a respondent from Monterrey says: “right now, since we already have more information, access to social media, and all that, I feel that we are more open to change and diversity.” However, informants point out that this perception should be taken with caution because it is related to an urban and privileged environment. A participant from Guadalajara stresses that “[people from cities] are so used to a progressive mentality; we live like in a bubble [in comparison to rural towns and communities across Mexico].” Furthermore, interviewees attribute this progressive ideology is something young people in any context and time endorse as their parents and grandparents did. Interviewees attribute this progressive Mexican ideology to a young people's state of mind. They think that their parents and grandparents also contributed to change Mexican toxic ideologies when they were young, but they stopped fighting for any transformation once they grew.

No matter the origin of this progressive ideology, one thing stood out during these discussions, the participants' maturity. How informants elucidate and rationalize topics related to class, race, and gender, as well as their criticism of other ideologies prevalent in the current cultural landscape, such as cancel culture, suggest a maturity in their thinking that frames their Mexican identity as progressive.

Family

The second factor that respondents recognize as the key source of the positive traits of their Mexican identity is the family. For them, the fact that Mexicans rely so strongly on their family ties becomes the reason that sustains and perpetuates traditions, attitudes, and beliefs. The Mexican admiration and respect towards their family is intrinsically connected with their identity, at least for the interviewees. A participant from Monterrey notes: “[the

family] is our first support. It is a fundamental part of the stability we have as a person . . . here in Mexico, family is everything, and the family always comes first." According to this perception shared by respondents, they cannot conceive of themselves without a family.

In this regard, it is necessary to highlight that, in the Mexican imaginary, during the 20th century the concept of family was an unalterable nuclear model composed of mother, father, and children with a role determined by a binary gender (Guadarrama, 2007). Although some of the participants suggest this family prototype when they elaborate on theirs, most of them have a broader conceptualization. As Gómez (2015) emphasizes, after 2000, media representations of the Mexican family have included single-parent families, families without children, extended families (including other relatives), or families comprised of people who live in the same place without blood ties. In accordance with these media representations of different families, most respondents distinguish their family as a construct that is not determined by blood ties. In this regard, a participant from Tijuana states:

> "[the family] is that person you can count on . . . If the family concept sometimes depends on blood ties, the truth is that it is not always represented or lived in that way. I feel that family is the one you grow with and helps you grow."

Nevertheless, despite recognizing a broader concept of family than prior generations held, all respondents agreed that its importance is vital, implying a foundational role as a symbol of protection, affection, and support. A participant from Veracruz exposes this juxtaposition: "I consider that families continue to have the same value as before; however, the concept has been re-signified. The family can already include friends. It can include other types of family constructions." Here, the progressive Mexican ideology introduces a new nuance when participants challenge the traditional conceptualization of this institution

by recognizing that, many times, it is better to renounce the "blood" family to build one's own. Following this rationale, a participant from Monterrey expresses:

> It is recognized that [the family] is the nucleus of society. Still, now with all the mental health issues and everything, it is also acknowledged that, okay, not always your family will give you the peace you need; [sometimes] it will not be a healthy relationship. Thus, they [the family members] no longer influence our decisions.

There is no Mexican media content that I can recall in which the family does not have a central part in the story. Our society teaches us that family means everything, but not all collections of people could be a family. Indeed, by dissecting how Mexicans talk about family, it is possible to trace the conservative ideology still dominating the definition of this term. For instance, as a Mexican, you are always subject to social scrutiny of people asking you two questions: when you will get married and when you will have a family. Family, then, is still a concept reserved for nuclear compositions. Like participants, I also have mixed feelings towards this concept. Indeed, it has been a source of knowledge and affection, but, at the same time, it has also been an institution that attacks mental health in different ways. Family in Mexico can be a double-edged sword.

In one of the Monterrey interviews, a participant feels uncomfortable answering how important family is to him: "I don't know if I am the right person to answer this." Then, he articulates some of the subtle and underlying criticisms that participants expressed when talking about this concept in the focus groups:

> I don't think I owe something to someone just because they are my family, but you don't realize this until you grow . . . [The Mexican media] says family fixes everything; there is something of truth in that, but there is also something wrong with it.

Explaining his mixed feelings towards this concept, he ties his disenchantment with the idea of family to his disillusionment with religion: "I don't know where all these narratives about the family come from, maybe from religion. I mean, I was very Catholic,

almost a fanatic, and I don't recall if the Bible says something like that about the family." Both terms, religion and family, are closely linked in Mexico. A participant in Tijuana explains that "religion is the basis of the family. If religion provides good foundations there [in the family], they are reflected."

When participants talk about the family, they rarely mention the role religion has played in it; however, when the discussion focuses on religion, all references are always associated with the religious values and beliefs learned and transmitted from generation to generation within the family. In this way, it is possible to glimpse the complex network of interactions that provoke mixed feelings in the respondents about their concept of family. Within families, there is often a clash between a progressive ideology professed by young people and a conservative ideology that emerges from religious foundations. A participant from Tijuana put it in this way: "the beliefs we have today come from our ancestors, without them we would not have a religious standpoint; we would have had another path . . . they [beliefs] have changed over time, because, obviously, we have our way of thinking." The participants agreed that conservative ideology persists as a consequence of the Catholic religion. It has imposed, according to an interviewee in Monterrey, "the social norms that are present in a Mexican such as not to say or do things, or not enjoying x or y thing in your life."

Therefore, respondents point out that divorce, consensual union without marriage, sexual diversity, and abortion are still taboo in many regions and Mexican families. However, they also recognize that many of the Mexican traditions and celebrations, as well as values such as solidarity, fraternity, and unity, could not be conceived without that religious influence. A participant from Guadalajara summarizes this duality rooted in religion in the Mexican culture:

> Mexican people are conscious that we are still very religious. There is this conceptualization of religion that I do not think is entirely negative. It is related to traditions such as The Day of the Dead, celebrations, and folklore. I think we are related to partying in many ways, but, yes, there is still a bit of conservatism, or something like that, a sort of perception that we as Mexican society, in general, are not so open to new matters, that we don't have an open mind.

The ambivalent role of religion

In December 2019, during a Christmas Eve mass I attended, the priest said in his sermon, "Women, pay attention to your husbands! Obey their commands!" When I reflected upon how we as men in Mexico are educated, I can only remember lessons that are not role models. If religion, which is the basis of Mexican family values, reinforces a macho standpoint, what can we expect from Mexican media content? Men could not watch soap operas in my home; men had to like sports or action movies. We are taught as men to see women as inferior beings, subordinated to masculine desires. When I had my first girlfriend in middle school, my father gave me a book, To women, not all the love, not all the money, *which claims to teach how to make a woman fall in love. Hence, today, it is not a surprise when newscasts mention a statistical increment in the number of women sexually assaulted, murdered, and disappeared in Mexico increasing year by year. The macho culture is everywhere in Mexico.*

Some participants perceived no "real change" in many of the foundational characteristics of Mexico. A respondent in Guadalajara says that "maybe in how we behave, yes, but not in the foundations that include things such as machismo, misogyny, and homophobia." Many participants recognize that although the mentality of the contemporary Mexican is progressive, there are still strong influences of machismo framing Mexican beliefs and attitudes, a point of view inherited from the family and religion. This fact is perceptible when respondents talk about their feminine and masculine positionality.

For instance, a participant in Monterrey suggests that "liv[ing] with a man without marrying him gives you a bad reputation [as a woman]." Along similar lines, an interviewee in Veracruz complains that people mock men when they speak "more lovingly. . . [people say that] you're looking ridiculous, like a soap opera." In the same way, a participant in Tijuana expresses that he likes romantic comedies but that he watches them alone "because I don't want to cry in front of someone else." Through their behavior, the participants conform with and thereby reinforce these gender roles that have been constructed from a male perspective in Mexico, even when they agree that they no longer share that perspective.

The *albur*

Another Mexican trait identified by informants, the *albur*[20], manifests the more subtle forms of machismo prevalent in Mexico. A participant in Veracruz expresses his concern about the use of *albur*, "we have a humor, I don't know whether to call it misogynist, but it has macho elements, aha, sexists, at least this double meaning." Nevertheless, other participants do not reflect on the harmful implications of the *albur*. Indeed, they normalize its use by identifying it as an "original" and "funny" resource. Even though interviewees indicate how implementing the *albur* can be perceived as rude, they justify its use as a way to fraternalize among people they consider close to them. As a participant from Mexico City mentions: "we are like that because we love each other." However, this form of fraternalization implies a dominant connotation in which the victim

[20] The words *albur* and *alburero* will not be translated from Spanish as they don't have a direct translation. The *albur* is a form of Mexican humor that involves the double meaning of words but always appeals to sexual references. Terms such as pun or double entendre are sometimes used in English to refer to the *albur*; however, they do not always have a sexual innuendo. In Mexico, the *albures* always have sexual connotations and are commonly used by males. The word *alburero* refers to the person who uses the *albur*.

of an *albur* is humiliated by someone more experienced and more masculine. One of the participants in Monterrey unwraps this concept by describing his work environment:

> I work with older men that are twice my age, and they are like that [*albureros*]; I mean, the *albur* is like that . . . we [as Mexicans] have this mentality that if you don't meet the challenge of the *albur*, they . . . how can I say it . . . they beat you, they fu- [he did not complete the phrase] . . . well, you are screwed.

The *albur* seems to become a form of masculine camaraderie that unconsciously perpetuates and justifies a macho philosophy because it is used as a resilience tool. Participants downplay the toxic ideology perpetuated by the *albur* because they are more aware of an aggressive context that they need to fight at all costs, and using it is a way to endure. Thus, the *albur* becomes a resource employed to survive and protect themselves from the Other. Simultaneously, the use of the *albur* ties bonds with other members of the in-group. So, respondents privilege these two factors over any others that could foster a more progressive Mexican identity. This fact downplays the consequences of employing this albur to construct men-women relationships and how it becomes the source of verbal abuse and gender-based violence against women. In this regard, participants overlook the negative consequences of allowing the albur to become a norm for the Mexica humor and thereby a tool for discrimination.

Together but apart: The other Mexican identities

Before having access to cable television, I watched broadcast television, where movies and comedy shows relied consistently on the albur. *Double meanings characterized the Mexican humor of those audiovisual products, and the audiences transferred this to their everyday interactions. On most occasions, far from being fraternal, the Mexican comedy is offensive and rude towards the Other. What we called in Mexico* carilla *(playing practical jokes on someone) can be easily conceived as bullying in any different culture. In*

that desire to make fun of someone else, the Mexican has built stereotypes of other identities that are also part of Mexico. Characters such as the indigenous peasant, the gay, or the naco *(a person from the Mexican lower class) were recurrent as the object of ridicule of these audiovisual contents. While it is true that all of them are part of Mexico, these stereotypes make you realize that, in the popular imaginary, not all Mexicans occupy the same place of relevance*.

"I think that one of the biggest problems of Mexico was trying to present all Mexicans as the same," using these words, a participant from Guadalajara indicates that today's Mexican identity is incomplete without considering the many internal divisions in Mexico. She continues in this way: "This fact downplayed indigenous populations by saying, 'whatever, it does not matter, we all have indigenous blood.'" Before speaking of a Mexican identity, the interviewees are aware that it is necessary to look at local identities, such as indigenous groups and the ones expressed by each state. A participant from Veracruz underscores this fact: "first, I am Veracruzian, and I always try to see that, but then, I'm Mexican, so I think in some other things." From this perspective, participants rely on a cultural miscegenation paradigm to construct their identity. They conceive that defining a Mexican identity as something pure without some other positionalities that are also a fundamental part of their culture is impossible. Thus, for them, instead of just one identity, it is more accurate to say that the Mexican one is a mixture. For this reason, it is common for them to say that the Mexican identity is "diverse" and "multicultural." However, accepting this fact does not mean that all the identities available in Mexico coexist in harmony. A participant from Guadalajara expresses that reality:

> The different mini cultures from each state and region divide us and unite us because certain things remain the same. Certain beautiful fights can arise in discussions, such as if the *quesadillas* should have cheese or not . . . but there are

> political and social topics in which the country is divided because it is also divided socially and economically. There are polar realities in Mexico influencing the way we think, and that fact separates us.

As the previous remark indicates, there is a profound division in Mexico expressed by different points of view and based upon disparities that come from race and social class differences. These sources of inequalities subtly emerge in the conversations of focus group participants. Their remarks take the shape of the principles underlying classist and racist ideologies operating in Mexico. Regarding classism, respondents recognize an economic gap in Mexico fostering different ways to construct identity. For instance, according to one participant in Guadalajara, people from the higher classes do not share the same traditions as the lower ones; when the former embraces more global celebrations, the latter appeals to more conservative traditional practices.

Moreover, respondents perceive how those differences become more profound when the realities of people occupying the two extremes cannot even be imagined by the other. The participants closely link the lower class to indigenous communities or people in rural towns. A participant from Mexico City reports that "the indigenous word always has negative connotations." That widespread logic suggests that, in the social imaginary of Mexicans, indigenous people are considered unsuitable for the image of modernity the country wants to present. These kinds of thoughts are inherited from the government's attempts during most of the 20th century to unify the country, which stated that indigenous populations should mix with the colonizing populations to integrate. This phenomenon also brings light to the origins of racism because most of the indigenous populations have darker skin than the *mestizo*. Thus, miscegenation was a way to whiten this population and integrate them into the desired Mexican identity. Respondents are aware of these

differences, and one step closer to counter them is to recognize that indigenous populations are also part of the Mexican identity they are defining.

In the social imaginary of these respondents, the lower class is also comprised of people from specific neighborhoods in large cities. Bad taste is related to this social group called "nacos" by focus group members. A participant from Mexico City elaborates on both social classes and classism in this way:

> They [high and lower classes] are stigmatized. For instance, if you go to Acapulco and don't go to the Diamond Zone, you are poor or *naco*. Now, indigenous people are always conceived as homeworkers or sweepers or jobs like that. For example, in one course in my university, we talked about Yalitza, and a girl said that Yalitza acted there [in the film *Roma* (2018)] because she was a servant in real life, but she was a teacher. I do not know why people think that the fact of being indigenous or brown people made you inferior.

Through these words, this participant makes visible the actual connection between class and race. Asking what it means to be privileged in Mexico, informants usually respond by focusing on skin color, attributing whites a higher place in the social hierarchy and more significant economic, educational, and job opportunities. A participant from Monterrey explains how, in his job, white people have more options: "they are preferred over others. If their face is white and they are pretty, they will bring more clients, or they will be more liked by the clients." A participant in Veracruz points out that the upper class is always white: "to be privileged in Mexico is (laughs)... well, to be white... a *whitexican*." According to the informants, the so-called *whitexicans*, people of the upper class with high economic and cultural capital, are also called *mirreyes* for their way of speaking, their eccentric luxuries, and, above all, because they are always white. Although the participants acknowledge racism exists and is practiced in Mexico, they point out it is not discussed openly, like this participant from Veracruz mentions: "It [racism] exists but in our social agenda we prioritize other topics." Despite their awareness, the participants do not reflect

on how they perpetuate this racism. Many pointed out that being "brown" was one characteristic when asked what traits they considered Mexican. Interestingly, when they argue this, they always clarify that "they don't want to sound racist" or that they "aren't being racist," as if being "brown" should be something to be ashamed. Interestingly, they recognize this fact, but they also participate in the practices that perpetuate racism in Mexico.

All of these characteristics set the ground from where participants reflect on the representations of Mexican comedies, a topic explored in the following chapter, and they allow them to generate identification or not with those portrayals.

A barely alive past: The evolution of Mexican traits

The previous section delved extensively into the traits participants in this study think as uniquely Mexican and answered research question 1a about the traits considered by this audience as fundamental in a person to be considered Mexican. It is necessary to identify and explain how respondents use them to negotiate their identity with the representations available in Mexican comedies, a goal part of chapter VI, about identification. However, before reaching that point, it is critical to consider how this perception of Mexican traits implies a comparison with the other, in this case, embodied by previous generations of fellow Mexicans and different cultures. Therefore, this section explores how these characteristics of the Mexican identity have evolved compared to previous constructions that both the Mexican media and previous generations used. Consequently, this section answers research question 1b: how these contemporary traits have evolved from earlier representations of Mexican identity in Mexican films.

When I think about the Mexico of my grandparents, I imagine it as those early films from the Golden Age of Mexican cinema where homesteads and celebrations were familiar

places for courtship between the imperturbable and courageous macho and the self-sacrificing and submissive woman. From their experiences, I deduce that the plots of the first films of Pedro Infante, Jorge Negrete, Dolores del Río, or María Félix hold some broader truths to be discovered. The Mexico of my parents is a different story. I imagine it as in Los caifanes (1967)*, where the city became a character triggering new dangers for young people; perhaps they were idealists like the youngsters in* Rojo amanecer *(1990), or they lived in a bubble just as the young people in* Guadalajara en verano *(1965). In any case, that Mexico is just a vestige that lives in nostalgia.*

Even though Monsiváis (1996) indicates nostalgia is a fundamental tool for Mexicans to make sense of their identity, participants in this dissertation are far from that assertion. While they recognize some constant traditional historical elements, it is through the opposition between past and present that they shape their identity.

A progressive identity

As explained in the previous section, machismo or patriarchal culture is inherited from past generations; a participant from Guadalajara describes this fact: "it is still real that women are almost always serving men at Christmas or parties like that." She pauses her response while making a gesture of disapproval: "I consider myself quite a feminist person, but I am also willing to help, so I not only serve men, I serve people in general." Instead of replicating beliefs respondents consider harmful, they recognize how their parents still perpetuate these ideas, preferring to distance themselves. However, when talking about traditions, informants admit that they play a role in perpetuating these customs. A participant in Veracruz points out how his family preserves the folklore of his ancestors: "the traditions have passed from generation to generation, and currently, I have seen how my cousins, who already have children, pass them on to my nephews."

Focus group participants perceive that this friction within families – in which they identify harmful ideologies, and generational traditions are embraced – is a change in the Mexican identity. For instance, they perceive their generation as free to decide whether the family is essential or not, unlike their parents, who participants perceive tied to the traditional concept of family. An interviewee from Veracruz elucidates:

> Before, it was considered bad not having a family, that reaching certain age you were still single or without establishing yourself properly. Now, it is much easier, much simpler, more relaxed to choose what you want to be and whatever you want to do with your life.

Once again, the progressive thinking identified in the previous section becomes relevant for the respondents who label previous generations as conservatives. The participants express several generational differences by framing themselves and their ideology as "globalized," "aware," "collectivist," "modern," and "spiritual." For them, the fact of being more globalized means, as a respondent from Guadalajara says, "having more access to technology," and, like one from Tijuana indicates, "[being] more open to other cultures." As they explain, globalization has had a favorable impact on generating "critical" thinking in Mexican society. Thanks to it, a respondent from Mexico City says they have the skills to "recognize what is beyond what we have been taught for a long time." Thus, he continues it is possible to have "other perspectives of how the family or relationships or religion can function."

Being able to draw from more perspectives allows participants to become more critical of the country's problems. However, this fact does not imply they have been more involved in proposing possible solutions to these issues. As a participant from Guadalajara comments, it means they are more aware of a dangerous environment and suggests a possible normalization of that state of affairs:

> I feel that older people believe [Mexico] was less violent before, that things were more innocent, right? I mean, I think that someone who lived in the sixties, fifties, didn't process violence like today. We are so used to dealing with it on a day-to-day basis. . . we have to be consciously thinking about the risks for ourselves, our children, our brothers; it isn't easy.

Unlike their parents, participants perceive that the sense of awareness developed in modern times helps them care for their fellow Mexicans. "From what my parents and grandparents have told me, I feel that our community right now is much more united, and we care more about ourselves and support each other more," a young participant from Tijuana explains, while the other respondents in the focus group nod in agreement. Even though they describe technology as a potentially deceitful tool that gives a false sense of unity, feeling closer to each other helps informants overcome what they perceive as a sense of inferiority experienced by past Mexican generations. Interviewees describe that their parents and grandparents constantly "look down" when comparing Mexico to other cultures. Still, because of the increased cooperation among Mexicans and globalization, Mexican talent has been recognized worldwide, supporting their arguments of a prouder feeling towards their Mexican identity. A participant from Veracruz stresses that their "worldview has changed a lot realizing that what is Mexican or what is done. . . in Mexico can also have a value." Even so, a participant from Mexico City notes, Mexicans must take this pride with caution: "focusing on current problems, I'm not saying 'oh no, what a shame to be Mexican,' but I feel like, right now, the stakes are high. Various sectors of the population are not so proud of being Mexican."[21]

[21] Focus group participants express this dissatisfaction several times, mainly towards the political administration of the country. On many occurrences, interviewees manifested their dislike against Andrés Manuel López Obrador and his government policies. They perceive in López Obrador someone "incompetent" to lead the country and attribute to this fact the still existent issues of lack of security and economic inequality. That disenchantment leads some participants not to be proud of being Mexican. The tension emerges when they face other Mexican fellows that they perceive highly loyal to López Obrador. Their political frictions provoke this sense of uneasiness.

Finally, due to the influences of a progressive ideology and globalization, informants agree that the connection between Mexican identity and religion is fading: "it is less complicated for us to discern things as they really are and move away from religion" (A participant from Monterrey, 2021). When the participants speak of religion in relation to the Mexican identity, rather than denying the value of symbols or dogmas, many reject conservative ideologies and religious rituals. The Mexican identity that they build is no longer tied to religion and, consequently, to traditional ideas, a participant from Tijuana explains:

> When I was a child, they [my parents] forced me to go to church and all that, and I think that when I was little, I also believed that it was nothing more than my father and mother, but we grew up. We had more conscience, and we reasoned more, and we said: "No. That is not right."

If the Mexico of my grandparents, my parents, and my childhood remain only in my memories, then only silhouettes remain from Mexico and the Mexican identity represented during much of the 20th century. In recent months, I have watched many comedy films, a genre I used to despise fiercely. When I compare these movies with the ones from the Golden Age, whose symbols of Mexicanidad *were constantly part of the plots, these contemporary stories speak briefly (or not at all) about Mexico or the Mexican identity. They promote a universal vision of culture that could be mistaken with one from any other Western country. Could it be that the* malinchismo *so profoundly rooted in Mexicans for a long strengthened because of globalization?*

The role of the Golden Age of Mexican cinema

Discussing the referents of Mexican identity available in previous media representations about Mexico and Mexicans, the participants focus on comparing their identity with some general symbols promoted in the films from the Golden Age. Due to the

importance of this period, it is not a surprise that, with only two exceptions, the focus group participants do not compare their Mexican identity with films produced at any other time before 2000. It is also significant to acknowledge that a third of the participants from Monterrey, Guadalajara, or Mexico City had attended or were currently taking a course on Mexican culture in which the consumption of Mexican cinema from the Golden Age was required material. Nevertheless, both groups agree that prior to consuming Mexican films from the Golden Age, their interest in these films was null or non-existent. A participant from Guadalajara manifests this feeling through recalling an experience:

> [a friend] told me, "come with me to see some movies from my homework," and I was like, "oh no." I thought it would show me some of Pedro Infante's films, and I was already bored, but we saw Luis Buñuel's *The Exterminating Angel*, and I was just super-amazed.

Although informants recognize that many of the films from the Golden Age had superior narrative achievements compared to contemporary productions, they do not rely on these representations to negotiate their identity. For participants, new depictions available in current Mexican movies show a "more progressive," "modern," "global," and "real" Mexico. This last term, "real," leads them to reflect on the films of the Golden Age as an incomplete picture of Mexican complexities. In this regard, a participant from Guadalajara notes that "the movies from the Golden Age portray a very romantic side of Mexico. I feel that this has changed over time. Now, you can see that a Mexican film is terrific because it shows a real Mexico."

Even though this perception suggests that participants conceive contemporary Mexican cinema as a source of more accurate symbols concerning their identity, it is impossible to support this conjecture as the next chapter on their perceptions of Mexican cinema will address. However, informants' interventions imply that contemporary cinema

displays a more positive vision of Mexico and breaks stereotypes from the Golden Age, such as the macho and the self-sacrificing woman, placing new representations in a more favorable light. Regarding this topic, a participant from Mexico City concludes:

> I feel that the image of the Mexican charro, that masculinity, for example, has been destroyed. For instance, from Pedro Infante's or Jorge Negrete's films to *Esto no es Berlín* (2019) or *Te prometo anarquía* (2015), these movies are not just talking about men, but also homosexuality and other things that would have been unthinkable, no? In the end, those films point to trends that mark our generation.

Although the Golden Age has served as a source of symbols to make sense of the Mexican identity, from the informants' responses, it is possible to conclude that participants barely rely on these images to shape their contemporary identity. The sense of nostalgia predicted by Monsiváis (1996) as a stabilizing resource for Mexican identity does not play an important role in the identity of these focus group members due to their increased access to technology and their exposition to progressive cultures and ideologies. These two facts have given them tools to question the representations of Golden Age films. Their criticism focuses mainly on stereotypical gender roles and the depiction of Mexico as rural. In this sense, even though contemporary Mexican portrayals have certain limitations explored in chapter V, participants conceive them more appropriate to describe their Mexican identity than films from the Golden Age. It is clear that respondents do not refer to the Golden Age representations to define their identity, but they consider it a period in which the Mexican film industry had superior aesthetic qualities. In addition, they recognize that these films are also a source of portrayals about customs and cultural traditions that today remain stable and are reproduced from generation to generation. Thus, despite its not so relevant role, the Golden Age continues in the social imaginary of these new generations.

It is critical to emphasize that some other periods in the history of Mexican cinema, such as post-revolutionary movies, cinema produced between the 1970s and 1990s, and the

so-called New Mexican Cinema (films made between 1990 and 2000), are not mentioned at all by participants, even though many of them had attended a seminar on Mexican culture and cinema. Neither do the representations from *telenovelas* or television in those periods occupy a place in their answers. Hence, the history of the representation of the Mexican identity in the Mexican audiovisual remains with multiple gaps that the participants are not interested in filling in.

Como México, no hay dos[22]: the role of the other to negotiate the Mexican identity

During the first focus group conducted for this dissertation, a participant from Guadalajara mentioned a meme that had been a trend in recent years. It consists of an outlandish real scene taken from the everyday reality of Mexico framed by the phrase "Imagine living in [insert the name of the first world country of your choice] and missing out on this." Mexico indeed emanates culture even through its pores. Still, the country is also mired in many social issues provoking mixed feelings about our country. To make this equation more complex, Mexico's proximity to the United States is a double-edged sword. It constantly forces us to compare ourselves with them because of the northern neighbor's prevalent and ongoing cultural presence in Mexico. Mexico is caught between two worlds: Latin America and North America.

In each focus group and interview conducted for this research, participants constantly contrasted their Mexican culture with others. Hall (1991/2019) recognizes that this comparison establishes the limits of the in-group's cultural identity by identifying how out-groups possess characteristics absent in the in-group. Thus, answering research

[22] *Como México, no hay dos* is a colloquial expression used by Mexicans to emphasize the superiority of Mexico by arguing that no other country can be compared with Mexico.

question 1c about the strategies this audience utilizes to discern between their identity and the cultural identities of other groups was a constant exercise in the reflections expressed by these informants. In this regard, participants' responses suggest a pattern. First, they immediately place Mexico as a developing country; by doing this, they put many of its identity traits at a disadvantage compared with those they recognize in developed countries (United States, Canada, and European nations). Conversely, juxtapositions perceived by participants between Mexican identity traits and those from other countries considered developing (Central and South American countries) exhibit several points of convergence. Nevertheless, for the interviewees, Mexico is above these countries' social and cultural conditions to the extent of being a "benchmark" for Latin America. Some participants in Guadalajara express comments like "We are the face of all Latin America," and "unlike many others in Latin America or Central America, Mexico is in the international imaginary; it is a well-known country."

In these comparisons, the traits described by the participants at the beginning of this chapter as essential to the Mexican identity are used here again to trace differences and similitudes between them and the Others. In that sense, they identify some traits as advantages or disadvantages, while others provoke mixed feelings in them.

The warm Mexican

Mexican warmness is the most salient positive trait identified by interviewees that makes Mexico stand out from other cultures and countries. "I can't imagine living as a grown-up in another country other than Mexico," a participant from Monterrey states, explaining: "we are more affectionate or expressive than the Germans or the United States." For focus group members, warmness is related to fraternity and unity (values learned in their family) and exerted when helping other Mexican fellows or foreigners. A participant

from Guadalajara explains this interaction between warmness, family, and Mexico: "We have certain family values; in Mexico, there is an environment where children grow more warmly and usually in the United States, they are all cold."

Mexican interviewees see their warmness as a competitive advantage they share with other Latin American countries when contrasting it with other more developed countries. In this sense, the participants recognize that the Latino/a is "effusive," "passionate," "with a better attitude," "more extroverted," and "optimistic" compared to Americans or Europeans whom they generally consider "cold" and "reserved." The informants use this warmness and optimism to speak again of resilience, deemed vital to the Mexican definition since it leads Mexicans to be "warriors." A participant from Mexico City elaborates on the term "warrior": "Many people know that abroad exists preference to hire Mexicans because we are used to *chingarle* [working hard], and we don't complain and arrive early. We can work 8 hours straight, without complaint."

In a similar vein, interviewees refer to the "desire to overcome oneself" as a motivation for working hard, a trait that, on the one hand, they do not mention sharing with other Latin American countries, and, on the other hand, they implement it as a strategy to reverse negative stereotypes from the first world countries. A participant from Veracruz expresses his struggle:

> You go to a foreign place, and right away, you are branded as a lazy and irresponsible person. You show that you are the opposite, and even so, they do not believe you. So, you have to constantly and constantly prove that you are worth it.

The primitive and violent Mexican

Much of the media content consumed in Mexico come from the United States. The cartoons and series of my childhood were primarily American productions like Alf, Gilligan's Island, The Wonder Years, The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Ducktales, or The

Simpsons. *With the arrival of cable television, and my adolescence, MTV and several American cable channels were part of my consumption. Cinema was no exception. Despite having seen several films produced by Televicine, most of the movies we saw at home or in movie theaters were from Hollywood. Our media diet as Mexicans consisted of content made mainly by United States companies; this fact implies that our identity in the media was also conceived through an American perspective. As Mexicans, we have witnessed a media offering that paints us as lazy, inferior, violent, and ignorant people. Even more positive representations such as* Coco *reinforce stereotypes of Mexico as exotic compared to other first-world countries.*

"My boyfriend is *gringo*" explains a participant from Mexico City while grimacing, "I did not care that he thought that in Mexico there is no cars or internet, but now it bothers me a lot that his education system is so ignorant, and they live like [in] a bubble because they don't need to leave their country like us (laughs nervously)." In several of their comments, informants point out how they constantly have to refute stereotypes other cultures have built regarding their Mexican identity. For them, being conceived of in this way is the reason why many Mexicans deny their Mexican identity or generate a feeling of inferiority, a feeling that interviewees fight to eradicate. A participant from Monterrey explains how her generation deals with this problem that many consider inherited from their parents:

> I remember that, when I was a child, it [the U.S.] was like wow. As we have the border so close, it is easy to compare with the United States, but now that we have grown, we notice how they [her parents and media] were wrong. Mexico has a lot of good things.

However, animosity towards Mexican identity does not only come from stereotypes but also from realizing that some of them are based in reality such as violence. For the

participants, it is a reality that the Mexican identity carries with it the stigma of violence, attributing its roots to historical factors ("we were conquered by violence and we get free through violence"), social circumstances ("there is a lot of social inequality that generates insecurity"), and even ontological aspects ("we hate for fun").

In this topic, the most conflictive point is whether the culture of violence surrounding drug trafficking influences the Mexican identity. On the one side, stereotypes that other countries and popular *narco* series have created are accurate for some respondents. They mention: "we embrace the *narco* culture," "we idealize *narcos*," or "we have a strong culture of delinquency." On the other side, interviewees see this as an incorrect generalization created by the media and the United States for other interviewees. A participant from Mexico City comments:

> I do believe that [violence] is something that we all experience every day. However, it is not something that defines us. That is a perception of someone from the United States, a TV series, right? They say that Mexicans are poor, vandals, and drug traffickers, but that is not true. Mexicans are not a bunch of criminals.[23]

Both sides agree that a violent attitude towards life undoubtedly characterizes part of the Mexican identity. This attitude can be conceived as a method of resilience ("we are used to being worried about our relatives and living in constant fear") or as a consequence of Mexican passion ("that expressiveness can fall at one extreme and it can become rude").

The traditional Mexican

Finally, respondents indicate the most critical point of comparison with other cultures, which turns out to be the one that causes the most mixed feelings: Mexican

[23] It is worth noting that these negative portrayals about Mexicans were part of the public opinion during Donald Trump's presidency since he announced his interest in running for the United States presidency in June 2015. He used several pejorative terms against Mexicanas during that speech, such as criminals, rapists, and bad *hombres*. It was only the beginning of several complaints against Mexico during his first campaign and later on during his presidency.

traditions/culture. When informants compare their Mexican identity with any other in the world, they describe that "*Como México, no hay dos*" A participant from Guadalajara proudly comments:

> Mexicans have a very internalized and well-established culture. You can tell the difference. I have noticed it because I have friends from Venezuela, the Dominican [Republic], from various parts of Latin America and the Caribbean. Mexicans specifically feel that they have a very clear idea of their culture and follow cultural practices. Even though they are not in Mexico, it is super easy to identify a Mexican in any part of the world by how they live their culture.

A similar comparison emerges between Mexico and the United States, as participants point out that the main culture of the U.S. is "very gray" or even non-existent. For Mexicans, gastronomy, traditions, music, among other dimensions, are part of their identity and make them stand out. However, they also recognize that these symbols are the source of many stereotypes that "limit" them. An informant from Mexico City explains:

> [Our image] comes down to the tacos, the *sombrero*, the music, that we are very friendly and very familiar and very warm. It makes me very uncomfortable to be abroad with that idea, with that expectation that they have of me when it is not necessarily true. There are many shy people; there are many people who do not fulfill these stereotypes.

For a participant from Veracruz, it is crucial to "expose more of the other faces that Mexico has" and that they are also part of the Mexican identity, such as a "businessman and [an] artist."

Comparison is the primary and only strategy used by these focus group members to discern between their identity and the cultural identities of other groups. For this young audience, these different groups used as a point of reference are comprised of people from developed countries (The United States, Canada, and some European countries and Asian countries) and people from developing ones (Central and South American countries). The difference between both groups lies in the fact that participants considered the Mexican

culture a benchmark or superior to those cultural identities deployed by Latin American countries. Yet, at the same time, they perceive their culture as similar or slightly inferior to the ones developed countries have.

To place the Mexican culture over others, participants rely on warmness and resilience as salient characteristics. However, according to them, the violent nature of Mexicans plays a critical role in their identity formation. Finally, the cultural richness that imbues Mexican traditions and customs is a double-edged sword because it frames their identity and country as "colorful" but simultaneously presents them as exotic to the gaze of the Others.

As this section illustrated, the comparison between the in-group and the out-groups implies different overlapping positionalities that suggest a fluid Mexican identity. In addition, comparison becomes a natural component in the exercise of defining a particular cultural identity.

Redefining a Mexican identity

The purpose of this chapter has been to discuss and answer the first research question in this dissertation about the way participants define their Mexican identity and the processes they use to negotiate it, such as comparing it with other cultures, older generations of their fellow Mexicans, and older representations of the Mexican identity available on media. As the chapter has shown, these informants express their Mexican identity through a series of traits that have a minimal connection with symbols available in past representations and displayed by past Mexican generations. Traditions/customs, *machismo*, family, warmness, and solidarity are the traits most closely related to that past.

However, when respondents discuss the media representations used to convey these symbols, they express relief that these portrayals are no longer a constant, allowing them to

take distance from images they consider stereotypical. Informants perceive that movies from the Golden Age are also the source of many stereotypes used mainly by U.S. productions to frame the country as inferior. Despite this fact, they simultaneously recognize the aesthetical and narrative value of these films.

Contrary to these mixed feelings, informants have taken some of those characteristics and integrated them to craft a collage called Mexican identity. In the current context, they use these traits to compare themselves with other cultures. Even though respondents share some similarities with different Latin American cultures, the Mexican identity traits are not replicable or comparable for them.

By distancing themselves from other cultures and past Mexican symbols, the participants are involved in developing their identity, looking for images that resonate with that identity in a media landscape that no longer recognizes borders or nations. Before analyzing how participants negotiate and shape their identity through Mexican comedies, the next chapter explores how this audience engages in the consumption and perception of this popular genre and its products.

The results of this chapter offer a light regarding the construction of the identity of these young Mexicans. The responses of this young audience are aligned with Hall's (1996) reflections on cultural identity. For most interviewees, the Mexican identity has a series of features that have evolved and adapted to the current times. They are aware that their identity is not "finished," but a concept constantly evolving and adapting to the present times. In addition, they identify that their identity is comprised of a series of identities that overlap with the ones deployed by regional cultures in Mexico and global cultures. Thus, their answers dispute the construction of a pan-identity influenced by the free market forces and its commodities because they are not relying on fixed symbols to make sense of their

identity. Their awareness of the different influences that converge in their identity allows them to challenge the representations of the Mexican identity portrayed in comedies and appropriate them to satisfy particular needs discussed in the following chapters. Distinctively, this young audience has suggested that to make sense of our identity is not enough to describe it but reflect on its components and construct them in collectivity. Using this chapter as a reference to understand a kaleidoscopic Mexican identity, it is possible to understand participants' interpretation of comedies and their identification process.

CHAPTER V

INSIDE THE CONSUMPTION OF MEXICAN COMEDIES

According to the 2019 IMCINE Statistical Yearbook, the Mexican cinema industry obtained revenues close to 1.7 billion pesos [853 million dollars] only from movie theaters, and more than 33 million people attended these films. These figures from 2019 reflect a 14% increase in box office revenues compared to 2018 and a slight 1% increase in the number of attendees in contrast to 2017, which had seen the highest number of moviegoers since 2010. Looking beyond these numbers that seem to demonstrate the favorable conditions of Mexican cinema reveals something these figures do not communicate at first glance. Since 2013, comedies have occupied the top places as the highest-grossing productions in the history of the Mexican film industry, and their popularity makes them dominate the 2019 figures overwhelmingly. Comedies obtained 81% of the total revenue registered that year at the box office and accounted for 81% of the total attendance. This phenomenon has repeated year after year since 2013, even though comedy is not the genre most produced in Mexico. According to IMCINE, 39% of the films released in Mexico in 2019 are dramas, but they only earned 5% of the income. Documentaries offer a similar panorama, presenting the same number of films released in theaters as comedies (24%) but barely registering 0.14% of box office revenues.

Comedy is indisputably the most-consumed film genre in Mexico. Because, as discussed in the literature review, media representations significantly impact the formation/negotiation of an individual's identity, the higher consumption of comedies suggests that these films will have some impact on this process. Therefore, this chapter delves into why avid consumers of Mexican cinema, middle-class students/professionals

between 18 and 25 years old, consume Mexican comedies, answering in this way the second research question of this dissertation. We must consider three factors to answer this question: a) how this audience determines the authenticity of a Mexican comedy, b) how they select and mediate their consumption of these films, and c) what are the advantages and disadvantages that they perceive in how this genre represents their Mexican identity. Each of these topics is analyzed in detail in the following sections.

However, before diving into that explanation, we need to know how many Mexican films, and particularly comedies, the participants interviewed consume. Informants were asked the number of Mexican films they viewed during 2020 and how many were comedies. The results were similar across all regions. The average number of Mexican films consumed during 2020 was between 9 and 10, although comedy was not the genre most consumed by the participants.

Several peculiarities emerged from these numbers. First, as most informants were students, some of the Mexican films they watched were not selected by them but mandatory for assignments. Second, in some cases, the participants indicate that they only saw the five films required as criteria to participate in the research, confessing that they do not regularly consume comedies. Third, as a consequence of the pandemic, participants indicate having more "free time" to watch movies at home, choosing in several cases Mexican comedies to "pass the time," so this contextual factor increased their consumption of comedies. Fourth, the aforementioned average of Mexican films watched per participant does not necessarily reflect a constant reality since only three interviewees report having consumed around 40 Mexican films each in 2020, thereby inflating the mean stated. Finally, the movies watched by participants are eclectic. They mention having seen the same film several times during the year, productions released in other years (even in the Golden Age), and different genres

such as drama or documentaries. In some cases, they even watched films that have not been released in movie theaters or streaming platforms because their professors shared them through an online video platform such as Vimeo or YouTube.

Using this information as a background, the following section elucidates the characteristics respondents identify in a comedy to categorize it as Mexican.

How to identify an authentic Mexican comedy

One of my hobbies is suggesting and reviewing films through my social media accounts. The last time I mentioned some contemporary Mexican comedy films, some friends' comments on that post highlighted their lousy acting or narratives and how boring they were. People I follow in my networks usually post about Mexican comedies in the same terms that my friends use and even consider these movies racist and classist because they only show white characters living in exclusive neighborhoods of Mexico City. As far as I can recall, during all my education in Mexico, every time a professor used Mexican comedies as an example was to stress what we should avoid If we want to succeed in the film industry. Many Mexicans, therefore, consider Mexican comedy films as bad taste. However, comedies are the most consumed productions in the country, and all moviegoers in Mexico, whether we like it or not, have contributed to their financial success by watching at least one of them.

Research question 2a aims to clarify how this audience determines the authenticity of a Mexican comedy; achieving this goal requires to retrieve from the literature review how this sense of authenticity is defined theoretically. In a transnational landscape of film production, Stock (1995) points out that a film's cultural authenticity depends on the origins of talent (e.g., actors, actresses, and filmmakers) from that culture and on a series of nostalgic references about the culture that any viewer seeks to identify.

Identifying the comedies' Mexican cast

Regarding the first part of the previous assertion about the cultural authenticity of a film, when the participants interviewed for this research describe the characteristic features of a Mexican comedy, one of their most frequent responses focuses on the actors and actresses who appear in these films. The informants mention names such as Eugenio Derbez, Vhadir Derbez, Aislinn Derbez, Omar Chaparro, Martha Higareda, Mauricio Ochmann, Mariana Treviño, Karla Souza, and Luis Gerardo Mendéz as compasses to identify a Mexican comedy, regardless of whether the directors or the production companies producing the films they appear in are Mexican. According to focus group members, the chronic presence of these actors and actresses is a consequence of their long careers, which has turned them into celebrities who are easily recognizable by spectators as references to comedy in Mexico. Regarding this subject, a participant from Mexico City explains: "[Mexican film producers] continue releasing films with Eugenio Derbez because they are hits, right? Because he already had a career in television, everyone knows that this *wey* (or *güey*) [dude] is *bien cagado* [extremely funny], and they're going to see him." The prevalence of these actors and actresses is so constant in Mexican films and comedy TV series that, for the participants, celebrities and their characters are interchangeable, erasing the boundaries between real life and fiction. For example, a participant from Guadalajara jokes: "Martha Higareda and Omar Chaparro always appear together; I don't know why they are not married in real life if they always play a couple." This exchange affects how spectators perceive the histrionic qualities of these cast members to the extent of seeing them as a cliché. A participant from Tijuana points out: "it [the lack of actors' and actresses' variety] bothers me because it's like watching Martha Higareda playing Martha Higareda in every movie."

In other cases, respondents cannot recall the names of these actors and actresses, only the characters that brought them fame. This fact is evident in an interview in Guadalajara when a participant tries to name some actors whom he calls "Javi Noble" and "Hugo Sánchez," characters that Luis Gerardo Mendez and Jesús Zavala play in *Nosotros los Nobles* and *Club de Cuervos* (2015-2019), respectively. This participant explains that it is easier to identify them with the character because, in any case, these actors "do not change their performance, only their haircut." This characteristic intersects with another that participants identified as fundamental in Mexican comedies: the iteration of a narrative formula. As a participant from Mexico City explains, because the cast and the story are the same, it is difficult to distinguish one film from the other:

> They [actors and actresses] are always like the same, for instance, Martha Higareda and Omar Chaparro. I mean, the same actors in the same stories, sometimes it can be difficult to differentiate them because you just saw them in love in *No Manches Frida* (2016) and then you see them in *Tod@s caen* (2019).

Recognizing the comedies' narrative formula

When respondents discuss this narrative formula (and other traits), they distance themselves from some of the theoretical assumptions stated in the literature review. On the one hand, while Stock (1995) notes that nostalgia is an essential element in the authenticity of these representations, it must be remembered that focus group members quoted in this dissertation do not define their identity based on references from the past. The few symbols that come from older representations and conceptualizations mentioned in the previous chapter on Mexican identity have little or no presence in the traits used by participants to define a Mexican comedy. On the other hand, focus group members' responses suggest a tension between some of the features identified by participants in the comedies and the characteristics that Sanchez Prado (2014) indicated as fundamental in these movies.

Although respondents recognize the depiction of a utopian and aspirational Mexico, they also acknowledge these stories describe some of the country's contemporary realities.

Contrary to Sánchez Prado's overstatement about the impossibility of finding traces of the Mexican identity in these films, the process of negotiation these informants implement indicates otherwise. We can infer this conclusion because this young audience renounces nostalgic symbols and reflects on similarities between representations in comedies and their everyday lives. These similarities will be part of the next chapter on identification. Thus, to support this conclusion, it is necessary to delve into the narrative characteristics that lead participants to perceive and label these comedies "Mexican."

When participants mention that Mexican comedy films follow a formula, they refer to the fact that these movies are "predictable" because "you know perfectly what is going to happen and how it is going to end." In the words of a Mexico City's respondent, "you see the [film's] first 10 minutes, and you can say like 'ah, I can stop watching it because it is already evident what is going to happen.'" Another participant from Mexico City describes these films as a "comic version of *Romeo and Juliet*," in which the hatred between families is replaced by disagreements between two social classes or different personalities, always framed in romantic circumstances. A participant from Guadalajara develops this formula in which love is always the persistent theme:

> there is this tendency that someone has to win someone else over. In other words, [comedies] always deal with love or with someone who is not loved, and they have to find out how to win over [the other person].

Another participant from the same focus group completes this idea: "it's always a love triangle. The girl gets engaged to someone and ends up falling in love with the one she doesn't like." For the respondents, this formula does derive not only from copying other Mexican comedies but also from the influence of Mexican television and international

productions, especially from Hollywood. A participant from Guadalajara indicates this fact: "They [Mexican comedies] are all a rehash of something [foreign media content]. They [Mexican producers] just do like a Mexican version, according to what they conceive as the Mexican spark." Because of the reliance and consistency on this formula, many informants define the production of these films as "industrial," "mass-produced," "like if these [films] were episodes of *La Rosa de Guadalupe* (2008-)[24]. They [producers] write the script in a jiffy and use the same characters copied from another film that copied another film that copied another film." (A participant from Veracruz, 2021). In this massified production, informants recognize that love conflicts are always central to the plot and influence the tension between different social classes. Resolving the former conflict generally depends on satisfactorily solving the latter through "an ending in which everyone is happy." Consequently, respondents acknowledge that characters from the upper class are the ones that learn the main lesson, adopting a series of values from the lower-class characters who always are "good people." Hence, according to a participant from Guadalajara, the wealthy character discovers that poor people have "many good things to give to the Mexican society" and "it is okay to accept those with fewer resources."

[24] *La Rosa de Guadalupe* is a Mexican TV series produced by Televisa y broadcasted through free TV channels. Its popularity increased among Mexican viewers to the extent of being part of Netflix's offering until Blim appeared in the Mexican marketplace. In the U.S., Univision broadcasts it. The series started in 2008, and currently, it has more than 1500 episodes. The show is a fictionalization of real contemporary social issues, such as social media dangers, bullying, suicide, or COVID pandemic, framed through telenovela tropes and moral lessons. A vital narrative device constant through all the episodes is the protagonist's faith in the Virgen de Guadalupe. Thanks to it, a miracle always occurs at the end of the episode, solving the protagonists' conflicts. The name of the series, *La Rosa de Guadalupe*, comes from a leitmotiv. A white rose appears because of divine intervention in front of an image or altar of the Virgen de Guadalupe, indicating that a miracle has taken place.

The resource of a utopian Mexico

The interviewees' articulation of this formula encompasses two constants: a utopian and aspirational Mexico as well as a predictable series of one-dimensional, stereotypical characters. Regarding the utopic representation of Mexico by comedies, respondents notice that this phenomenon is a consequence of the favorable resolution of these films. Although "repetitive," the messages comedies consistently present the "maturation" of the main characters, their transformation, and adoption of more positive values. A participant from Monterrey explains: "despite all the superficial matters that [comedy films] may address, they always put values at the end. For example, they say that the most important thing is always your family or that your essentials do not depend on money." Informants agree these productions' intentions are laudable. However, the impact of these purposes fades due to the "idealization" and "romanticization" of stories and characters, not showing the pessimistic or realistic face of Mexican society's problems. A participant from Mexico City elaborates both points:

> [idealization and romanticization exist] because films that focus on these higher classes give us an idealization, something even aspirational that makes us say, "Oh, the upper class live like that; is it true that they have this thing? or this is their life?" And romanticization occurs because these movies always have the honeyed side of romance and the clash of social classes. . . they are made so you can have this good feeling of saying, "well, life is not so bad, it can be worse, and/or it can be better; we are doing well."

Interviewees recognize that this representation of a utopian or aspirational Mexico is intentional to neutralize Mexico's "bad image" like a developing country and aspire to build "a beautiful Mexico." This perception aligns with Gramsci's (1930/1970) hegemonic theory, in which the purposeful effort strived by the elites, in this case, the producers, is showing an idealized vision of Mexico that facilitates social cohesion. At the same time, it reveals the interest of producers in making these films consumer goods, fostering a

desirable image of the country for the local spectators. In this way, respondents suggest a connection with the aspirational sense identified by Sánchez Prado (2014) in romantic comedies, recognizing that comedy films present a role model for the country and Mexicans. A participant from Veracruz concludes in this regard:

> [comedy movies] try to show that Mexico, Mexico City, is like New York or some European city, that everything is pretty, everything looks fancy and elegant. Wow, even the ugly parts, even the lower class, look good. . . I even wish I was like them sometimes.

Besides the veiled classism expressed by this respondent (a common fact when the participants refer to the protagonists of these movies), this argument points out the other constant element in the formula of Mexican comedy films: one-dimensional, stereotypical characters.

The resource of stereotypical characters

Informants admit that these stereotypes are based on social class, gender, and family. When they refer to class-based stereotypes, respondents mention poor and rich people. According to the interviewees, the lower class is "kind," "romanticized," and "glorified, to the extent that being poor is almost a virtue, even though comedies often depict people from this class as "*nacos*" or "indigenous." Because the poor character has a series of positive traits by default, participants acknowledge that rich characters embodied a series of negative attributes that will change through their interaction with the lower classes. The rich man is defined as a "*whitexican*," "*mirrey*," or "snob" who enjoys a series of privileges and "who has to learn to work to know what real life is really about." Moreover, racial differences are also synonymous with social class; a participant from Guadalajara indicates: "I have realized that characters from higher social status are usually white and people from lower social strata are usually darker or brown." Because the rich

characters learn a moral lesson in the story, this young audience recognizes that the narrative's point of view constantly comes from the upper class. An informant from Monterrey synthesizes how these two social stereotypes operate:

> they are like very opposite extremes. Or you are extremely rich and need someone from the lower class to help you understand what you really appreciate, or you are from the lower class, and you have to understand that your problems are very specific to your social conditions.

In the end, no matter how different the two social classes are, they have to "mix and unite as Mexicans." This perception that participants shared about the outcome fostered by Mexican comedies resonates with the goals of Mexican unification cinema had served during the Golden Age. As Monsiváis (1995b) and Noble (2005) point out, cinema reduced the most visible social tension between rural and urban contexts. Elites used films to indoctrinate audiences to embrace modernity by noticing the advantages of urban life as well as the moral lessons derived from the dangers. Thus, as participants indicated in the characteristics fundamental to Mexican identity, the social class division is the central tension behind the lack of unification in the country. Then, it is not surprising that Mexican films mitigate this separation, proposing a representation that fosters an ending in which, no matter how different social classes are, they can conciliate under a Mexican identity.

Regarding gender roles, the participants recognize that men, women, and members of the LGBTQ community also fulfill very marked stereotypes in these comedies. This fact is most prominent when LGBTQ characters appear because they are only considered secondary characters, helping the main ones to become enlightened or achieve their goals. These characters are always a "comic relief," a joke, portraying "the lesbian as a man or the gay man as a woman." In the case of the male and female roles, although they have been the source of broader representations that depend on each film, respondents recognize some

patterns. For instance, male characters are "attractive," performing "macho" and "misogynistic" attitudes, but as the plot moves forward, they show their "sensitive" side. For their part, women are more "independent" and "empowered," but, in the end, they regularly "fall into the same [cycle]:" love as their motivation. For participants, no matter how different characters could be from the pattern, they are permanently reduced to the goal of finding "true love." Regarding this recurrence, a student from Monterrey explains.:

> If you are a woman, you lack love, and if you are a man, you also lack love. . . they always lack something, and something is usually something very mediocre, which is a partner or a love interest. For example, in *Cindy la Regia* (2020), the whole movie was going very well, and in the end, it turns out that Cindy's real problem was she didn't have a boyfriend. . . the characters' world is very pink because the only thing they lack is love.

The third kind of stereotypical "characters" informants find in these films relates to the family composition, which they perceive comedies portray as "perfect," "always united," and "traditionalist." A participant from Veracruz explains that "in general they [comedies] represent it [the family] in a traditionalist way, right? The mother is a housewife, the father a worker, the brothers and sisters are students." Focus group members recognize that no matter how "dysfunctional" these families are or how "complex" their problems might be, in the end, they will reconcile, emphasizing that "the family will always be there to support you." Thus, more challenging family predicaments are absent and replaced by a resolution that frames the family as a stable, nuclear institution irreplaceable in the social composition. In the words of a participant from Mexico City: "when the film resolves, the family values are encouraged such as the family unity, that you have to be there for each other, things like that." A participant from Monterrey sums up ideas developed about the family this way:

> [The family] is always there, right? At the end of the day, when the problem is solved, whether the family is part of the solution or not, the family is always there,

> right? In *Me gusta, pero me asusta* (2017), everyone comes together to make a great family in the end. In *Sin Hijos* (2020), too. Although the family is put aside, in the end, it is like all together.

Acknowledging the exaggeration of "reality" in Mexican comedies

Whether comedies depict a utopian Mexico or any of the aforementioned stereotypes, this young audience recognizes that comedies "exaggerate" or "take to the extreme" all social dynamics they represent. For example, when talking about the characters in Mexican comedy films, a participant from Mexico City expresses his displeasure with these stereotypes: "You cannot reduce a person to just one characteristic. A person is much more complex. It has a whole grayscale, and these contents are merely signaling only a characteristic and exploit it to its maximum." Thus, for the focus group members, Mexican comedies frame situations and characters as "caricature" and "ridicule" them to provoke laughter. Ultimately, this process turns out to be counterproductive, as a participant from Mexico City elaborates:

> It seems that I could have done the script in half an hour or something like that without really making an effort to develop the story well. I feel like Mexican comedies are pushing things to the limit, and it can be funny, right? I imagine that some people laugh, but if you're expecting to see something good, it will tire you out. You say, I understand where this joke is going, but the way it unfolded is grotesque, or they [producers] don't have a limit to soften the story and make it maybe a little more realistic or a little more meaningful.

Like this participant, other informants describe the humor of Mexican films as "gross," "superficial," based on "double meaning" (*albur*), "rude," "basic," "simple." Due to these characteristics, the interviewees express mixed feelings about how to describe this humor. On the one hand, some informants indicate these humorous features make Mexican comedies "bad taste" or "unpleasant," as a young person from Tijuana describes, "they [comedies] take us [viewers] as fools. I feel it [Mexican comedy] is very, very tasteless,

effortless, very... despicable." Although the jokes might be funny when watching the film, respondents realize how offensive these jokes were upon further reflection. A participant from Guadalajara underscores this idea, "they [these jokes] used to make us laugh, but they are things producers should no longer play with." On the other hand, some other informants confess that some of the jokes are funny. After all, they refer to the Mexican culture by presenting situations or characters from everyday life and situations discussed on social media, capturing "the essence of Mexico." From this perspective, participants recognize themselves and their surroundings in the comedy displayed by these films; this topic will be addressed in more detail in the next chapter.

A contrasting point about the theoretical characteristics that underlie the cultural authenticity of films emerges when participants discuss the locations used in Mexican comedies. Although it has been argued in the literature review that transnational productions depict non-identifiable places to penetrate in other markets (Mayer, 2003; Sánchez Prado 2014), the informants recognize that having Mexico City as the central location is one essential characteristic of these comedies. On some occasions, some comedies compare this city with Mexican "little towns," showing how rural and urban lifestyles still coexist. Acknowledging this fact, some informants dub Mexican comedies as "Cine de Coyocán" because they perceived this cinema is produced by the few privileged students of the Centro de Estudios Cinematográficos (CCC) and the Escuela Nacional de Artes Cinematográficas (ENAC), the two most prestigious cinema schools in Mexico, both are located in the elite Coyoacán neighborhood of Mexico City. According to them, students and alumni from these institutions are behind the production of Mexican comedies, showing their "desperate admiration for Mexico City." Although this assertion is partially false, according to the social imaginary of the interviewees, the producers and filmmakers

of these movies are privileged people or at least members of the wealthy classes. For this reason, respondents signaled that representations of Mexico and Mexicans in comedy films are limited, leaving the country's multicultural richness off the screen. A participant from Mexico City expresses this discomfort:

> What conflicts me is that comedy representations are often very centralized. In other words, as they are just here in Mexico City, all other communities, other societies, and specifically other social groups, are put aside, right? For example, there isn't a significant representation of Afro-Mexican groups or indigenous groups or anything like that.

Defining the aesthetics of Mexican comedies

Finally, this young audience discusses the aesthetic qualities of Mexican comedies. In this area, participants indicate a series of characteristics that made a comedy easily identifiable as Mexican: constant happy music throughout the film ("as if we were in a party"), the presence of well-known Mexican pop songs, the use of animated opening/closing credits, a story that is laden by product placements, as well as a "vibrant and colorful" color palette. Interestingly, unlike the participants' perception of stories, characters, and symbols, they do not trace connections between comedies and other Mexican media products such as *telenovelas* or TV series when they talk about the aesthetic properties of comedies. However, they express a complaint that involves all kinds of Mexican cinema productions: the poor quality of their sound design. Focus group members report that they turn off or reject watching a Mexican movie on many occasions because it is "tough listening to the dialogues." In this sense, even films considered superior to the average Mexican productions, such as *Roma*, appear here as a bad example. A participant from Mexico City explains this general malaise about sound design:

> I'm going to say something technical that always kills me: the audio. I would really love to see more money invested in the audio of Mexican cinema. It's horrible! (general laughter from informants) My ears hurt a lot when the dialogue comes out

> super loud and then the background music or the outside sounds. I mean, well, I hope you all don't cancel me for what I'm going to say: *Roma*'s audio details are very nice; they seem incredible to me, but then I didn't even listen to Yalitza. It was like, well, I have to raise and lower the volume all the time, which bothered me a lot.

Considered together, these characteristics lead these young students to conclude that Mexican comedies are "trivial," "ephemeral," "not very remarkable," and "superficial." For them, Mexican comedies are just for "hanging out" and therefore "disposable." Due to this consideration, as will be seen in the next section, participants use a series of very particular strategies to select and mediate their consumption of these movies. This bitter feeling is constant across all the participants; a student from Tijuana concludes:

> I don't remember so many moments from them [Mexican comedies]. It's like, I saw them, and I forgot much of the movie. So that's why I don't watch them much because there are other movies that I go to, I enjoy them, and I even remember moments, jokes, whatever and a large part of the Mexican comedy movies that I saw this year or last year, I hardly remember something. They are not very memorable.

The pieces of an authentic Mexican comedy

The discussion and answers of this young audience provide partial support to the theoretical assumptions regarding the cultural authenticity of a film. At the same time, they suggest the role of Mexican comedies in describing the Mexican identity. As these participants have mentioned, the films' cast is still a fundamental factor in determining how Mexican a movie is; however cultural referents from the past are not necessarily essential to define the movie's origin. Instead, focus group members rely on a series of narrative devices to determine the movie denomination as Mexican. This young audience defines a narrative formula always constant in Mexican films. This formula is comprised of a utopic vision of Mexico, stereotypical characters based on social class and gender, and exaggerated scenes or situations that portray instants of the audience's daily life in Mexico (such as jokes and locations). This formula, coupled with certain aesthetical decisions that

make comedies resemble *telenovelas* or TV shows, gives comedies the denomination as Mexican and allows informants to differentiate these movies from others produced worldwide.

These traits echo some of the characteristics that scholars have recognized in Mexican comedies. For instance, like Sanchez Prado (2014), participants also emphasized the limited construction of the social complexities of Mexico by appealing to a formula that provides positive solutions to Mexico's problems while reducing the characters to easily identifiable stereotypes. This utopic portrayal, which participants recognize is part of the comedy genre, provokes frustration in the participants who cannot perceive feasible or realist alternatives to construct it. Their responses also indicate that intertextuality is relevant to appeal to the audiences' consumption because these films emulate local television content's aesthetical qualities and narrative patterns from Hollywood films that are also easily identifiable by spectators. Thus, the global and the local media industries interplay in the perception of these respondents and converge in comedies.

Finally, in the process of highlighting the authenticity of a Mexican comedy, their discussions challenge theoretical assumptions that have downplayed the role of these films to narrate the identity. As will be discussed in detail in chapter VI, focus group members can easily trace connections between their Mexican identity and the representations of these films. Comedies have much to say about the identity of this young audience; it is just a matter of listening to these spectators.

Turn off the lights and chill out: the process of selecting and watching a Mexican comedy

Disclosing yourself as a fan of Mexican comedies, or even as a sporadic watcher of these films without "academic" reasons, is placing yourself under the scrutiny of other

Mexicans. If, in the collective Mexican imaginary comedies are related to "bad taste," then their avid (or casual) watchers are conceived as "simpleminded" audiences with low cultural capital. It has been common for me to hear phrases such as "do you really watch that?" "I've tried to give them a chance, but there is no way to help them," or "these are films for uneducated people" when people talk about Mexican comedies. None of my classmates or students from courses in Mexican cinema have positively addressed these films during my academic years. An outcome of educational preparation in Mexico is then an instant rejection of these comedies as we do not consume illiterate and middlebrow cinema unless we want to point out how they are wrong and harmful.

The previous section provides an insight into the process of identifying and defining a comedy as Mexican; however, it did not mention how and why this audience selects these films. This section aims to answer research question 2b by explaining the audience's strategies to choose and mediate their consumption of Mexican comedy films.

At the beginning of this chapter, I mentioned that the average number of Mexican comedies this young audience has watched in the last year ranged from 9 to 10, or less than a film per month. Among the factors that influenced this consumption were academic purposes (including participating in this research) and the COVID-19 pandemic, as one of the Mexican government's measures to avoid spreading the virus was sending people to their homes and requesting them to stay there. The pandemic was a crucial positive factor to increase the consumption of Mexican cinema in general, as a student from Mexico City indicates: "the pandemic encouraged many production companies and festivals to release in streaming platforms countless very good Mexican projects and that was a great opportunity to watch them." However, the fact that the pandemic increased the availability of Mexican films and gave informants the chance to access a vaster catalog does not mean that it altered

the means they used to consume Mexican comedies. A statement from one participant in Guadalajara provides an insight into some of the participants' mindsets:

> I'm an introverted person, so in my case, it [the pandemic] has not changed the way I watch movies because since Netflix came out, I'm like Netflix, Netflix, Netflix, and I'm always checking what's new. I think that's why the way I watch films hasn't changed because if I don't like that option, I pause it and watch another and I'm now spending more money because Disney+ is now out and I want to watch Disney, Disney, Disney or like Amazon has new great films, so I want Amazon now. That's why this [the pandemic] didn't affect me.

Informants mention that even before the pandemic, they resorted to streaming platforms as the primary source to consume Mexican films in general, not just comedies, due to the "availability" of a large number of movies as well as the "convenience" and "comfort" of watching them from home. For the respondents, digital media are an easy way to access Mexican films from current and past epochs either legally, through YouTube or similar platforms, and illegally, through downloads in forums or torrents. A participant from Guadalajara elaborates in his strategies of digital consumption:

> Nowadays, it is easier to choose what to watch because there are many platforms or because so many people can make pirate copies because not all classic Mexican films are available on platforms. Obviously, due to the public decision, there [in streaming platforms] are the ones they watch more, the blockbusters, the new ones.

The interviewees mentioned two preferred platforms to watch a Mexican comedy: Netflix and Amazon. While the former is cited as the alternative to see content in general, the latter is considered to navigate the most current and highest-grossing Mexican films.

Movie theaters occupy second place among the media used by the respondents to view Mexican comedies. This alternative is addressed as a second option because several interviewees comment that "those films are not worth paying for." In addition, as the informants consider that "it is not necessary to pay attention to enjoy" these productions, it is easier to consume them in the "comfort of home." That feeling is not only reserved for

Mexican comedies, but any comedy, as stated by a participant from Guadalajara: "Even if it [a comedy] were an American one, I wouldn't go to watch it in a movie theater because going to the movies is an experience, the giant screen, the sound, and a comedy can hardly take advantage of that experience." The fact that this participant suggested that an American film is above a Mexican comedy is no anomaly when they refer to their routine of going to the movies. During the discussions, participants said repeatedly that watching a Mexican comedy depends on their companions' preferences and the movie theater's offering because a comedy is not generally their "first option." However, despite this reluctance, most participants report having seen at least one comedy film in theaters last year because, as noted, these movies are widely available.

The commercial release of a Mexican comedy film in theaters is a crucial factor indicating to the participants whether, within the standards of the genre, the film is worth watching or not. A young student from Mexico City explains this idea:

> Unless there is a better one [film] in the movie theater, I watch them [Mexican comedies]. However, if it [a Mexican comedy] was not released in movie theaters, I don't watch it [on streaming platforms] because, I don't know, it's a bad sign.

Finally, only a few participants indicate a third means for consuming Mexican comedy films: cable television. In this regard, they comment that sometimes when changing channels, they have found one broadcasting a Mexican comedy they once saw and enjoyed in cinemas. Because of their prior experience, they stay on that channel and continue watching the movie. When referring to this media outlet, the common factor is repetition, indicating this phenomenon the reason that incites them to watch the film because it was "stinging" them, "like if it was saying to me 'pick me, pick me.'"

Strategies to select and mediate the consumption of Mexican comedies

Relaxation and the irony bribe

While discussing these three media used to consume Mexican comedies, participants naturally reflect on the strategies to select and regulate their consumption of these movies. The most prevalent motivation deployed by this audience is amusement. Respondents indicate selecting Mexican comedies to "pass the time," "relax," "laugh," "change their mood," or "turn off their brain" because these are "easy" films that do not require any "effort." Elaborating on these terms, a participant from Tijuana explains how a Mexican comedy becomes the best alternative to relax: "I see them at night because I no longer have assignments. I already did my activities during the day, and I have the night free, and I take the opportunity to watch a Mexican movie to fall asleep." Informants use comedies as a tool to relieve the stress caused by their daily duties and activities. In addition, as they consider comedies demand limited attention, they can accomplish other tasks while listening to these stories. For example, a participant from Monterrey explains how comedies have become her favorite genre for doing chores: "usually when I have to clean my room or do an activity where I don't need to think about what I'm doing, like cleaning or moving things, that's when I watch a Mexican comedy."[25]

A contradiction emerges when participants discuss amusement. On the one hand, they recognize that Mexican comedies have a series of deficiencies that make them a "disposable" product compared to other Mexican films and/or Hollywood productions. On the other hand, when they justify why they watch comedies, participants usually express

[25] The multiples studies based on the uses and gratifications theory have already covered the multiple motivations of film spectators to watch particular films. To mention just one related to the intersection of cultural identity and film studies, Soto-Sanfiel (2021) delves into the reasons of young European audiences for consuming movies and contrasts their expectations with the ones from young American audiences.

positive emotions these movies cause in them, such as "joy," "fun," and "entertainment." They turn to these movies when they are looking for something to brighten their day. For example, a participant in Mexico City mentions that due to the pandemic, he picked these films for being "light" and helping him to change his mood when he was "very saturated with the real world and bad news." For their part, several focus group members in Guadalajara explain that when they feel "cranky," "bored," "sad," or "depressed," they prefer to watch something that "relaxes" them like these comedies. In Monterrey, Tijuana, and Veracruz, several participants indicate "having pleasant feelings" by watching a Mexican comedy.

The explanation for this contradiction comes from what Cloud (2010) recognizes as "the irony bribe," a strategy whereby audiences realize the deficiencies that a media text may have and approach the text for the pleasure generated by knowing that they can identify the failures of the premises presented in these stories. In other words, viewers engage with the narrative, knowing that it does not accurately reflect reality and, consequently, it cannot affect them. The downside of this strategy is that while viewers are focused on noticing the flaws of films, at the same time, these film texts convey ideologies that silently operate in society because they go unnoticed by spectators who are focused on recognizing the flaws of the film. Some interviewees express this ironic reading of the texts in a clear way when saying phrases such as "I like these bad movies and laugh at their mistakes" or "my sister and I watch these films to mock not just the film's plot, but the film itself."

Escapism

However, most respondents engage in a subtle identification of the real and non-real through another strategy they and their relatives implement: escapism. It is common for

participants to articulate the word "escape" when referring to the reason behind selecting a Mexican film. Interviewees point out that this cinema allows them to put aside the country's social problems and "not be sad because of that reality." They admit that these films propose a happy ending because reality does not offer it. It is critical to stress that escapism is not necessarily related to the moviegoers' motivations, such as enjoyment. As Jeacle (2009) explains, because cinema serves as an organized representation of reality, it provides an opportunity to escape from the contextual conditions in which the audience lives. At the same time, it presents alternatives to cope with that reality that the audience can perceive and implement. As the contextual factor is the most relevant component of escapism, Mexican comedies become a way to deal with the social problems of this young audience (and Mexican fellows) in the Mexican case. A participant from Monterrey elaborates on this assertion:

> These are movies that when we, the middle class, watch, we can say, "I would like to be like them, living in a peachy world where the only thing needed is love, and they don't worry about eating or financial stability or things like that." Those are the movies we like because we are not on the peachy side of life.

Nevertheless, respondents mention thinking this way and also suggest that their close relatives justify consuming these films through the same reasoning. For example, an informant from Veracruz indicates how her mother explains to him that these films make her "feel comfortable, laugh, not think about the Mexican reality and think that a fair Mexico is possible." Hence, participants are aware that consumers of Mexican comedies, including themselves, use escapism to cope with the negative reality of their context, one in which itself media contributes to the stress and negativity by bombarding them with detrimental messages about Mexico's reality.

Family bonds

Escapism introduces and sheds light upon another strategy used by this young audience. Participants do not talk just about themselves but about an audience that they consider avidly consume Mexican comedies: their relatives. In other words, participants indicate a third-person effect. According to them, comedies have a more significant influence and provoke a greater fascination in their relatives than themselves. Perloff (2009) points out that, from this perspective, an individual can feel immune (and superior) to the common people around them. This bias is evident on several occasions when interviewees note that because they are "film production" or "communication" students, they are not "satisfied" with what most people consume. In addition, they have the knowledge and background to notice the failures of these films and demand more quality in these comedies, not like most of the Mexican audience that "gets what they ask for." A clear example of this perception occurs in a focus group in Guadalajara where two participants mention studying film production, which, unlike the other focus group members, renders them capable of criticizing the industry and the audience "because we are content creators, and we know what we're talking about." This perception resembles the (sometimes arrogant) perspective of previous Mexican scholars boasting their superiority over the audience because of the film (and academic) texts they studied.

Although this differentiation among participants themselves only occurred in one focus group, their attitude was recurrent in other discussions when this young audience talked about their fathers, mothers, partners, and siblings as the principal spectators of these comedies. For example, a young student from Mexico City explains her relationship with her father by criticizing him for watching "mono-neural movies," a nickname she borrows from a university professor to identify Mexican comedies or films with an excess of special

effects. Although her father justifies his desire to see these stories as a way to relax, she confesses that she cannot "stop thinking" while watching one of these films.

By contrast, on other occasions, it is precisely the arguments of relatives or partners that convince participants to watch one of these films and change their opinion about them. An informant from Monterrey, for example, explains how his girlfriend convinced him to watch Mexican comedies:

> She consumes a lot of Mexican cinema, and she laughs at me, saying, 'Nah, you think of yourself as the cream of the crop because you don't like Mexican cinema.' So, we talk about that, and she changed my mind by saying that, whether we like it or not, that's what Mexicans want; that's what we watch.

No matter how strong the participants' arguments against these films are or how favorable are their relatives' opinions are, participants agreed that they consume these movies with their parents, siblings, and partners to promote family harmony. Despite the fact that participants downplayed the role of the family in their Mexican identity in the previous chapter while talking about their consumption of these comedies, this characteristic occupies an important place, making its actual value for this young audience to emerge. In each region where I conducted this research, respondents repeatedly mentioned watching these films with their intimate friends and family members. For example, in Mexico City, a participant explains that she watches these movies because her boyfriend likes them very much, "and to please him, you pick them." An interviewee from Guadalajara emphasizes that she watches these movies with her mother to share moments with her because her mom "dislikes bloody or violent movies." In Monterrey, a young student points out that these are the only films he watches together with his parents in theaters. In Tijuana, a respondent confesses to seeing comedies because these are the only movies his family watch because of his younger sister. Finally, in Veracruz, a participant

shares that his mother is a "fan" of Mexican comedies, and she constantly asks him to put them on Netflix "and then I stay with her for a while to accompany her." Thus, although participants stressed that the family is no longer a vital feature of Mexican identity, this strategy shows that the family continues exerting a strong impact on Mexicans to the extent of influencing their media content selection.

Dependance on marketing

A fourth strategy these participants deploy to select (and evaluate) Mexican comedies comes from their reliance on marketing campaigns. Thus, titles, trailers, posters, adverts, and reviews are critical agents in deciding whether to watch a comedy or not. Respondents indicate that by looking at the title, poster, or trailer, it is easy for them to know what the film is about and whether they will like it or not. For instance, if the title is different from other comedies or uses vernacular language such as *Mirreyes vs. Godinez* (2019), *Guadalupe-Reyes* (2019), or *Cindy la Regia*, this young audience feels a stronger attraction to watch these movies. An informant from Guadalajara explains that he is willing to watch a film as long as it doesn't have a "basic title," which "sums up the plot, so no one gets confused about what the movie is about."

Regarding posters for comedies, participants agreed they are very colorful compared to the ones used by other movies, so "they call your attention." A participant from Veracruz mentions how trailers tell him "the kind of comedy the film will be because they show you the jokes and you can get an idea about it." Reviews also play a critical role in framing the movie as something worth watching or not. That's why the participants rely on YouTubers or social media accounts of the specialized press in deciding whether to give a Mexican comedy a chance or not. A participant from Guadalajara explains:

> If I do not see good critiques from the public or the critics, I will not go to see it. That's the truth. However, if they say "Ah, it is terrific, you have to see it," of course I will be delighted to support the Mexican cinema.

Similarly, peers' recommendations fulfill that role, as mentioned by a participant from Veracruz: "if a friend tells me that 'this comedy is awesome,' of course I will consider it." In addition, when participants consider a film's advertising, the main cast carries significant weight.

In this sense, the cast becomes a double-edged sword as some of the participants affirm that having well-known talent warrants a "fun" movie. In contrast, another fraction perceives this fact as the main argument to avoid a comedy. Regarding the first point, an informant from Guadalajara stresses that as long as one of the cast members has "Derbez" as a last name, the film "is going to be good." On the opposite, an informant from Veracruz argues: "when there are well-renowned actors, and I would think twice before watching this film. However, if it has a new talent, I think it is worth giving it the shot to see how they act and their work." Both camps agree on one point. If stand-up comedians appear in those films, it's worth giving them a chance. In this regard, a respondent from Mexico City comments: "comedies have been like introducing more Youtubers or stand-up comedians; that's why I have seen them. For example, Carlos Ballarta appeared on *Mirreyes vs. Godinez*, and when I knew that, I said, 'okay, let's give it a chance.'"

Curiosity/morbidity, familiarity, and contemporarily

Finally, participants use other strategies less frequently, such as curiosity/morbidity, familiarity, and contemporarily. Concerning curiosity/morbidity, the informants confess to watching these films just because they have heard strong negative comments against them, as a participant from Mexico City explains: "If people say that this film is bad, let's see why they say that; maybe it isn't." In this case, focus group members agreed that the "buzz"

around the film appeals to them. For its part, familiarity relates to the respondents' process of identification as they recognize "places," "characters," "the culture," or "situations" associated with their contextual conditions appearing in the films. For instance, some informants from Monterrey mentioned watching *Cindy la Regia* because they are also *regios* (a nickname for people from Monterrey). They want to see how the movie portrayed their regional culture. A participant from Guadalajara elaborates on her point of view:

> I prefer these movies because they are something that I already know, and I fear wasting my time watching something that I don't like or that I will not understand because of its language. Why would I watch a French film if I don't speak French? Instead, I watch a Mexican movie because I'm already familiarized with the theme, plot, language, and characters.

Some other interviewees claim to watch Mexican films because they are new and show current situations. These participants also tend to manifest strong support for Mexican cinema, so they prefer to consume something "national" because, as a participant from Mexico City says, if "we watch American *churros*[26], why don't we watch Mexican ones that you can see without reading subtitles."

A discernible pattern emerges from these three last strategies, the close identification of these spectators with the films. This topic will be discussed in detail in the next chapter; for now, it is sufficient to stress that despite the participants' animosity professed towards Mexican comedies, they imply a process of negotiation of their identity in the strategies used to select them. This reflection is more underscored in the next section, where informants discuss the advantages and disadvantages of having these films represent Mexican culture in general.

[26] generic films similar among them (Noble, 2005).

Selecting and mediating the consumption of Mexican films

The discussion of the participants in this section highlights seven strategies used by them to select a Mexican comedy and, consequently, mediate their consumption. Each one of them also provides an insight into the motives that lead to watching one of these films and the influence of their social context in this process. For instance, when participants rely on the irony bribe as a tool to read these movie texts, they reveal their awareness of the aesthetical and narrative properties of these films and engage in a comparison between a Mexica cinema they distinguish made for entertaining and a Mexican one with artistic properties that has a social message. Thus, participants perceive themselves with a higher cultural capital than the average spectator. Even though this perception of comedies as middlebrow products, participants' responses justify their existence as a tool of resilience in a social context where traditional media (local and global) constantly stresses the negative aspects of Mexico, such as violence or drug trafficking. Thus, they rely on these comedies to escape and counter a mediated reality that frames their culture as problematic.

Interestingly, one of their strategies reveals a reality they downplayed when discussing their identity: their family's role. Although focus group members indicated that family no longer carries the same social significance as in the Mexican past, the fact that they privilege the family bonds over their media preferences suggests otherwise. Respondents prefer to spend time with family even though it implies watching a comedy, strengthening the ties between family members.

The free market also has an essential function in how this audience selects Mexican films. More than easily conclude that marketing campaigns have the desired impact on their target audiences, participants' agency allows them to rely on a sum of different factors as they not only passively consume what the campaign offers, but they look for more

information about the film on the internet. Their responses have highlighted a process in which participants search online information about the film, relying on YouTubers who review movies, forums of discussion about the picture, and social media comments/posts to hear what other fellow Mexicans think about a particular comedy. By gathering all this information, respondents are ready to decide whether they give a chance to the film or not.

Finally, their individual agency was demonstrated by three particular strategies, curiosity/morbidity, familiarity, and contemporarily, in which their previous experiences have shaped their ways of approaching these films. Hence, identifying an actor, actress or director can be a way to accept or reject a film. Moreover, hearing a particular detail about the film's production or its plot can trigger the participants' desires to watch the movie. Furthermore, identifying their Mexican reality is also part of the conversation, and they rely on this process to select a particular comedy. Chapter VI will tackle this identification strategy in detail; by now, is it sufficient to recognize that it is also part of these strategies. Now, let's dive into how this audience thinks about these comedies.

Breaking old stereotypes, building new ones

Since I started my doctoral program, one of my main interests has been to get closer to the Mexican audiences and understand where resides and what has fostered a love-hate relationship with Mexican cinema. On the one hand, we talk about an art cinema consumed and awarded in festivals worldwide, a cinema that makes us feel proud because it engenders positive discussion of the talent of the Mexicans involved in its production. On the other hand, we talk with disdain about mass-produced cinema, bad taste comedies that make us feel ashamed but are popular among an unidentifiable target audience (never including us). People complain more about comedies because they perceive them as empty products taking away opportunities for new talent or new proposals. The irony in this

perception is that we have an industry thanks to these comedies. Whether we like comedies or not, the comments of all the participants have made me think that the portrayals of Mexico and Mexicans available in these films have much to say about the genre's success. Over and over, I have heard complaints in these and previous conversations with Mexican audiences that stereotypes about Mexico/Mexicans as primitive and violent emerge when meeting people from other cultures. They blame the media, especially the narco *series. Interestingly, mass-produced Mexican cinema does not show traces of these stereotypes; in contrast, art cinema tells another story. The irony behind this discussion becomes clear.*

So far, this chapter has delved into the traits that participants consider fundamental to determine the Mexican authenticity of a comedy, their interest in these films, their consumption strategies, and the means used to watch them. Although these sections have outlined and suggest a series of reasons to watch these films, this point becomes more explicit when participants articulate the advantages and disadvantages of these films representing their Mexican identity. This discussion provides an answer to the research question 2c specified in this dissertation.

It is critical to recall how participants have expressed negatively about these films, considering them ephemeral, which means that these comedies are easily forgettable. In addition, some of the focus group members rely on the irony bribe as a shield that protects their identity from these (mis)representations. Because of this animosity towards these comedies, participants indicate that they are not the target of these films and describe what they consider the actual audience of these comedies.

The "imagined" target audience of Mexican comedies

As explained in the prior section, these interviewees identify their close friends and relatives as a group of closely associated spectators. The respondents tend to extrapolate

from this perspective to perceive the target audience of comedies as a group of fellow Mexicans aware that the image portrayed of Mexico and Mexicans in these films is not real. However, participants think that the motivation of these spectators to watch these films is escapism: putting aside, at least for two hours, the conflictive Mexican reality. An informant from Veracruz elaborates on the average Mexican imagined as the target audience of these comedies:

> Mexicans look for films that do not refer to Mexico's problems, so they look for films with themes that, in some other way, address their context and develop within that context that they live day by day but not include those problems, those details that are part of their life. I think they are looking for a much plainer cinema, avoiding being saturated with negatives messages and looking lost themselves in the comedy.

As participants identified escapism as the principal motivation of what consider the target audience of Mexican comedies, it is possible to suggest that having comedies as representations could bring more positive than adverse effects for this imagined audience to cope with their reality. At the same time, these arguments reinforce the participants' perception that these comedies are aspirational for viewers to reach a higher social position and imagine a better Mexico. Some participants justify their own consumption by relying on this aspirational and escapist sense; as a participant in Mexico City comments: "I want to rest from my problems. I like to think that it [the peachy world] can happen, and I like to feel like that girl, and I want to have that kind wedding and think beautiful things about my country."

The other audience members imagined by these participants are foreigners, non-Mexican people who consume these films outside of Mexico. There are two nuances to consider about this different audience. First, participants never refer to Mexican Americans or Mexican diasporas specifically; they use more generalized terms like Latinx and

Hispanic to refer to these populations in the U.S. Second, they are unsure whether these comedies are watched much outside of Mexico. A participant in Mexico City encompasses both perspectives:

> To be honest, I extremely doubt it [that Mexican comedies are consumed abroad]. In the United States live a lot of ex-Mexicans or people that speak Spanish or Latinos in general, so I think that they are the ones who watch them, but I don't believe that people who are not related to the Latino culture consume them. If you watch it, then you have Latino parents, or you're Latino or something like that, but no average *gringo* will watch a Mexican comedy.

When considering this imagined foreign audience, participants agreed that media representations play a vital role in defining the other and its culture. As an interviewee in Guadalajara stresses, "whether we like it or not, the image they [the non-native] had constructed when you ask them about Mexico or Mexicans has been shaped by the things they have watched on media." This reflection resonates with the perceptions these informants elucidate when defining their Mexican identity compared to other cultures, as many of the stereotypes about Mexico or Mexicans worldwide are constructed due to media (mis)representations. In light of this fact, respondents expressed mixed feelings about the depictions available in these comedies. On the one hand, they recognize these films can contribute to breaking some stereotypes. A participant from Tijuana explains this point: "they [foreign audiences] are going to think that we are like in those pictures, so if they had a concept that Mexicans were *desmadrosos* [people who cause chaos and participate in debauchery] and all that, they are going to change it." On the other hand, they also consider this image limited by the topics and characters that do not comprise the whole reality and complexity of Mexico; like a participant from Veracruz mentions: "it is not a vivid and credible image of Mexico." The focus group members are aware that these are

consequences of the comedy genre limits because, in order to be "funny," a participant from Mexico City comments, "these movies must exaggerate or distort reality."

Pros and cons in having comedies represent Mexican culture

The interviewees transfer this intricate relationship of bright sides and downsides about how the imagined audience engages with these comedies to the advantages and disadvantages perceived in how comedies depict Mexican identity. They identify three central representations these films communicate to their target audience: 1) a developed Mexico, 2) a pronounced difference between social classes framed by the wealthy class perspective, and 3) a relaxed, partying, funny and warm Mexican. Informants elaborate on the advantages and disadvantages of these three portrayals.

The image of a more developed Mexico

Regarding the image of a more developed Mexico, respondents recognize that comedies break previous stereotypes that *narco* series have reinforced about the violence or life in the country. As a participant in Guadalajara notes, comedies are "opening the door to know other realities about what Mexico is." From this perspective, related to the discussion of the characteristics that make a Mexican comedy authentic, a respondent from Guadalajara notes that the goals of these films are to "break that trauma that foreigners see Mexico as little ranchers" and show worldwide audiences "that we are at the level of other nations." Nevertheless, focus group members stressed that it is only an urban vision centered in Mexico City, obscuring the contextual conditions and reality of other states or places in Mexico. Moreover, a principal danger of this image is transforming Mexico into an unrecognizable place for the eyes of the foreigner, who mistake the country with other developed nations. A participant from Mexico City elaborates on this idea:

> These films are consumed abroad because they [foreigners] see them as Spanish movies. They don't think about us; they don't perceive us as Mexicans. They think about Mexico when watching drug traffickers [on the screen], *Roma*, *Chicuarotes* (2019), or *Amores Perros* (2000), but comedies, like romantic comedies, I think they watch them in Europe or Asia because they believe we are Spanish.

According to respondents, this fact is not only a consequence of the images conveyed but also of the narrative resources adopted from Hollywood films. For this reason, a participant in Mexico City explains that even culturally proximate cultures, like Latin American ones, perceive Mexican comedies as a product manufactured by the U.S.: "We are copying the gringo model, that's why in Latin American they see us as we were part of the United States."

The image of a more fragmented Mexico

Concerning the second portrayal, a pronounced difference among social classes framed by the wealthy class perspective, although films convey a real gap between social classes, comedies stereotype these groups. Stereotyping transforms characters into exaggerated caricatures that downplay the credibility of these representations. A participant from Tijuana explains how instead of presenting actual characters, these films "depict unnecessary exaggerations. If they are rich, they are super extravagant or stupid. Poor people always live tragedies; they don't have food to eat, they cannot work because they don't have education, or no one gives them opportunities."

Thus, participants note that comedies present misleading portrayals of how these two social classes behave, calling them cartoons. In addition to this mocking representation, participants emphasize that a privileged white lens filters the narrative. As a respondent from Guadalajara complains: "they [producers] love showing *whitexicans*; stories are always from their perspective." Framing the narrative from a white and wealthy perspective causes that participants perceive this portrayal as a disadvantage. A respondent from

Monterrey notices how this point of view is a biased representation of the country: "[these comedies] depict a tiny reality, a small reality, a bit of all what Mexico is, and that's the reality of privileged people, of the privilege that many Mexicans aspire to."

However, for several focus group members, this strategy is appropriate to counter the negative image media conveys about Mexico. For instance, a young student from Monterrey explains that these comedies challenge outsiders' idea of Mexico as exotic by presenting a reality close to the one experience of foreign audiences: "at the end of the day, these Mexican films will resonate with foreign people because they are--well most of Europeans and Americans are--privileged." Furthermore, another respondent from Monterrey argues that, despite the limited vision of comedies, the social class reality portrayed in them allows audiences to perceive contemporary Mexico more accurately than previous media representations of the country. As she explains:

> I feel that at least people can say, "Ah, okay, that's what a city in Mexico looks like; this is the people's routine." They [Mexican comedies] have a solid power to reflect the culture like any other film from the U.S. or other country, like *Parasite* (2019), which helped us to understand a little bit more about the culture there. So, I feel like everyone that can see our films could say, "Ah, okay, this is Mexico."

The image of a warm Mexico

Finally, the third perspective these films communicate about Mexico, according to the interviewees, is the image of a relaxed, partying, funny, and warm Mexican. In this regard, respondents concur that the portrayal of Mexican behavior is generally accurate and echoes some of the traits already discussed in the previous chapter about their identity as Mexican. Thus, thanks to this correspondence between Mexican comedies and the characteristics of Mexican identity, it is possible to vindicate the image of Mexicans abroad. "If they [foreigners] see these films," a participant from Mexico City indicates, *"*they are going to say that we are *a toda madre* [very cool], hilarious, and hard

workers." Nevertheless, although these films are more reliable in depicting the Mexican identity than some Hollywood or other Mexican productions, this is not the whole picture of the Mexican identity, as an informant from Veracruz sums up:

> [These comedies] show a bit about us regarding our partying spirit, that we are warm. They send that real message of who we are, but the truth is that not all of us are like that. We are so different from each other. Some are introverted, shy, and there is much to work in that concept of Mexican because not all of us are party people, not all of us are *Godinez*, not all of us are posh or poor.

Having comedies as representations of Mexico and Mexicans

The discussion of these focus group members regarding the advantages and disadvantages of having comedies represent Mexican culture derived in the construction of an imagined target audience of Mexican comedies. They suppose that these representations more easily influence other fellow Mexicans and Mexican diasporas because they consider having higher skills to interpret and handle these film texts. This perception makes easily identifiable two phenomena operating in this young audience.

First, these results indicate the prevalence of a third-person effect. Because of this effect, a person can underestimate the influence of media content over them or their peers, assuming that a third person will be strongly affected by it. From this perspective, individuals believe that messages can cause significant behavioral effects in others, not in them (Perloff, 2009). As the answers of these participants have indicated, they perceive as immune to comedies' misrepresentations and message, creating what Perloff (2009) calls a target corollary, a specific audience or social group that is indicated as the intended audience of particular media content. Aligned with the theoretical paradigms that sustain this effect, this group of participants assumes that comedies will distort the perception of the audience's social reality. These results illustrate how the third-person effect operates in a particular communicative context. However, there are specific nuances to consider.

Although this result may be perceived as something negative, the pros and cons explained by the participants provide a more complex dynamic in which the third-person effect not always implies negative connotations. For instance, if we pay attention to how these respondents described comedies as a way to break stereotypes and frame Mexico from a more positive perspective, then it is possible to argue that these representations are fulfilling an important role and are giving resources to both, these respondents and their imagined target audience, to cope with their reality. This perspective provides similar results to what Mayer (2003) found in her study of *telenovelas*. A different outcome is obtained if we notice how, like Asse Dayán (2017), participants also have recognized that a wealthy class ideology dominates these narratives. Thus, from this perspective, they justify these films as aspirational and stereotypical. In either case, respondents conceive this imagined audience as less skillful than them.

This fact leads to another phenomenon perceptible in these responses, the operation of Bourdieu's (1984) cultural capital in the Mexican context. Participants frame themselves as an elite because they perceive having more resources to handle and disregard these representations' impact(s). According to focus group members, their constructed target audience has bad tastes compared to them. This idea reinforces the prevalence of a hegemonic discourse in the culture that privileges some representations over others. Thus, participants unconsciously help to perpetuate the status quo by distancing themselves from the target audience. Strategies such as resorting to the irony bribe explain how a spectator is not aware of their role in this perpetuation by engaging critically with some aspects of the media text and ignoring others. Interestingly, as will be explained in chapter VI, respondents are not fully aware of how they are privileged by having a high economic

capital, as Hinojosa Córdova (2015) noticed, giving them the chance to select multiple media outlets and contents.

Into the rationale behind the Mexican comedies' consumption

As the responses cited in this section suggest, participants reflect upon comedies by engaging in a negotiation between their identity expressed in traits or contextual conditions they consider Mexican as well as the events and characters these comedies portray. This topic will be at the center of the following chapter.

Before delving into that identification process is important to notice how this chapter has elucidated respondents' rationale behind their consumption of Mexican comedies. Although many of them confess to not regularly watching these films and do not conceive themselves as comedies' target audience, their discussion reveals a more complex relationship between them and these movies. However, this fact does not necessarily support Hinojosa Córdova's (2015) results about identifying this population as the most avid consumers of Mexican comedies. Two factors, the number of films watched by these participants and the dynamics expressed by them, raise questions regarding how accurate it is to indicate that young people between 18 and 25 years old comprise the audience that consumes more Mexican films. In fact, their responses suggest other possible consumers, such as older generations (their parents), who informant consider the primary target audience of Mexican cinema. This claim requires more attention in further research projects. Moreover, they also signal a significant change in Mexican film consumption, presenting streaming platforms as a more relevant media outlet for their demographic.

We have noticed during this chapter that respondents identify a very straightforward set of characteristics about Mexico and the Mexicans that these films construct and portray, which, undoubtedly, make these comedies stand out from any other Mexican or foreign

movie. Interestingly, although transnational forces shape comedies, these participants aligned with García Canclini's (2000) assumption of getting the national from the mixture of signifiers available in one media content. More critical is that, instead of relying on previously conceived signifiers of their culture, respondents deploy their agency to determine a series of factors that include local and global traits as part of the authenticity of a Mexican film. Thus, we can imply from the responses of this young audience that they are aware of how comedies are co-productions shaped by the global and the local, as their identity.

This chapter has also illustrated how the agency of these spectators deployed in their strategies of selection and consumption is a political and a cultural act, just as indicated by Sandvoss (2015) studies in the literature review. Among the strategies mentioned by these respondents, enjoyment, escapism, and family life occupy a relevant centra position, suggesting a connection with some of the traits acknowledged as Mexican, such as resilience and family bonds. At the center of these strategies is the use of cinema to cope with the unstable and conflictive social conditions that participants and their relatives perceive in the Mexican context. They also agree that these comedies fulfill a more critical function, such as challenging negative stereotypes of the country or providing an alternative reality that makes them believe that a better Mexico is possible. However, the vision of this reality is limited to a wealthy class, urban context, and white race; their exaggerated properties make these films a conflictive battleground over these participants' Mexican identity.

The next chapter delves into the last variable converging in the process of identity formation: identification. Through this process, participants try to conciliate the characteristics they perceived as fundamental to their identity as Mexicans with the

representations they find in the comedies produced in Mexico. With their identity at play, negotiating it becomes their last defense to not succumb to a pan-identity shaped by the market and globalization. Now, let's dive into this young audience's struggle to recognize if the joke was on them or not.

CHAPTER VI

NEGOTIATING A MEXICAN IDENTITY THROUGH MEXICAN COMEDIES

Participants in this research were asked to discuss various dimensions of their identity and the most popular and profitable Mexican genre in the national film industry, comedies. Through their discussions, participants have engaged in what Hall (2006) describes as a negotiated position. This group of spectators indicate that they perceive Mexican comedies as a product manufactured from fragments that reflect only part of the Mexican essence. At the same time, participants use their situated logic and experiences to interpret these texts, contrasting their reality with the cinematic images available in these films. In this process of making meaning, they reflect upon these comedies' complexities and biased perspectives of these comedies and propose new alternatives to deconstruct their meanings and symbols. This process has revealed these participants' mixed feelings and thoughts about their identity, their reasons to consume Mexican comedies, their concerns about the characteristics of these films, the influence they perceive comedies have over a Mexican identity.

Hence, a Mexican comedy triggers a series of expectations before a viewer selects it, while watching, and after the credits have rolled, positioning spectators in a crossfire between what they think they are as Mexican and what these comedies portray as Mexican. This chapter illustrates how Mexican comedy films contribute to these viewers' identity formation/negotiation, addressing the third research question of this dissertation. There are four dimensions necessary to consider to fully solve this inquiry, each of which is discussed in turn and refers to a derived research question. First, this chapter addresses the narrative

devices these spectators rely on to link the comedies with their identity. Second, informants disclose the emotions and thoughts these films elicit regarding Mexico and their fellow Mexicans. Third, we delve into how this audience negotiates comedies' misrepresentations of the traits they consider fundamental to their Mexican identity. Finally, this young audience comments about the roles these comedies play according to their identity formation processes.

Mexico on the screen: the narrative devices to frame an identifiable Mexican identity

I have watched Mexican films for as long as I can remember, and I cannot recall one that has talked about me, what I am as a Mexican or human being, or what I feel or expect from life. It does not mean that I don't like Mexican cinema; it is quite the opposite. Some of my favorite movies are from my home country. However, regarding my identity as Mexican, I would argue that these films only convey some traces of events or characters that I can recognize from my day-to-day life in Mexico. From the last comedies I have seen, I can relate to the social pressure of having children. Only when you have them, it becomes the moment when you can be considered a real family for many Mexicans. This situation is similar to the one experienced by the main couple in Ahí te encargo *(2020). I identify the smugness of some former co-workers and advertising professors in the characters working in the advertising agency in* Guerra de likes *(2021). In* Sin hijos*, I find connections between the attitude of the female main character and some friends who also have decided not to have children. Nevertheless, I cannot assure you that these are Mexican traits, but I can say that these are traces of my reality experienced in Mexico, and, likely, I am not the only Mexican who has lived them.*

After discussing Mexican identity and their perceptions of what comedies have to offer to the audience, respondents engage in a series of reflections that make them hesitate and contradict their own answers numerous times. “I don’t think that, I mean, I feel like, I feel like, I mean, I relate myself with these comedies, but not, not so much;” this interviewee in Monterrey struggles to define the existing connection between her Mexican identity and the one portrayed in these films. For her, comedies provoke an identification, but that fact is not necessarily influential in her identity:

> I mean, I can watch these movies or not, and I will not miss a part of my identity. Perhaps it is because they don’t show much about what is true or ordinary, so I do feel reflected. I identify myself to a certain extent, but that does not influence me; even with characters, it has not happened that I relate a lot with them. It has never occurred to me.

It is common to note how Mexican comedies present a cluster of circumstances and characters that respondents find appealing in one way or another. Simultaneously, participants strive to maintain this nexus between comedies and their identity because of some misrepresentations they encounter in these films. Therefore, the young people who inform this dissertation elaborate on the narrative devices nurturing and loosening this connection. By doing this, they also answer research question 3a as these narrative devices can foster (or not) participants’ identification.

Characters

The most recurring narrative element cited by the respondents is the array of characters. Although informants stress that comedies only represent two types of characters derived from Mexico’s social classes (poor and wealthy) and, most of the time are unidimensional, they perceive these characters’ traits as accurate. An informant from Mexico City recounts his association between fictional characters and reality:

> I have attended many parties and met people from the two social groups in *Nosotros los Nobles*. I have interacted with very wealthy people, *mirreyes* like the film shows, and they are like that. It is the same with people from humble origins, some not all.

Moreover, according to the respondents, these features reflect the attitudes and behaviors their friends or acquaintances perform. An interviewee from Guadalajara stresses that every Mexican has "100% chances to relate the characters you are watching in a comedy with someone you know." In this vein, direct experiences recounted by interviewees support that premise. For example, a student from Monterrey talking about *Cindy la Regia* indicates how the film's protagonist is very similar to his friends from the wealthy neighborhood of San Pedro, "people from San Pedro are the ones that express themselves like her [Cindy], with that stereotype or material person." A participant from Veracruz confesses to calling his friend "Javi Noble" because he is also a "*mirrey*, practically a representation of him." Likewise, a respondent from Guadalajara recalls living in Mexico City and noticing how "the ladies from Las Lomas are really like that, it's not a joke, and there's also the hippie who moved to La Condesa or Roma [wealthy neighborhoods in Mexico City]." These traits become so distinctive that informants affirm their existence and confess that any significant divergence from these stereotypes turns the film unplausible. A participant from Mexico City clarifies this point by remembering her experience watching *#Lady Rancho* (2019):

> I couldn't stand even the first 10 minutes. I guess that the producers' goal was to break the stereotype of the blonde and white girl that lives in Polanco, and they presented a rich girl, but chubby who did not talk like the typical posh girl . . . I would have liked to see the typical stereotype instead of that odd thing supposed to be a character.

For these participants, stereotypes appearing in comedy films have become the norm to represent poor and wealthy social classes, so breaking them is counterproductive: "Yes, there are rich brown people, but they are not posh; they usually are not the posh boys. . . If

comedies show a brown character talking like a posh person, you as a spectator will not buy that."

Relying on stereotypes is not something new in Mexican cinema. As explained in the literature review, films from the Golden Age perpetuate stereotypes regarding the characters to promote the interests of an elite aiming to control the population by fostering a sense of unification in a construct called *pueblo*. Interestingly, these informants' responses suggest the prevalence of a similar hegemonic discourse in which the disparities of social classes have replaced the differences between the rural and the urban. The outcome is the same in both cases: unification. However, this unification does not imply solving social inequalities or reduce the gap between social classes. Quite the opposite, it requires that each social group accepts their limitations and places in the social hierarchy exposed in these films. As Hall (1997/2013b) point out, normalizing stereotypes is a way in which a group achieves social cohesion and accepts its limits. Thus, by endorsing these stereotypes as necessary and somehow accurate, participants like the latter perpetuate the status quo and support the prevalence of this hegemonic discourse. When participants mention that brown people can also be part of the wealthy class in Mexico, audiences would not believe it if presented in a film; they also reinforce the power and dominance of white people, and intrinsically, accept their role in the Mexican social hierarchy.

Hence, participants are not against having a *whitexican* stereotype as a referent of a wealthy class or framing a character as *naco* if that person is lower class; their concern resides in the reduced number of characteristics used to describe them. A participant from Guadalajara concludes in this regard: "I agree with my peers that this aspect of characterization exists, is real, but Mexican comedies could go beyond this."

This "beyond" would require renouncing exaggeration as a narrative resource and including a wider variety of characters in the narratives. First, as mentioned in Chapter V about the Mexican comedy genre, one of the characteristics interviewees identified as recurrent in these films is distorting their portrayals to the extent of converting them into caricatures. Although this is a source of nuisance for the informants, it does not deny that the images available in these stories still correspond somehow to reality. Still, this exaggeration is what breaks a depiction that, if framed differently, could be considered as accurate. A young student in Guadalajara affirms this fact: "They [the characters] are well defined, but they are caricatures and exaggerations and stereotypes of those prototypes of persons . . . They exist for a reason, and they represent someone, but they are also caricatures." The participants recognize that exaggeration is required to fulfill the expectations of the fictionalization of this reality, "it is valid to catch the spectator and entertain them." Still, this narrative resource, delivered in high doses, can negatively affect how the audience conceives a character.

Regarding the second matter, including a wider variety of characters, focus group members noted the urgent need to portray characters from the middle class. Numerous respondents' complaints regarding comedy representations focus on the lack of middle-class characters depicting Mexican daily life, as a participant from Guadalajara notes: "people that I will find in the bus or leaving their work." Moreover, the lack of these characters impacts the bonds interviewees tie between their own identity and their identification with the film text. A respondent from Tijuana places himself in the fictional role of a comedy producer and explains how to improve them:

> If I had to make a comedy, it would be our life as ordinary students that need to work to pay for their school, to pay their gasoline, and all that, something that

> makes us identify. I will make the character hang out with his friends. He does one thing, and because of that, he lives an adventure; the film's plot starts right there.

For the interviewees, one of the reasons no middle-class characters appear in these films is to not "offend" them as they could be stereotyped. According to participants, poor people will not attend movie theaters, and rich people will not consume these films. Interestingly, these explanations echo Shaw's (2016) description of the Mexican audiences. Although participants do not identify or describe the content poor and wealthy classes watch, they agree that comedies are not targeting these two social groups. Thus, they support Shaw's assumption that the social context can determine which contents are more appealing in the Mexican context. Moreover, the participants' comments underscore the relevance of habitus in the Mexican context, social class being a determinant factor to consume (or not) a specific content.

Hence, if comedies target middle classes, then producers can transform the wealthy and the poor ones into conventions so, according to a participant in Mexico City, middle-class spectators could be in a safe space: "you want them [middle-class spectators] to laugh, not that they come out from cinemas *mentando madres* [cursing] and angry." Intrinsically, participants reinforce the status quo by accepting the limits imposed by the stereotypes presented in the film. If they consider the middle classes absent from these representations, they embrace the borders established in comedies for social classes. The wealthy and poor classes portrayed do not trespass those limits that define the middle class and vice versa; by remaining outside these films, the construct of the middle class has a well-defined series of characteristics.

Focus group members qualified this conclusion by admitting being unsure of how people from lower and higher classes think about these representations. However, their

responses, far from disproving the assertion that the stereotypes in comedies impose limits on social classes, supports it by mentioning the likelihood that these representations can be more accurate than they thought. As a participant from Guadalajara notes:

> We don't know how people from another economic or academic context perceive these films. Maybe they called themselves *chairos*[27] or *fifiís*[28], as our president [Andrés Manuel López Obrador] says. We can identify many things that occurred there because we are also privileged, and films are crafted from an elitist perspective, but I don't know if the rest of the population sees this in the same way as I do.

This argument reveals participants' self-awareness in the sense of recognizing themselves as privileged members of the population who have access to education and can cover all their needs. Moreover, it implies that producers using a wealthy class point of view in these comedies facilitate identification between viewers and representations as the Mexican cinema audience is closer to the high classes than to the lower ones. Implicit in these responses is the respondents' perception of themselves as an elite with higher cultural and economic capital. Still, they express their need so that these comedies could portray a more accurate version of the reality of the middle classes. Thus, the participants' identification as middle classes within this narrative is still a pending matter, as a respondent from Tijuana concludes:

> It's curious how a foreign series such as *Malcolm in the Middle* (2000-2006) makes Mexicans feel more identified than Mexican comedies do. However, it presents an unfamiliar context; maybe it's because of similar characteristics that middle classes share in the Western culture. Thus, it is possible to craft an intelligent comedy where a social critique lies behind.

[27]According to the Mexican Spanish Dictionary, *chairo* is an improper noun and adjective used to describe a "person who defends social and political causes against conservative ideologies, but with a lack of genuine commitment to what they claim to support." (Chairo, n.d.).

[28]According to the Mexican Spanish Dictionary, *fifí* is a masculine and feminine noun used widely to describe "someone who dresses very elegantly or has very delicate manners" (Fifí, n.d.).

Although Mexican comedies do not fully reflect the interviewees' social class, the producers of these films subtly foster the social class division and the characteristics required to perpetuate a social hierarchy. Respondents are not aware that by accepting comedies' stereotypes as somehow related to the reality of those classes and stressing that the middle class is absent of those narratives, they are supporting the social stratification prevalent in Mexico.

The family

A different story emerges from representing the family archetype that comedies depict. Regarding this narrative construction, the family and its role in Mexican society are accurately represented in these films, even when families are always nuclear and heterosexual. "It's curious, but there is a more reliable representation of the family," an informant from Mexico City reflects on the families depicted in comedies, "it incentivizes values and issues such as a familial union." For the respondents, the family is not only a characteristic part of their identity but also, as they point out when talking about the authenticity of Mexican films, it has a privileged place at the center of the narratives.

Although participants mention a series of nuances when they elucidate the role family plays in their identity and comedies, when they discuss their identification with the families in these films, they recognize members or values professed by these fictional families similar to the ones they perceive in real life. Therefore, it is common to hear phrases such as "I can identify families that I have been with;" "when I watch comedies with my family, there is a sense of identification with familial situations that occurred there;" or "comedies show things that could happen in any Mexican family." In Tijuana, two participants' responses provide arguments that help us understand the strong identification of these family archetypes as narrative strategies. "They are super united,

united, united, united, like this," the respondent intertwines his two hands tightly, "the mom supports the character who is in love, causing a powerful bond, and I have friends who have families like this - super united." Even though this respondent does not recognize his own family in the films, he does notice that there are families in his social context that operate that way, and for him, this fact is something very positive. The other informant from Tijuana sees this representation within his family: "[in comedies] there have been scenes from daily life that anyone can relate to. For instance, when a family is having fun or throwing a party. In those cases, you can say 'that happened to your cousin yesterday or your uncle once.'"

It is critical to stress that this identification with the families represented in these films perpetuates a stereotype that has been constant in Mexican cinema since its origins. As Gómez (2015) has indicated, the traditional portrait of the family in Mexico, a heterosexual nuclear one, has been prevalent even when more diverse family conceptualizations have been adopted into Mexican productions. Aligned with this theoretical examination, participants' perceptions perpetuate this kind of family representation by emphasizing how crucial it is for their identification. Interestingly, participants overlooked their own roles in the perpetuation of this stereotypical traditional model of family.

Everyday life situations

"Somehow they [comedies] make you feel identified," a participant from Mexico City elaborates by providing an example from a film he watched, *Tod@s caen*, "there were moments where I felt identified with that sentiment of love or love situations that reminded me of my personal experience." Respondents point out that Mexican comedy films manage to capture situations of everyday life in Mexico that resonate with their own experiences as

Mexicans. They emphasize that no matter how implausible plots may be, comedies always show something real about their life in Mexico. For instance, a respondent from Veracruz narrates how he identified with the work environment depicted in the film *Mirreyes vs. Godinez*: "Any office worker in Mexico, or who works in that type of environment, can be seen there. I'm in the office right now, and I say, 'yes, I'm the one who brings the *tupper* [food container], the one that has to make fortnightly payments,' things like that which made you feel identified." Similarly, other participants explain that one of these films' achievements is to highlight situations that may be common to Mexicans, despite their being different from each other, as a participant from Guadalajara elaborates:

> You can relate to a lot of ordinary situations like dialogues, as in *Cindy la Regia* when they argue if a quesadilla has cheese or not and show you how the *chilangos* [people from Mexico City] are odd, or things like having a really nice grandmother or that her domestic worker has a strong bond with the main character and protects her. Also, we saw this in *Nosotros los Nobles* when they [the characters] are in the market, and some people swear or call you *güerita*[29], or that someone yells at you *güerita* in the street, or going for tacos with your friends, things like that.

Among other daily Mexican situations, this audience perceives that comedies incorporate some specific devices to generate identification, such as language, traditions, celebrations, and locations. A respondent from Tijuana identifies language as the element he likes most, and which makes him feel more linked to the story: "I like that they [comedies] use curse words, those that an average person and your friends use. That's how I like it, a very colloquial language, very Mexican." Concerning traditions/celebrations, informants point out that comedies include food, traditional festivities, or parties, in

[29] *Güero/a* is a complex term in the Mexican lexicon that depends on the context. Although its literal translation is blonde or white, it is generally used to describe an outsider and differentiate between two people, especially a buyer (*güerito/a*) and seller. That is why brown or black people can also be called *güerito/a* when they are outsiders in a particular place. However, this term can also have a sexual connotation, making the *güerito/a* target of the sexual desire of whoever called them in that way.

general, to show Mexicans' festive spirit, "how we are party people." Finally, when interviewees discuss locations, although they have reported that Mexican comedies only center in Mexico's major cities or some rural towns, they recognize positive feelings when they can identify places "close to them."

Nevertheless, no matter how similar the situations portrayed in these films to informants' experiences are, focus group members emphasize that exaggeration downplays the relevance of these events regarding their identification. A participant from Mexico City summarizes, "many of these things happen, but many others make you say 'dude, the *neta* [truth] is not like that, this is a fiction made by the screenwriter or the filmmaker.'"

These reflections about daily life portrayals support Benitez's (2008) assumption that comedies seem more concerned with ordinary reality (which focus group members perceive as tangible in the language, locations, and events) than with the social problems experienced in Mexico. Despite this fact, these films are saying something about the country's reality, as Shaw (2013a) has recognized. Participants' voices support this assertion by indicating how these representations resonate with their experiences as Mexicans. By doing this, they are suggesting an undeniable connection between comedies' portrayals and their own identity.

As a remedy for exaggeration, participants recommend showing the stark reality of Mexico, including the problems caused by violence. For instance, an informant from Tijuana indicates, *El infierno* (2010) as a model of Mexican film: "It caught me because it was very realistic, it reflected reality, a bit exaggerated, but somehow it makes us feel identified with the Mexican poverty and harshness." At first glance, arguments like this are contradictory, considering the escapist function that comedies play in Mexico or the stereotypes that Mexican comedies try to break. However, when elaborating on their

justification, respondents explain that due to the limitations of comedies' generic conventions – such as happy endings, stereotypes, or exaggerations – appealing to other hybridizations with other genres can offer alternative ways to portray the Mexican reality. An interviewee from Veracruz elaborates on this reasoning:

> Luis Estrada's films are a specific view or a closer one to what Mexico is. I believe that's not only because of the drama and harshness; it is because wrong things in Mexico are lightened up with comedy to make them more bearable and better but portraying real things.

That fact may explain why participants do not mention the comedy genre as a narrative device that causes identification. Of course, they laugh at the jokes and situations that these stories present, but the fact that respondents conceive these films as disposable or trivial distances them emotionally from those comedies. Moreover, the generic boundaries they identified in comedies also reinforce their perception that this genre is incapable of capturing the vast and complex Mexican reality, a characteristic also addressed by Sánchez Prado (2014). A participant from Monterrey points out that even when comedies use trending jokes, memes, or gossip from social media to connect with the Mexican audience, the fact that "the film is released months or years later, make them not funny anymore. Only my parents laugh at something that is no longer new." Expressions like this stress the participants' perception that comedies target an audience other than them as well as frame them as an in-group with higher cultural capital than older generations because they can follow current trends, not rely on the past. This perception is a generational outcome of a group that has emphasized that representations from the past are no relevant in the present, even if they are just a couple of years older.

Stories

Finally, another narrative resource that could also generate interviewees' identification is the stories themselves. However, this element is not mentioned positively by the participants as stories only "show the problems of rich people" or "are based on real-life but taken to an unrealistic extreme." Therefore, whenever informants explain their relationship with the stories of these films, their feelings carry a negative assessment. For example, an annoyed interviewee from Guadalajara states: "There are no moving or traditional stories, of those that one can feel identified, but they are all stories of the type that only happen to rich people."

These expressions are not surprising considering how comedies have relied on a formula mentioned in the literature review and recognized by participants. The pattern that emerges from these plots privileges narratives that narrow their protagonists' perspectives and problems. As participants do not identify with the main characters' social context, many of the difficulties these protagonists face do not resonate with participants' experiences. By doing this, focus group members express that these movies do not portray the social class they relate to and implicitly support a social hierarchy proposed by comedies.

The aftermath of Mexican comedies: feelings about the Mexican identity

There are two layers of my Mexican identity intertwined in a typical comedy film produced in the country. On the one hand, there is always the image of a place that makes me think that a Mexico without social problems could be possible. A Mexico where we, as Mexicans, help each other to construct a different country from what the media portrays, and we live in the streets. However, these comedies talk about a Mexico reserved for wealthy classes. The people who populate these representations are the few who can afford

penthouses in the most exclusive areas of the city, who can spend their life traveling, eating, and enjoying without financial pressure. Mexican comedy cinema depicts, for the most part, a Mexico and a Mexican that exists inside a bubble of opulence, beauty, and glamor that few of us can access, but accurate for a small fraction of the population. On the other hand, comedies also talk about another face of Mexican identity. This face refers to the creative filmmaker and producer of Mexican films, to the Mexican talent that appears in those films, to all the people involved in the hard task of making a Mexican movie. It is a Mexican creative identity that disappoints us when the good intentions of the crew behind a Mexican film remain just as good intentions and nothing more due to its telenovela mise-en-scène*, an editing without pace, constant music without justification, overacting, and artificial dialogue. The result is a cinema made from privilege, which claims to have a fundamental message for all Mexicans, but it is produced just to be consumed and discarded immediately.*

Shame

Once the credits are rolling and the enchantment that has transported the audience to a utopic Mexico has broken, it is time to delve into the answer to research question 3b and disclose the feelings and thoughts these comedies have triggered in participants regarding Mexico and their fellow Mexicans. Despite the necessary function comedies fulfill in providing a greater nuance to a harsh reality, informants discuss sentiments that lean negative when reflecting on comedies' portrayals. "Ugh, yuck, why are you going to see that?" An informant from Mexico City explains that her family uses this phrase in response to her watching a Mexican comedy. "I don't even ask my friends to watch it with me because their response will be the same," she says, laughing, then goes on to explain how

she hides her liking comedies because she "feels ashamed" to be associated with them. Feeling ashamed is one of the most recurrent sentiments expressed by the participants.

There are various factors interplaying in regard to this feeling. Participants normalize watching a Mexican comedy film with their family, justifying their consumption through the group's selection. However, when informants decide to consume one of these comedies independently, they hide it from their friends and family to avoid being judged. This due to a sense of embarrassment coming from being associated with those films and their representations. A participant from Guadalajara elaborates:

> I'm embarrassed, not in the sense that I want to hide under the bed, but a little bit. I would not like these to be the films that represent me. I would like other movies to represent me and my country; a better kind of comedy or any other genre is okay.

The shame participants feel about the representations available in these films about their identity as Mexicans also influences how they believe that viewers outside of Mexico think of Mexicans. For example, a participant from Monterrey points out not feeling proud that these "poor quality and poorly made" films are the ones that represent his country. Therefore, on the one hand, this feeling refers to the skewed image of Mexicans on the screen. On the other hand, it also suggests the informants' negative perception of the Mexican filmmakers and their lack of creativity. Both situations threaten these spectators' identities, as an interviewee in Veracruz concludes:

> Do I have any other feelings about comedies? Yes, shame (laughs). Knowing that this is our cover letter because these films do not stay in Mexico are presented to the world. This is our cover letter, and I am very ashamed that this is the stereotype that we make of ourselves. How do we want the outside to see us seriously, see us as workers, as students, as people who have universities, PhDs? If, in the end, we want other cultures or other countries to see us like this, if we see ourselves differently, we look bad.

Repulsion and animosity

In many instances, when participants express feeling ashamed, they also register some other feelings like repulsion and animosity towards the Mexican identity portrayed in these comedies. This fact is not surprising, considering respondents' disapproval of comedies in general. Informants use adjectives such as "ugly," "deficient," "bad," "horrible," and "lousy" to emphasize how Mexican comedy films are in bad taste. They extend the use of these terms when talking about the comedies' representations. This attitude seems to contravene the credit this audience gives to Mexican comedies as a tool to vindicate the country's image. However, we must remember that they consider themselves a more skillful audience; thus, when they recognize the positive role of comedies, focus group members think of these narratives' influence in the imagined target audience, which they consider inferior. For them, these products of a low culture can be beneficial for that imagined target audience by generating a better sense of their identity.

Nevertheless, participants perceive these representations as flawed or incomplete for their own process of identity formation, calling them worthless. For example, a participant from Guadalajara expresses her aversion in this way: "I avoid them [comedies] because their message is completely disconnected from reality. That doesn't happen; characters are all the same, and the image and the message that is given bothers me."

An interviewee in Guadalajara explains that her annoyance regarding the identity portrayed in these movies is due to the wealthy point of view privileged by comedy plots as they invite the viewer to make fun of the Mexican identity of lower-class people:

> I feel annoyed. For example, in *Mirreyes vs. Godinez*, yes, we make fun of the *mirreyes*, but it is more like mocking of the *godín* [a salaried employee] because they don't have enough money for one thing or because they eat at such a place that makes them *nacos*. We make fun of the *nacos* who are not to blame for being in that position.

In addition to feeling annoyed due to classism and being encouraged to laugh at another's disadvantage, interviewees are also upset because these films reinforce a series of harmful ideologies tied to one or more elements of their own identity. For example, a participant from Mexico City is "disturbed" by the fact that Mexican movies still portray women "as if they always need to be protected by the man." When comedies relate Mexican identity with macho or conservative beliefs, this young audience member expresses her indignation towards this representation.

Disappointment

Another negative sentiment manifested by participants is disappointment about the imagery movies use to describe Mexican society and culture. This disappointment is related to the limited vision already mentioned on several occasions. For instance, a respondent from Veracruz explains that these films "do not make him feel hopeful," because in any case, "they do not change the reality of the country." A participant from Guadalajara elaborates about this dissatisfaction:

> It discourages me. It takes away from me the desire to embrace it [Mexican identity]. It's disappointing to know that many well-known people, incredibly talented Mexican people, could direct a piece of art, and it's kind of sad to see that they are out there, you know? Doing it full time, fighting and fighting, and writing and working for production companies, day and night, and you see this kind of content that is not on par with the international industry standards, and it puts me off a lot.

At the same time, this sentiment of frustration carries with it an invitation to their peers (and other audiences) to demand a "more dignified" representation of Mexico, as one interviewee from Mexico City remarks: "society should ask for a change, but if it doesn't want that [comedies] will not change, and it makes me sad but at the same time who am I to tell others what to do?" As has been discussed in the previous chapter about Mexican

comedies, the third-person effect has a fundamental role in the participants' perception of higher cultural capital. Thus, demanding action from their Mexican peers is a way for the participants to emphasize their awareness and skills to deal with these film texts and their misrepresentations, but also a way to prove themselves superior to the imagined consumers of Mexican comedies who they perceive as conformists.

Indifference

This statement suggests that it is possible for this young audience to feel something towards Mexican comedy films as a genre and have very different emotions when talking about representations. In addition to this experience, for some participants, it is impossible to generalize that all Mexican comedy films make them feel the same way towards the genre or identity, noting that there may be cases that make them feel proud from the image of Mexico portrayed in those films. Thus, the representations of Mexican identity these comedies offer may provoke mixed feelings in the respondents, depending on the film. However, having a clear sense of their cultural identity encourages participants to consume these films with a sense of not being affected, a perception that becomes stronger when they implement the irony bribe to read these film texts. In this regard, an interviewee in Guadalajara concludes:

> I have no problem saying that I like them [comedies] or that I liked them or that I see them. I do not know why; maybe it's because I take them lightly. I do not give much importance to them because they are romantic comedies. Thus, I do not expect they will talk about me, so if one of them takes me by surprise or takes me out a very good laugh, I will share it, but that's it.

This statement suggests that it is possible to feel something towards Mexican comedy films as a genre and have a very different evaluation when talking about representations, especially Mexican identity. In addition to this experience, for some participants, it is impossible to generalize that all Mexican comedy films make them feel

the same way towards the genre or identity, noting that there may be cases that work differently from the statement mentioned at the beginning of the paragraph. On top of that, it is also possible that the Mexican identity representations these comedies offer provoke mixed feelings in the respondents. As an interviewee from Monterrey explains, "there is a gray space that makes me say that not all Mexican comedy films and their representations are bad, I am not going to say that I don't like them at all, but I'm not going to say that I like them either. I will continue watching them." These respondents recognize that even though Mexican films may have a series of limitations regarding their representation of Mexican culture, they also show themes that break with other cultures' preconceived ideas about Mexico. Thus, if these Mexican productions are considered just a comedy, informants indicate, then there's a positive aspect to these comedies being consumed not only in Mexico but also abroad. In this regard, an interviewee in Guadalajara concludes:

> I don't feel good or bad about my identity. I do not know how to express it. It is not that I say, "Oh, I feel very proud," but it is not something that makes me sad. I mean, these plots happen, but they are just movies, and how cool if someone from abroad likes them, how cool that they allow themselves the opportunity to see those kinds of films and not just things from there, but something that belongs to us, from our culture, and created by Mexicans.

Pride

Finally, a less frequently reported sentiment experienced by these informants is a positive one: pride. From this perspective, interviewees who identify positive emotions regarding their represented identity not only point out that these films challenge stereotypes, a perception already stressed in this and previous chapters, but also look for values, characters, or situations within the plots that reinforce the traits they consider positive about being Mexican. For example, a Mexico City informant talking about the movie *Mirreyes vs. Godinez* confesses feeling proud that the film shows "how you are at

work, working hard to getting more money, and you are proud to be a worker." Once again, this pride depends a lot on the film that viewers see. Still, those who express this positive sentiment agree that the "image of Mexico and Mexicans depicted by comedies is very beautiful." It should be clarified that far from seeing this image as something aspirational, informants actively look and select situations and traits that reinforce the characteristics they perceive as fundamental to their identity. As Wang (2008) has indicated, spectators who express this feeling heavily rely on their cultural traits to make sense of these representations. Thus, no matter the many different transnational forces that shape a Mexican comedy, for this group of respondents, their identity allows them to navigate and obtain elements to sharpen their cultural traits. Therefore, as a participant from Tijuana indicates, he feels proud of what these films say about Mexico through their images and production:

> Comedies do not offend me because its cinema, right? Not everything we see there is real. So, I will not feel offended if people think Mexico and Mexicans are like the ones from the comedies. It will be okay. I will feel okay if a Mexican film is awarded or watched abroad. I will feel good, proud.

Dealing with negative emotions

Answering research question 3b, about the emotions and thoughts these films elicit regarding Mexico and their fellow Mexicans, has been a way to reinforce this group of spectators' self-perception as more cultured than their fellow Mexicans. Expressing mostly negative feelings is a way to reject and set a distance between their identity and the one represented in every Mexican film. For them, comedies are a massified product that appeals to the tastes and identities of other audiences from the middle-class. Interestingly, if we take for granted respondents' perceptions, comedies do not represent these other audiences at all. Thus, their responses suggest constructing an easy-to-handle audience, conformist,

that will shape their world (and identity) according to these misrepresentations. Ironically, this perspective reinforces the hierarchical status quo they claim to challenge and assume, as many Mexican scholars have done, that they can infer the audiences' tastes and configuration by just looking at the popular films, an argument of questionable merit, as we have seen.

Coping with misrepresentations: strategies to negotiate a Mexican identity

During my adolescence, few Mexican films had a significant impact on my life. I grew up in a time where Mexican cinema rarely talked about people of my age, so the representation of my identity was not part of those films. From that time, three movies remain in my memory as talking directly to my stage in life: Y tú mama también *(2001),* Amar te duele *(2002), and* Inspiración *(2001). The three of them had young people as the main protagonist of their plots, and I could find similarities in dreams, problems, and expectations deployed in these films. However, I was never an adventurer or precocious teenager and never made a road trip with my high school friends. I was not part of the lower or wealthy classes, nor did I live a story of impossible love. Finally, I was not rich or* mirrey, *I never went to clubs or parties every weekend, spending money on all the luxuries I wanted. None of the plots resembled my life; none of the characters were like me. My identity was influenced and shaped by Hollywood films and TV series, presenting people with problems like mine. These people were whiter and framed by subtitles, but they were talking directly to my identity. And what about the Mexican one? Broadcast television reminded me about my roles as part of this country. Hence, I was covered on both fronts.*

Few vestiges remain of the media panorama of my adolescence during the 2000s. At first glance, the 2020s present a different landscape to negotiate the Mexican identity. The difference of 11 to 18 years between the participants and myself, the technological

evolution that cinema consumption has experienced through the introduction of on-demand and streaming platforms, as well as the changes in the narrative tendencies of Mexico productions, are some of the changes that have shaped a new battleground to negotiate identity. However, these informants' strategies to deal with the misrepresentations available in contemporary Mexican comedies parallel some of those I used during my adolescence. Interviewees' responses answer research question 3c, how does this audience negotiate comedies' misrepresentations of the traits they consider fundamental for the Mexican identity, by deploying four strategies: 1) ignoring these misrepresentations, 2) fighting against these representations, 3) using the irony bribe to read those films, and 4) selecting other media to shape their identity. I will discuss each of these in turn.

Ignoring misrepresentations

As discussed in the previous section, participants indicated feeling indifferent towards comedy films' representations of Mexican identity and expressed apathy for taking these images seriously, emphasizing that "they are only movies to pass the time." This strategy is deployed to not taking representations seriously, downplaying them, and, in most cases, relating to other Mexican films as more accurate portrayals of Mexico. These other Mexican films are what respondents call art films. As one participant from Mexico City points out, it is a cinema that has "an intellectual intention, an intention to express something because it boils your blood to express it, or because you develop a technique, you experiment as a filmmaker, or you give a clear message." For most of the respondents, these art films are the antithesis of comedy films. As art movies are "crude" or "realistic" regarding the problems experienced in the country, they are capable of presenting the ideal counterweight to the "idealized" version of Mexico and Mexicans. Hence, interviewees

believe that this art cinema is much more purposeful and articulates with "greater seriousness" Mexico's and Mexicans' complexity.

Fighting against these representations

Also, as the previous section highlighted, the majority of respondents' express contempt towards these comedic films and their representations, becoming *hatewatchers* of Mexican comedies and, as a consequence, fighting against these misrepresentations. A *hatewacher* consumes these comedies to describe their flaws, laugh at them, and critique other mainstream audiences, thereby framing themselves as individuals with better taste (Gilbert, 2019). *Hatewatchers* could challenge the status quo reinforced by these products and consider themselves unaffected by their representations. They engage in a crusade to discredit the role of these contents and promote others of "better quality." In this case, the *hatewatchers* of Mexican comedies described forcing themselves to consume these products in order to socialize with their families or criticize them through academic assignments. As explained in the previous chapter, it is common for *hatewatchers* to consider themselves not to be the target of these films and to secretly judge an imagined audience of comedy consumers. For example, a respondent from Mexico City elaborates on a strategy used by *hatewatchers*, to avoid these films at all costs:

> I don't watch Mexican movies released in commercial cinemas. I mean, unless they are in the Cineteca Nacional [a movie complex characterized by releasing art films] because I know that's not my kind of film. I mean, I don't say that everyone that watches those films is wrong, but the truth is that I feel upset because I know what Mexican cinema can be and its capabilities. So, watching comedies makes me feel sad that we are not doing that good cinema, I mean, this is what they [producers] are giving us, and we should conform with that? So, I don't watch them because it is not according to what I think.

Respondents disfavor these films and fight them by pointing out what is wrong with the movies' representations every time they watch them. In this regard, a participant from

Guadalajara explains that she and her sister always try to demonstrate to their parents the film's "toxic" elements, "I do not insist like my sister, because I know that they are not going to change their mind." For her, "educating" her mom about these misrepresentations has been an outstanding achievement, "it has been little by little, but she gets it now." Some of these *hatewatchers* of Mexican comedies use these films for academic purposes, as one of the interviewees from Guadalajara who reports watching them because she is doing a paper on gender-based violence, and these films give her "a lot of material." In Mexico City, a participant discloses wanting to be a filmmaker, and he watches these comedies to "learn what not to do." For him, watching Mexican comedies is to learn how not to resort to "vulgar resources such as stereotypes" or "botching" a movie.

Using the irony bribe

Regarding the third strategy, using the irony bribe to read those films, the respondents select these films for the pleasure gained in making fun of the "poor technical quality" or the "exaggeration" or "unreality" that these films present. From this reading, some of the participants may enjoy consuming comedy films, turning comedies into their guilty pleasures and at the same time allowing them to recognize the imperfect representations or flaws in comedies' production and plot. Interestingly, these results are similar to the ones reported in some other studies of *hatewatchers* of films appealing to a specific cultural group; such is the case of Martin (2019) and his analysis of *hatewatchers* of Tyler Perry's comedies. Similar to the findings of that study, the participants who deploy this strategy have a love-hate relationship with these movies. On the one hand, they regulate their consumption to maintain family bonds and counter the influence of these films in their families. However, the main difference between Martin's respondents and the ones that inform this dissertation is that, on the other hand, they laugh

at the comedies' aesthetic and narrative flaws, as well as enjoy this sentiment. Hence, although *hatewatchers* can also use the irony bribe, the group using this third strategy is not entirely negative about these films and their representations. For example, a participant in Guadalajara mentions that the title of *Mirreyes vs. Godinez* caught his attention because it seemed like a terrible title. However, once he saw the film, he confesses that "it was so bad that I liked it so much; I enjoyed it." Phrases such as "I loved it even though it was awful," "I laughed a lot, but it was terrible," or "It was good to hang out, although it is *chafa* [something of poor quality]," are repeated by almost a third of the respondents in different cities regarding those guilty pleasures. As explained in the previous chapter, when participants rely on the irony bribe, they gather with other peers or relatives to criticize the flaws of these films.

Using the irony bribe as a strategy had demonstrated (Cloud, 2010) that employing it does not mean that spectators are fully aware of the negative ideologies that these films present. Indeed, as this dissertation has found, participants who engage in this kind of strategy are not critiquing the social class hierarchy perpetuated by these films; instead, they recognize and reinforce its existence in their social context. Moreover, some focus group members can also acknowledge the positive narrative qualities that these movies can foster by applying this strategy. An informant in Tijuana mentions: “These films are not 100% bad, the problem is that they are not well-executed, they [filmmakers] do not know how to develop the plots, they fall very short; one expects something else and they come up with very obvious things.” Furthermore, approaching a Mexican comedy using the irony bribe has also signified breaking their prejudices against these films, for some informants. In Monterrey, two participants mention *Cindy la Regia* and *#Lady Rancho*, respectively, as

examples of films that were “quite gratifying surprises” since they had “more virtues” than the average of Mexican comedies.

Selecting other media

Finally, a fourth strategy these participants use is consuming other media besides Mexican comedies to complete or shape their identity. On the one hand, the interviewed participants who rely on this strategy mostly have mixed feelings about comedies and their representations. For them, the films deploy both negative and positive traits about their Mexican identity. On the other hand, despite recognizing positive traits, these respondents argue that comedy films do not fully influence their identity formation, attributing content produced in other countries as more relevant to fulfill this function. For example, a participant from Tijuana expresses her preference for Korean soap operas and the strong bond between them and her identity:

> I do not know if you have watched one of them [Korean soap operas], but the truth is that they have terrific actors and the plots are different, it is not the same as all the time about the rich and the poor. They have other very different stories with people of my age.

Like her, many interviewees indicate consuming Hollywood dramas, comedies, romantic comedies, action or superhero films; Korean soap operas and anime; Swedish, Mexican and Spanish series; as well as other genres of Mexican cinema, especially drama, and videos produced by Mexican YouTubers and Mexican stand-up comedians.

When resorting to other content that is not Mexican to build their identity, participants give greater importance to their identity as individuals than to their shared cultural identity. This perception implies two possibilities that deserve future attention. First, contrary to what Wang (2008) predicted, this young audience does not rely on cultural traits when facing media productions from other cultures. They disclose individual

motivations to engage with particular media content and shape different dimensions of their own identity. This phenomenon is similar to what Sandvoss (2015) identified in his study of audiences. For instance, some participants watch specific productions because of the feelings these contents elicit in them, the characters they develop, or the topics and issues depicted there. Thus, the individual agency is vital to understand audiences' consumption practices and how their cultural identity is subordinated to these practices. For example, an interviewee in Guadalajara explains that she developed a taste for dramas because she found "more emotions in them than in comedies; since comedies do not aim to connect you as a spectator with the character, they only make you laugh. Instead, dramas make you cry and make you feel things, and, for me, that is what makes me enjoy and feel identified." Another respondent from Guadalajara explains that Greta Gerwig's *Little Women* (2019) was an influential film for her because it develops "the complexity of a female personality, like me."

Second, cultural proximity is mentioned as something that influences their consumption. This young Mexican audience tends to privilege consuming content from other cultures over Mexico's production, and one determinant factor is what Straubhaar et al. (2019) predicted, their interest in different cultures or cultural similarities. An interesting phenomenon to note in these statements is how some interviewees use foreign media contents in opposition to what they consider the authentic Mexican identity. In some cases, respondents comment consuming foreign media content helps them contrast how other cultures are different from the Mexican one. Without making value judgments of whether these foreign representations of other cultural identities are better or worse than their own, informants explain preferring other foreign contents to, as this participant from Tijuana mentions, "see how different people and countries are from the place and culture we live

in." For example, a participant from Mexico City mentions being a fan of the Spanish series *Merlí* (2015-2018) because he likes to see what schools are like in Spain and how "their Spanish is different from ours." A participant in Tijuana claims to be an avid consumer of Japanese culture, "although it sounds like being a *malinchista*," because he likes to know "how they live in other cultures." In the same way, a participant from Mexico City has developed a greater connection to dramas, and even though she admits having seen "bad dramas" too, but at least they show "a different image of Mexico."

Negotiating the misrepresentations

Interviewees rely on these four strategies to diminish the negative impact of the misrepresentations populating comedies and consuming them without regret. Most of the time, they report relying on more than one strategy depending on their context of consumption and the film they watch. As noted, these strategies also interact with the characteristics they identify in Mexican comedies that make them authentic, cause identification, and trigger particular sentiments in themselves. This chapter culminates with a direct question asked to informants, the role these comedies play in their identity formation process.

Was this joke on us? The function of comedies in forming an identity

In a transnational media context where streaming platforms have strongly influenced audiences' tastes and film viewing habits, individuals' identity is a place of convergence for multiple contents affecting it. When I asked this group of spectators about media consumption preferences for Mexican comedies, these films were the first choice in only a pair of cases where Mexican comedies are included as a part of the comedy genre in general. The story is the same for my own family. My mother prefers Turkish and Korean series and soap operas, while my father and brother select Hollywood films. My sisters-in-

law do not hide their high consumption of Tyler Perry's dramas, while my wife prefers Hollywood romantic comedies or non-Mexican TV series. I cannot deny that Mexican comedies do not rank among my top movie preferences. Nevertheless, none of us can deny watching them; whether we, Mexican audiences, think Mexican comedies are disposable or bad taste, comedies have a salient place as a pillar of the movie industry in Mexico. In the process of watching them, contrasting them with other foreign media products or other genres in Mexico, rejecting or validating what they propose, we as film spectators and Mexicans transform the content of Mexican comedies into a piece of a broad (and complex) media puzzle that strongly influences our cultural identity.

During the focus groups and interviews with the participants, a resounding and categorical 'no' was the informants' response to whether these comedies represented them or made them feel connected with their identities. This answer could also be perceived as a conclusion about research question 3d, regarding the role(s) that these young spectators perceive comedies playing in their identity formation process. Thus, "none" can be an immediate answer. The origins of this answer can be traced to the films' exaggerated narrative devices and the prevalence of an upper-class point of view. Phrases such as "those films don't represent me" or "I understand them, but I don't identify myself" were standard replies to this question. The most favorable perceptions about the role of comedies in the identity negotiation were similar to one stated by an interviewee in Mexico City: "I feel that they represent a part of Mexico I have seen or know, but it is only a small part." Therefore, if only these answers are taken into account, a hasty conclusion could be formulated affirming that Mexican comedy films have no role in the identity formation of these spectators, and that their consumption is simply an escape valve that releases a bit of the

tension generated day-to-day in the country. From this perspective, comedies only entertain and do not influence the participants' identity, neither for good nor bad.

However, taking this answer as definitive denies these focus group members' active roles in the process of selecting, watching, and making sense of a film, something that their discussion has emphasized so far. Thanks to their agency, informants are able to use the representations shown in these films to fulfill diverse functions, such as proposing an enhanced vision of Mexico and its reality or recognizing negative traits related to the Mexican identity that they can avoid in their daily practices. These young spectators' active role suggests several functions that Mexican comedies play in negotiating and defining their cultural identity.

Comedies as a tool to recognize the Other

The first function suggested by the informants' responses is to define their identity through the recognition of the other. This otherness is necessary because, through it, the meaning of identity is constructed (Hall, 1997/2013b). By recognizing the other, we define our boundaries in the social context that we live in. Thus, we tend to identify traits that are relevant to the in-group and distinct to the ones that comprise the diverse out-groups. Using these characteristics, individuals build stereotypes of the other to make them more easily identifiable. Thus, representations rely on them, facilitating the identification (or not) of the spectator with a particular character, situation, or context. The stereotype "reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes difference" (Hall, 1997/2013b; p. 247), helping a social group achieve cohesion by recognizing its limits and traits. In addition, the stereotype not only speaks of the stereotyped group but also of the in-group that generates that stereotype, its characteristics, and its role in power relations in that society.

Hence, when interviewees report not being part of the representations shown in comedies, they suggest that the characteristics represented on the screen cannot be attributed to their in-group. Interestingly, this in-group is based on social class because participants use this trait as the most salient when discussing Mexican comedies. As discussed in Chapter V, by emphasizing that the middle class is absent, they imply that this group is characterized by a series of attributes that are not depicted in these films. Simultaneously, they recognize a wide range of Mexican identities and a power hierarchy defined by social classes. "I don't feel identified with a Mexican comedy film or their stories," a respondent in Tijuana explains, "what calls my attention is to know the life of another type of Mexican because I know that there are people living like that, and I'm interested in that side." The opulence, luxuries, excesses, and privileges of the Mexican upper class are a constant in comedy films for the participants. Because of this representation, they emphasize that the reality portrayed by these stories only belongs to "a tiny group of the population." By addressing this difference between themselves and the upper classes, informants point out a series of stereotypes attributed to the wealthy class.

In order to delimit the identity of a wealthy population, interviewees define what it means to be privileged in Mexico, emphasizing most heavily economic capital and financial freedom. For them, the Mexican that predominates as the main protagonist depicted in these films is one who "has no financial worries since he was born," "who is going to have trivial problems compared to most Mexicans," and "has access to a better job and educational opportunities." Embedded in these remarks made during focus group sessions is a recognition of a characteristic of Mexican identity shared by most Mexicans: the impossibility of having easy access to resources that allow them to achieve their goals.

In other words, resilience is, once again, highlighted as a fundamental factor. Unlike the characters in these films, respondents have to fight to get ahead.

Also, their discussion suggests that comedies help respondents differentiate between cultural and economic capital, making them believe that the two are not necessarily linked in the Mexican context. However, this relationship is more complex than what their comments indicate. When participants were recruit for this study, their university was not considered as a selection criterion. Nevertheless, it should be noted that most respondents attend private universities, placing them in a privileged place, especially according to those who attend public institutions. An interviewee in Monterrey explains:

> having money, you can focus only on studying. You don't have to work . . . I notice that there is classism in daily life, and you can see it in universities . . . the population is divided depending on which university you go to.

For students at private universities, attending them does not mean that they are privileged. According to them, what makes a person privileged is the mere fact of access to higher education, and this opportunity is not determined solely by economic capital because many of the participants reveal having a scholarship or working to pay for their studies. An argument made by a participant in Tijuana hints at how the interviewees conceive this relationship between access to education and cultural capital, using resilience as an argument to justify their privilege: "studying, you can get ahead. Having a roof and food, even if it's a fucking egg and beans, that's being privileged. If you want to get ahead, you can." Using resilience as an argument, this group of interviewees differentiates themselves from the upper class even though they enjoy some of the same privileges. An interviewee from Veracruz states how it is possible to amass a higher cultural capital regardless of economic capital:

> Privileged people are white, rich with this (laughs) ridicule tone. [If you are like that] maybe they [an employer] hire you, but perhaps not so much. Behaving well, dressing formally, using brand clothes, you sell an image of status, but many people like that do not know anything. They are only selling something that they are not, and I doubt whether it is privileged or not having a lot of money.

Even though participants concur that none of them has the privileges of the wealthy class portrayed in Mexican comedies and affirm that their cultural capital is not related to their economic capital, their contextual conditions indicate otherwise. As discussed in Chapter V, they have resources to access multiple media outlets, education, and a series of opportunities that most Mexicans who are members of the poor and middle classes do not have. Some even claim having traveled and lived abroad for a long time, a luxury that is impossible to conceive for most Mexicans. Although respondents mention these privileges, they deny these traits place them as part of the wealthy class. They are not able to perceive how far above the middle classes they are. This lack of recognition underscores a misconception broadly shared by the Mexican population regarding the economic characteristics of social classes in Mexico (Ríos, 2020).

Elaborating on the differences between what they consider the wealthy class and themselves, participants self-describe as Mexicans more aware of the value of work, solidarity, and union, with a more colloquial language, being more multiracial, as well as with a more productive behavior and attitude than this upper-class social group. Interestingly, these characteristics have been used by Mexican cinema as key elements to describe popular classes represented in film. However, the participants qualify this comparison by mentioning that characters from the poor classes in Mexican comedies do not have access to opportunities and social mobility, an essential trait that participants acknowledge in the middle class.

What this conversation reveals is that participants are not capable of clearly defining and articulating the differences between the Other represented by wealthy and poor classes, nor engage the series of contradictions that demonstrate how identity is a fluid concept that, as expressed in the literature review, sometimes overlaps and share characteristics between social classes.

A more straightforward definition of the in-group derives from participants' recognition of other out-groups not defined by social class. This phenomenon occurs when respondents recognize the other Mexican identities not portrayed in comedies, such as indigenous communities or other minority groups. This phenomenon is not only characteristic of Mexican comedies, but Mexican cinema in general, which has a long history of underrepresenting minority groups, and when it does, a colonizing perspective seems to prevail (Jablonska, 2017). Informants' acknowledging this fact is critical because it encourages them to challenge a single and fixed Mexican identity, stressing the arduous and complex task of portraying the identity that Mexican films should aim for. A participant from Monterrey elaborates on this idea:

> I notice a significant lack of identity here in Mexico, at least one which will make all happy. It's hard work, isn't it? Making a Mexican film that keeps us all happy, that reflects all the groups that Mexico contains, that makes us laugh, and that has a good quality, it's not easy.

This type of response urges us to take a cautionary approach regarding participants' categorical rejection of the role of comedies in their identity formation process. Contrary to the theoretical assumptions addressed in the literature review regarding the relationship between comedies and identity, informants are aware that these films depict several traits of some Mexican identities. However, they acknowledge that covering the whole set of dimensions or identities that comprise the Mexican identity is impossible for a movie.

Comedies as a way to reinforce the positive traits of a Mexican identity

A second role that comedy films play when interviewees negotiate their identity is to strengthen positive features of their Mexican identity and help them to identify negative features. This negotiation occurs when interviewees recognize some traits in comedies as similar to elements of their Mexican identity. From this perspective, resilience, family, and unity become central factors in evaluating representations and reinforcing their cultural identity. For example, a participant from Mexico City explains that watching several Mexican comedy films in a row prior to participating in this research led her to realize how "self-identified" she was with the cinematic "situations" characters go through and with the "places" she has visited or "passed by." Pointing to those characteristics that make them identify with Mexican comedies leads participants to evaluate those traits not only in a positive way, but also negatively when they face less favorable aspects of their identity. This action is evident in responses such as the one offered by this informant from Mexico City:

> People say they [comedies] don't represent them because they feel bad admitting that; after all, that's how Mexicans are. Unfortunately, that is how we are, because I am also, but yes, that is how we are. We are represented that way because it is true; we act that way because that is how we are with others. However, we can say, 'Oh, this movie is not good because it is like that' or 'that cannot be, how can they represent us like this' that is, we are like these representations in many ways.

Although this perception is shared by less than a quarter of the focus group members, it becomes relevant to challenge flaws they perceive in their identity and build new characteristics that are more in line with the contemporary construction of their Mexican identity. Therefore, it is possible to trace connections between toxic ideologies participants identify as latent in the Mexican identity, and the *hatewatchers'* attempts to educate other audiences about how those comedies are harmful because they perpetuate

these beliefs. For some participants, this is the way to construct a more progressive Mexican identity.

Comedies as an alternative to a build a new identity

Finally, a third function these comedies play in shaping the respondents' Mexican identity is the possibility of using these representations as a model. Even though respondents claim the existence of an audience who sees these films as aspirational, they also comment about comedies in this way. The difference is attributable to the third-person effect described in Chapter V that participants use to frame themselves as immune to the impact of these representations. Thus, when the imagined audience constructed by these informants is perceived as acritical spectators who accept comedies as a better way of life that only benefit themselves, the few participants who mentioned the role of these comedies to build a new Mexican identity described themselves as critically engaged with comedies and aiming for the common good of society.

Remarks such as "I like to think that this may be possible" or "I like how comedies make me feel," as well as uses such as escapism or relaxation mark a contrast between the Mexican identity these participants encounter in everyday life and the one represented in these films. In other words, they are aware that the Mexican social context is flawed and problematic, but it could be transformed by relying on some of the alternatives proposed in comedies. Considering their statements, it seems that participants who rely on this strategy judge the comedies' depictions of Mexico and Mexicans as more "constructive" or "positive." However, reading comedies in this way, no matter how purposeful they may seem, provides a fertile ground for perpetuating a social hierarchy based on distinct social classes because of recurring elements within these films such as a limited representation and the prevalence of an elitist perspective.

After discussing Mexican identity and national comedies, participants shared their viewpoints regarding the identification and cultural identity negotiated through these films. They accept a series of characteristics within these stories that make them feel identified: like characters, places, and situations within the narratives. However, despite the similarities between the participants' conceptualization of Mexican humor and the humor these films implement, they do not mention this concept as critical to a film's value or representativeness. This fact can be a consequence of the negative feelings expressed by respondents regarding the way their identity has been represented in these films, as many of the misrepresentations they perceived are a consequence of the comedy genre's limitations and tropes. These negative feelings are an integral component of the actions taken by participants to mitigate the influence of these misrepresentations, ranging from apathy and contempt to the use of other national and foreign media content to build their identity. Despite this generalized rejection of Mexican comedies, the films influence their negotiation process through the recognition of the other, the reinforcement of positive traits, and the rejection or redefinition of negative characteristics of their identity.

The genre's popularity in Mexico is not the result of a coincidence, the sum of transnational forces, or the interests of companies to reach broader markets and form a pan-identity. Discussions with this young audience strongly suggests that hearing them and probing into their process of construction and negotiation of their cultural identity is a rich source to understand how Mexico's contextual conditions play a critical role in the consumption of these films. The participants' individual agency is at the center of this process, trying to fulfill specific motivations.

In times of globalization, transnationalization, and fluidity, the discussion from these focus group members reminds us that a collage called Mexican identity is alive in constant flux and stronger than ever.

CHAPTER VII

FINAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Searching on the internet or library databases about Mexican cinema, it is not difficult to find research articles and books about the current status of the Mexican cinema industry or analyses of film texts produced in the country. However, the audience is one essential piece that has remained in the shadows, and scholars commonly draw assumptions about their consumption patterns, desires, and tastes from the box office numbers as well as the available film offerings and the prevalence of specific movie genres in Mexican theaters and on digital platforms. In a break from this tradition, this dissertation proposed to capture the experiences, opinions, and reflections of a particular group of spectators identified by one of the researchers in the field of Mexican audiences, Hinojosa-Córdova (2015), as the most avid consumers of the highest-grossing films in Mexico. This young audience from 18 to 25 years old, students and early-career professionals who are part of the broad Mexican middle class, discussed their preferences, uses, and appropriations of Mexican comedies centered around a fundamental topic part of the communicative process: identity negotiation. They debated and defined their Mexican identity, the representations available in Mexican comedies about that identity, their identification process, as well as the correspondence between comedies' portrayals and the identity they develop. This process reveals that this young audience is a cohesive interpretative community that shares common and easily identifiable attitudes and beliefs.

Their discussion has offered insights that bring light to three leading research questions: how these spectators construct their Mexican identity, the reasons they consume Mexican comedies, and the role these cinema representations play in forming a Mexican

identity. In this regard, the informants' interactions and remarks revealed how some key theoretical arguments concerning Mexican identity and Mexican cinema do not reflect the practices employed by this group of spectators. Furthermore, their comments have shown the potent influences of transnationalism and globalization in forming a cultural identity such as the Mexican. Despite the perceived threats of globalization to cultural identity that have been haunting many scholars (García Canclini, 2002), these fears have been left aside by this young audience which uses globalization and transnationalization as a way to expand and refine a Mexican identity that integrates traits from other cultures and reframes them. Thus, this research breaks a paradigm regarding the construction of a fixed and singular Mexican identity. These results show that, at least for this young audience, the Mexican is a coproduction under construction. These focus group members' cultural perceptions align with Hall's (1996) principles of cultural identity in which theoretical definitions of Mexican scholars, intellectuals, and previous governments no longer correspond to the Mexican identity these respondents are shaping.

When defining and shaping a Mexican identity, the young people interviewed for this research did not rely on representations of the Mexican culture from the Golden Age of Mexican cinema or nostalgic symbols available in popular culture; neither did they use negative traits that populated the reflections of Mexican philosophers and academics during most of the 20th century. Distinctly, they referred to their everyday social interactions and described themselves as subject to globalization trends that afford them the opportunity and material to define their identity as more progressive and positive. Their flexibility implies reconceiving constructs such as family, traditions, and religion to counter the media misrepresentations, stereotypical definitions, and negative characteristics attributed to these terms. In this thought process, this young audience is aware of the social problems and

scarcity of opportunities that have forged a resilient national character among Mexicans. Thus, to cope with the consequences of the country's unfavorable conditions, they privilege values such as unity, solidarity, and positivity. In addition, they compare themselves with foreign cultures, placing their own culture in a more favorable position. For instance, informants employ Mexican warmness as a salient trait to overcome the inferiority they perceive past Mexican generations carrying when facing the United States and European cultures. This warmness becomes a resource to tie stronger bonds not only with their own identity but with their fellow Mexicans as well, forming a tight-knit community. At the same time, they describe the Mexican culture as modern compared with those in other Latin American nations. Even though they replicate a colonizing gaze by relying on this perception, they do it trying to make their identity as Mexican unique. The use of these positive characteristics to define their identity is a resource deployed by these participants to enhance their Mexican self-esteem and shape a new identity that is more suitable for the current times. Nevertheless, the shadow of negative traits, such as the machismo perceptible in the Mexican humor, is a reminder that many of these young audience's aspirations for a more progressive Mexican identity are still a work in progress. That said, participants concluded that it is impossible to assert a singular Mexican identity. Instead, their responses deploy a cultural miscegenation paradigm to emphasize that their identity is kaleidoscopic, a convergence of multiple cultural groups shaping the many faces of the Mexican, a reboot of the concept of *Mexicanidad*.

Mexican comedies fall short when portraying the complexity of this kaleidoscopic Mexican identity, at least for these informants. Consequently, they consume other media products looking for characteristics that resonate with their sense of individuality. Thus, their cultural identity becomes only one layer in a complex network of dimensions that

comprise their identity as individuals. It does not mean that comedies are not playing a role in shaping their identity; to the contrary, these films have two evident functions in this process. First, participants give sense to their Mexican identity by comparing the identity portrayed in comedies with their own. In this comparative exercise, they recognize diverse out-groups portrayed in the films that they use as a reference for determining the boundaries for their in-group. However, some group traits overlap in this process. The distinction of these groups is based on social class, and informants emphasize that the middle class is absent from comedies' depictions. This particularity is vital because even though participants desire to confront the social disparities, they reinforce a social hierarchy by accepting as accurate many of the misrepresentations available in comedies. Consequently, this young audience perceives that in order to pertain to the middle class, they need to behave and perform in a particular way, avoiding the attitudes, beliefs, and performances of the groups depicted in these movies. The second function comedies play to define a Mexican identity is using specific narrative resources that participants perceive as closer to their daily lives. Participants identify characters, places, and social conventions as narratives devices distinguishably Mexican, challenging assumptions indicating that it is unfruitful to infer Mexican traits from these films. Those arguments have no validity for these young spectators because, for them, lo *mexicano* is evident within these stories.

This study has also revealed how escapism and entertainment-seeking are two strong motivations for young audiences to consume comedies. These films become an oasis amid a stressful Mexican context where media contents remind audiences of violence and insecurity lived daily. For this reason, participants evaluate comedies as a necessary evil, downplaying their flaws and misrepresentations. The audience researched herein recognizes that comedies foster a possible utopic version of Mexico that counters the heavily negative

image of the country populating news and Hollywood films. The main problem of this depiction is that it also privileges and reinforces a hegemonic discourse that places wealthy elites atop the hierarchy. Nevertheless, the members of this young audience perceive themselves as aware of, and immune to, the negative effects of this ideology operating within these comedies. Instead, they described themselves as a cultured audience conscious of the movies' flaws and worried about the influence they could have on unskilled audiences. This third-person effect encourages them to turn into *hatewatchers*, alerting their close relatives and friends about the problems these films carry. Interestingly, in that process, participants are not mindful of their own role in perpetuating and reinforcing the same hegemonic ideology they are supposedly fighting against.

As deficient as Mexican comedies are and as much as participants have tried not to associate with them too closely, the role of these representations in Mexican society for shaping identity is critical. For example, it is possible to notice that comedies have demystified some stereotypes of Mexico as a violent and retrograde country. However, they also have created others regarding social classes in Mexico. Also, comedies help interviewees to delimit and question the traits that constitute part of their Mexican identity. In this process, distinguishing between bad and good taste is critical for them. This distinction separates one sector of the population from the other due to its higher cultural capital that participants suggest is not linked to economic capital, although we have noticed how this is a misperception shared by participants. Participants' progressive desires only serve to evaluate peers' performance in these self-reflections, but their assumptions lack self-criticism.

Towards the conclusion of each focus group and taking advantage of the constructive discussion that had developed among participants, a final question asked them

to imagine a comedy film that responds to their identity needs. If we had 500 million pesos (25 million dollars) and the creative freedom to make the comedy film that makes us feel closely identified as Mexicans, what would you propose? The informants contribute to these conclusions with recommendations for an industry that can satisfy this desire for an accurate Mexican portrayal:

Representations of more locations than Mexico City or tourist places. Informants agreed that having more accurate portrayals of their identity implies showing more areas of the country than Mexico City or even more neighborhoods in that city that are not typical of the tourist gaze. An interviewee mentions: "we should find a way to show places like Tepito[30] and instead of presenting it as negative zone, showing it as a location where you can find bargains, a cellphone for 100 pesos [5 dollars]."

A more profound and educative message. For respondents, films must show not only Mexican problems but also solutions and ways to make the country better. It means that beyond showing a utopic place in comedies, these films could present strategies to reach that utopia in which differences of classes, gender, and race are no longer so determinant. As a respondent indicates: "I would like a message of respect, not a comedy just mocking or laughing at stereotypes and our problems."

Multidimensional and well-developed characters. Interviewees stress that Mexicans are more complex than just a single social class or other few dimensions highlighted by stereotypes. Thus, to make comedies more compelling, they demand "more profound" and "complex" characters with "more background" that allow them to understand their attitudes and beliefs. A respondent from Veracruz expresses his disdain:

[30] Tepito is a neighborhood in Mexico City identified among the population as a dangerous place due to the diverse illicit activities, such as prostitution, informal commerce, and piracy.

> I'm tired of the same characters, a poor person that doesn't have many opportunities, or the rich one that everything happens to him, or the LGTB [LGBTQ+] character that always wants to come out from the closet or that they don't know how to talk about their sexuality to the people or their family . . . Comedies need to be more realistic, not only use those cliches or stereotypes to make people laugh, we need to respect people.

Characters from the middle class. As many of the responses elicited by this research suggest, interviewees notice an absence of characters from the middle classes in Mexican comedies, obscuring their problems, needs, and desires. They suggest that these films should remove the focus from social classes to establish characters and stories that do not depend on those classifications. An important point here is that respondents notice the lack of characters similar to them (students/professionals 18-25 years old who are part of the middle class), making their identification difficult. A respondent from Tijuana proposes:

> I would make a film in which Mexicans feel identified with the main character, in which social classes were not relevant. Something closer to us. I don't know. I imagine a film where the protagonist is a student or a worker from daily life, right? Where you can say, "that's true, I do that every day" and you can see it comically.

Exploring other audiences. Tied to the previous arguments, participants recognize the importance of appealing to broader audiences; not only young people like them but also kids and older people or lesbian/gay couples should be part of these representations. A respondent from Guadalajara argues:

> I would love to see more films with teenagers or children or things that happened during the childhood of characters because I feel that's a topic experienced by all adults, so that's something very identifiable and successful worldwide. How many anime series are now referring to that and are successful? And right now, we have many content creators [stand-up comedians] taking these situations like when we were kids, and our mom threatened us with the *chancla* [slipper] or got angry in the van, I mean, if that is very popular nowadays. We like to see it, so it has so much potential.

Get rid of the exaggeration. Although respondents recognize that comedies require exaggerating situations and characters as part of the genre, they also emphasize the importance of reducing the use of this narrative device to make their stories more accurate of Mexican reality.

Crafting original stories. As the pattern constraining Mexican comedies is very narrow and easily identifiable, interviewees suggest giving more opportunities to new creative talent who could explore other stories and challenge the audiences' expectations. In this regard, they emphasize how producers must expand generic conventions or eliminate stereotypical portrayals. For example, an informant in Mexico City states: "I will look for a theme that has not been addressed before. I mean, it is evident that this is almost impossible because everything has been already told, but I will tackle it differently, avoiding cliches and the *telenovela* tone."

Hybridization of genres. According to interviewees, one way to design and convey new stories is to mix comedies with other genres. For instance, *dramamedies*, mockumentaries, horror, or action hybrids are mentioned as possibilities for exploring new opportunities for Mexican comedies. A respondent in Guadalajara mentions:

> I would like to experience another kind of humor, I mean, the Mexican is very cruel sometimes, so I would like to do a dark comedy. I think it is very cool to betray your audience, and I would like that Mexican cinema would dare to do something like that . . . something that could make feel the audience uncomfortable.

Improving aesthetic qualities. Respondents note that one thing that interferes with their identification with the story and characters is the films' aesthetic flaws. A faulty sound mixing making it impossible to hear dialogues clearly and a cinematic look that makes the comedy akin to a television product are two of the main flaws addressed by the interviewees.

Finally, this young audience has shared a common belief about the prevalence of Mexican comedies in Mexico. For them, the Mexican film industry has many problems to solve, involving production, distribution, and exhibition. However, they perceive that the main problem of this industry is that film producers do not care about Mexican audiences' opinions. According to participants, looking at the motivations and expectations Mexicans have about their identity and their country has never been of interest to an industry worried only about consumption levels. A participant from Veracruz elaborates on this matter: "To do something that really makes us feel identified, there should be an analysis that makes the industry understand if that film appeals to audiences, how they are talking about it, or if they like it or not."

In the hope that one day producers of Mexican movies will hear the concerns and wishes of these participants, this dissertation has shown the importance that audiences have in defining, negotiating, challenging, and reinforcing the relationship between their Mexican identity and Mexican comedies. Echoing these reflections, a participant from Mexico City shares his conclusion:

> We have a strong cliché about Mexican cinema; we say it is terrible and things like that, but the truth is that we only consume a small part. We have a vital responsibility of exploring, knowing more, not only demonizing comedies but look at them as an opportunity to recognize what they are doing good and wrong, why it is so popular. . . We just focus on the bad things, but I'm sure there are good ones. We need to open to other perspectives and overall to know more about our cinema.

There is a long road to understanding Mexican audiences and their dimensions better. Delving into audiences' understanding urges us to reconsider the messages and representations available in the most popular genre in the country, comedies. The value of these productions to shape a Mexican identity is undeniable. It is necessary to look at the

Mexican audiences and fulfill their expectations to promote a more robust Mexican film industry. This work is just one step forward toward accomplishing that goal.

Future Research

This study has centered on the thoughts, practices, and consumption of a particular group of Mexican audiences, young students/professionals from 18 to 25 years old, members of the middle class. Although the middle class is a broad construct in the Mexican social imaginary, wealth distribution in the country informs other realities where these participants are part of the middle and high classes. Moreover, their experiences have stressed how they are not members of the working class that populates many urban centers. Thus, it is necessary to find ways to identify and reach participants that are part of a specific and well-defined social class.

As only one specific audience was discussed here, in order to complete a more extensive analysis and comprehension of the Mexican audiences, it is necessary to interview children, young adults (who, according to the participants, seems to be the main protagonists and target spectators of these comedies), adults, and older people. Considering different Mexican audiences is critical nowadays due to the increasingly common use of streaming platforms, making Mexican comedies more accessible to a broader population. Analyzing them will bring a deeper understanding of the popularity of Mexican comedies in the country and the intersections between the diverse processes in which Mexican audiences engage when negotiating their identity.

Finally, as globalization and transnationalization flows play a critical role in the consumption of media contents around the world, and cultural identity is a construct subject to these processes, looking at how Mexican diasporas negotiate their identity as Mexicans

living abroad, it is critical to understand how Mexican identity has taken other shapes and meanings.

Aligned with these goals, the next step of this research is replicating this study in the United States, finding the most avid Mexican and Mexican American populations that consume Mexican comedies. Then, it is necessary to conduct a series of focus groups in the states having the highest concentrations of these spectators to discuss the topics covered here and include a new chapter to delve into the complex negotiation between Latinx/Hispanic representations and Mexican ones. After this step, the final stage of this project requires finding avid consumers of Mexican comedies among Mexican diasporas around the world. If globalization and transnationalization have influenced Mexican cultural identity by privileging a pan-identity, these diasporas have much to say about forces the multiple media forces that interplay in those regions.

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TABLE 1

MEXICAN FILM ATTENDANCE IN MEXICAN MOVIE THEATRES DURING 2019 BY REGION

Region	State	Attendants to Mexican films in 2019	Percentage of attendance to Mexican films in 2019
Mexico City	México City	4,522,819	13.5%
Northwestern	Baja California	1,665,229	4.97%
	Sinaloa	808,381	2.41%
	Sonora	668,083	1.99%
	Baja California Sur	297,972	0.89%
Northeastern	Nuevo León	1,829,870	5.46%
	Chihuahua	1,102,941	3.29%
	Tamaulipas	1,053,186	3.14%
	Coahuila	901,568	2.69%
	Durango	300,234	0.9%
Western Central	Jalisco	2,357,977	7.04%
	Guanajuato	1,337,741	3.99%
	Michoacán	1,137,948	3.4%
	Querétaro	864,728	2.58%
	San Luis Potosí	603,245	1.8%
	Aguascalientes	403,703	1.2%
	Colima	293,262	0.88%
	Nayarit	263,875	0.79%
	Zacatecas	224,963	0.67%
Southern	Veracruz	1,566,659	4.68%
	Quintana Roo	1,076,604	3.21%
	Yucatán	694,650	2.07%
	Chiapas	646,555	1.93%
	Tabasco	566,431	1.69%
	Campeche	208,280	0.62%
Central	Estado de México	4,554,931	13.6%
	Puebla	1,095,362	3.27%
	Guerrero	624,820	1.86%
	Morelos	583,504	1.74%
	Hidalgo	580,754	1.73%

	Oaxaca	454,935	1.36%
	Tlaxcala	211,729	0.63%
	Total	**33,502,939**	**100%**

Note. The data was obtained of figures reported in the IMCINE's Statistical Yearbook of Mexican Cinema 2019.

Appendix A

LIST OF QUESTIONS DISCUSSED DURING FOCUS GROUPS

1. *¿Cuáles crees que son los rasgos más importantes que caracterizan la identidad mexicana?* [What would you say are the most recognizable defining traits of the Mexican identity?].
2. ¿*Crees que estas características han cambiado de como las concibieron otras generaciones, por ejemplo, tus papás o tus abuelos?* [How do you think these traits have evolved from your parents or grandparents to your generation?].
3. *Si nos comparamos con otras culturas, ¿cuáles consideran que son las ventajas de ser mexicano?* [In comparison with other cultures, what are the advantages of being Mexican?].
4. *¿Cuáles considerarías que son las desventajas de ser mexicano?* [And, what are the disadvantages of being Mexican?].
5. *Usualmente, ¿cuántas películas mexicanas ves por año?* [Usually, how many Mexican comedies do you watch per year?].
6. *¿Qué características consideras o cómo selecciona que película mexicana ver?* [Which things do you take into consideration to select which Mexican comedies watch?].
7. *Debido al COVID-19, ¿Ha cambiado de alguna forma la manera en la que eliges ver una película de comedia mexicana en cines o en plataformas de streaming?* [Because of COVID-19, have you relied on the same strategies when selecting a Mexican comedy on a streaming platform than in a movie theater].

8. *¿Qué características consideras que tiene una película de comedia mexicana?* [What characteristics of a comedy film make it identifiable as Mexican?].
9. *¿Cómo te sientes al respecto de la imagen que estás películas presentan de México y de los mexicanos?* [How do you feel about the image of Mexico and Mexicans these films present?].
10. *¿Crees que las características que aparecen en estas películas reflejan los verdaderos rasgos de la cultura mexicana?* [How do you think these characteristics are related to the real traits you perceive in Mexican culture?]
11. *¿Crees que las historias que presentan las comedias mexicanas pueden ocurrir en la vida real?* [How do you think that the storylines presented in Mexican comedies relate to real-life events?]
12. *¿Crees que los personajes que presentan las comedias mexicanas son similares a personas reales que tú conoces?* [How do you think that the characters these Mexican comedies present are related to real people?].
13. *¿Qué consejos darías para que estas películas representaran a México y a los mexicanos de una manera más realista?* [What could be changed about these films to generate a more accurate depiction of Mexicans and Mexico?].

Appendix B

TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY. HUMAN RESEARCH PROTECTION PROGRAM'S IRB LETTER OF APPROVAL

TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY
Human Research Protection Program

Feb 1, 2021 10:56:01 AM CST

Kenton Wilkinson
JOUR and Creative Media Indust

Re: IRB2020-960 Negotiating Mexican identity in transnational Mexican comedy blockbusters since 2013

Findings: Best of luck with your research. Thanks for your patience during the review.

Dear Dr. Kenton Wilkinson, Gabriel Partida:

A Texas Tech University IRB reviewer has approved the proposal referenced above within the expedited category of:
6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.
7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

The approval is effective on January 30, 2021. Annual review is not required, and no expiration date will be listed on your letter.

The research must follow Texas Tech University's Operating Procedures, the Belmont Report, and 45 CFR 46. If changes to the approved protocol occur, a **Modification Submission** must be reviewed and approved by the IRB before implementation.

A goal of the IRB is to prevent negative occurrences during any research study. However, despite our best intent, unforeseen circumstances or events may arise during the research. If a deviation, unanticipated problem or adverse event happens during your research, please notify the Texas Tech University, Human Research Protection Program as soon as possible (45 CFR 46). We will ask for a complete explanation of the event and for you to submit an **Incident Submission** in Cayuse IRB.

Your study may be selected for a Post-Approval Monitoring (PAM). You will be notified if your study has been chosen for a PAM. A PAM investigator may request to observe your data collection procedures, including the consent process.

Once your research is complete and no identifiable data remains, please use a **Closure Submission** to archive this study. IRBs that remain active are subject to audit by the IRB.

Sincerely,

Kelly Cukrowicz, Ph.D.
Chair Texas Tech University Institutional Review Board
Professor, School of Veterinary Medicine
Human Research Protection Program
357 Administration Building
Lubbock, Texas 79409-1075
T 806.742.2064
www.hrpp.ttu.edu

Appendix C

LIST OF QUESTIONS DISCUSSED DURING THE IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

1. *Durante el grupo focal mencionaste que [rasgo] era una característica fundamental del mexicano. ¿Podrías elaborar este concepto?* [During the focus group, you mentioned that [trait] is a fundamental Mexican characteristic. Could you elaborate on this concept?].
2. *¿Cómo consideras que otras culturas perciben a México y a los Mexicanos?* [How do you think other cultures perceive Mexico and Mexicans?].
3. *¿Crees que la películas mexicanas contemporáneas de comedia tienen alguna influencia en como otros países conciben la cultura mexicana?* [Do you think that contemporary Mexican comedies influence the perception of other countries about Mexican culture?].
4. *¿Podrías explicar por qué odias (o te gustan) las películas mexicanas contemporáneas de comedia?* [Could you explain why you like (or dislike) Mexican comedy films?].
5. *Generalmente, ¿Con quién consumes estás películas y qué opinión tienen al respecto de ellas?* [Usually, who do you watch these movies with and what opinion do they have about them?].
6. *¿Cuáles son los rasgos que consideras hacen de estas películas representaciones certeras o fallidas de México y los Mexicanos?* [What are the traits that these films present that make them an accurate or inaccurate representation of Mexico and Mexicans?

7. *¿Cuáles consideras que son los rasgos rescatables de estás películas mexicanas?* [What do you think are the most positive traits these films show?].
8. *¿Cuáles son las emociones y pensamientos que estás películas despiertan en ti al respecto de México y otros mexicanos?* [What the emotions and thoughts these films elicit in you regarding Mexico and other Mexicans?].
9. *¿Qué rol crees que estas películas mexicanas de comedia tienen en tu identidad como mexicano/a?* [What role do you think these comedies have in your identity as Mexican?].
10. *¿Podrías hablarme más al respecto de (comentario realizado durante el grupo focal)?* [Could you please elaborate on (comment made during the focus group)?].
11. *¿Tienes alguna otra idea que te gustaría compartir o que hayas pensado sobre los temas que platicamos durante el grupo focal o esta entrevista?* [Do you have any other comments to add regarding the themes discussed during the focus group or the interview?].