I CAN BE MYSELF, [ALMOST] ALWAYS: A LATINX MICROCLIMATE IN A
PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

By

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ABSTRACT

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Latinx students often experience exclusion, alienation, microaggressions, self-doubt, hostility and feelings of not being supported in institutions of higher education. Yet, sense of belonging can also play a crucial role in their experiences. For this study, I used a qualitative approach and applied Critical Race Theory and LatCrit epistemology with a grounded theory methodology as a foundation to gather, code, and analyze the data. I drew on data obtained through thirteen open-ended interviews, thirteen corresponding demographic questionnaires from the Latinx undergraduate students, and participant observation. Findings suggest that microclimates are significant in engaging students' sense of belonging. Yet, they do not eliminate the exclusion, invalidation, and self-doubt that is perpetuated throughout the campus. Furthermore, findings also illustrate that microclimates can also perpetuate these for certain students based on their positionalities. Understanding the complexities of identity, belonging, and microclimates is critical to understanding the experiences of undergraduate Latinx students in institutions of higher education.

This thesis is dedicated to the Latinx students at Midwestern University for everything they do, their resilience does not go unnoticed. I would also like to give a special thanks to the Latinx Undergraduate Organization (LUO) for allowing me into their space, for their time, patience, and kindness. And although I am using pseudonyms, I hope they know that this is for them. Para mi familia y comunidad, ustedes me dan la fuerza para seguir adelante.

Mil gracias a todos.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

MU   Midwestern University

LUO   Latinx Undergraduate Organization

PWI   Predominantly White Institution

CRT   Critical Race Theory

LatCrit Latina/o Critical Theory

INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher education do not provide their students with equitable experiences. This is apparent by understanding the critical role students' positionalities play in these experiences. For example, students of color attending predominantly white institutions (PWI) of higher education often endure racial microaggressions, which can be subtle, verbal, visual, unconscious or intentional degradations, putdowns, and insults rooted in white superiority (Pierce 1995; Garcia and Johnston-Guerrero 2015; Ballinas 2017). As such, students of color also experience exclusion and self-doubt during their higher education careers (González 2002; Yosso et al. 2009). In addition, students of color attending predominantly white institutions describe their experiences as alienating, isolating, hostile, and unsupportive (Hurtado 1992; Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler 1996; González 2002; Yosso and Benavides Lopez 2010).

Moreover, space plays a critical role in the experiences of students of color in institutions of higher education. Space encompasses the physical as well as the symbolic and social aspects of an environment (Barajas and Ronnkvist 2007). The physical aspects of space are tangible. This includes the architecture, sculptures, and physical symbols, such as posters and flyers in higher education campuses (González 2002). The symbolic aspects of space include the meanings, ideologies, and knowledge that are shaped by existing power relations on campus (González 2002; Barajas and Ronnkvist 2007; Neely and Samura 2011). Examples of symbolic space include the racial campus climate and the political standing of marginalized students on campus. And lastly, the social aspects of space entail the racial and ethnic makeup of the students, staff, and faculty, and languages spoken in these spaces (González 2002). Therefore, it is important to note that the symbolic and social aspects of spaces are just as important as the physical ones.

Furthermore, it is crucial to understand that spaces are not neutral. Space is specifically not race-neutral, as race is deeply embedded in the physical, social, and symbolic aspects of space (Feagin et al. 1996; Barajas and Ronnkvist 2007). The racialization of space impacts the power and relationships within it. Barajas and Ronnkvist argue that in spaces where "power provides a supportive, reflective relationship, then racialization is likely to serve as a mechanism of awareness rather than a mechanism for hiding differences in neutral assumptions" (2007:1521). However, what is often rampant in institutions of higher education are assumptions of neutrality and equality. These assumptions serve to cover the privilege and power whites have in these spaces and position people of color at a disadvantage (Delgado and Stefancic 1993).

Consequently, to extend the understanding of Latinx undergraduate students' experiences in predominantly white institutions of higher education, this qualitative study addresses: (1) How do Latinx undergraduate students experience and navigate a Latinx microclimate?; (2) How can a Latinx microclimate contribute to Latinx students' sense of belonging in PWIs?; and (3) How do these experiences vary depending on the positionalities of these students?

To this end, I rely on thirteen in-depth interviews and demographic questionnaires from Latinx undergraduate students attending a PWI. I also use fieldnotes from various general membership meetings, executive board meetings, academic, and social events I attended in a space that I identified as a Latinx microclimate on this campus: the Latinx Undergraduate Organization (LUO) room. The LUO is central to many of the activities Latinx undergraduate students participate in on this campus. My observations gained through my involvement with this organization enabled me to observe the students in a microclimate different than those that dominate the university – a Latinx space compared to a predominantly white space. I found that the Latinx undergraduate students' experiences are complex. For example, whereas some

students describe the Latinx microclimate as validating, safe, home-like, and supportive, others described it as exclusionary, intimidating, and unwelcoming. This study further highlights the impact these students' positionalities have on their experiences. I engage in this discussion further in the analysis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

White Space

Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) of higher education are defined as institutions where fifty percent or more of the student population is white (Lomotey 2010). Subsequently, PWIs are white spaces. Anderson describes white spaces as spaces where their "most visible and distinctive feature is their overwhelming presence of white people" (2015:13). This whiteness is actively built into the educational spaces through both informal and formal practices (Barajas and Ronnkvist 2007). It is the result of the histories, structures, and discourses that reproduce inequalities by privileging whites and disadvantaging people of color in these spaces (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Feagin and Cobas 2014; Ballinas 2017). Spatial whiteness then results in making people of color feel unwelcomed and inferior (Ballinas 2017). For example, in higher education settings students of color can experience stereotype threat. This is described as feeling "threatened by the possibility that they may be judged or treated stereotypically by their teachers and peers and facing the prospect that their academic performance may confirm the negative stereotype" (Tuitt and Carter 2008: 53). In these situations, students of color are made to feel hyperaware of their own presence and the impact it has on their relationships with others in that shared space. This negatively impacts their experiences in the classroom, especially when they are constantly made to feel that they are viewed through a negative lens or have to continuously combat racist stereotypes. Additionally, students can also experience being assigned the role of the "native informant." Tuitt and Carter describe this as when black students are required to provide expert opinions on topics related to their racial identity, therefore assigning them the role of the racial spokesperson in that space (2008: 55). This reduces the student to a role that caters and prioritizes other individuals over the students of color. As a result, students then find coping

mechanisms to combat these experiences, one of which includes self-censorship. While in classroom settings, self-censorship occurs when students do not participate as much as their peers and when they meticulously calculate their responses if they do participate. Consequently, they do not perform to their maximum capacity while engaging in this type of coping mechanism (2008:58).

Sense of Belonging

Furthermore, a student's sense of belonging is essential to their ability to thrive in institutions of higher education. For this study I used Strayhorn's definition of sense of belonging which is defined as a "students' perceived social support on campus; a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group or others on campus" (Strayhorn 2012:3). The sense of belonging among students is imperative as it leads to academic success, increased feelings of confidence, capability, validation, and pride (Vaccaro and Camba-Kelsay 2016). Additionally, a sense of validation is crucial for countering the effects of microaggressions, stereotypes, and racism (Rendon 1994; Nuñez 2011). Yet, the perception of a hostile campus climate is directly and negatively associated with a sense of belonging (Hurtado, Alvarado, and Guillermo-Wann 2015).

Additionally, Samura states that "students' sense of belonging in different campus spaces may be closely related to the racial makeup of the student population or even to practices that maintain and reproduce certain relations of power" (2010: 1942). Similarly, González found that the lack of demographic representation often leads students of color to feel "out of place" (González 2002). Students of color are constantly made to feel that there is no place for them at the university which can lead them to question their presence on campus and the legitimacy of

their merits (Yosso and Benavides Lopez 2010). Therefore, there should be a focus on understanding the benefits of belonging, especially in the context of a Latinx undergraduate student population, as belonging is also a key to persistence and attainment in higher education settings (Yosso and Benavides Lopez 2010).

Microclimates

This study of space engages microclimates. Microclimates are "smaller distinct spaces where individuals operate within institutions of higher education" (Ackelsberg et al. 2009; Vaccaro 2012; Garcia and Johnston-Guerrero 2015; Serrano 2020). Microclimates encompass spaces such as programs, departments, and student organizations on campus (Serrano 2020). Scholars have found that hostile microclimates lead students to disengagement from their institution, yet positive microclimates lead to retention (Ackelsberg et al. 2009). However, for this study, I focus on a racialized microclimate.

Considering that there is a continuous increase in students of color attending predominantly white institutions of higher education (Skinner and Richardson 1988; González 2002), it is imperative to address how student engagement in microclimates impact their experiences on campus. This study will explore how Latinx undergraduate students experience a Latinx microclimate at a predominantly white institution in the Midwest and its impact on their sense of belonging.

Counterspaces

Furthermore, students have found other ways to cope with various forms of exclusion, microaggressions, and hostility on campus. Some students find support, community, and validation in campus counterspaces. Vaccaro and Camba-Kelsay (2016) describe counterspaces as spaces where students of color are able to be with similarly marginalized individuals and

where they are the majority in those spaces. Counterspaces offer these students a space where they are not constantly experiencing microaggressions, a space where they can share their experiences with racist microaggressions and vent to understanding ears, find support and validation, be a site for responding to injustices and pushing for social justice, a space for identity formation, empowerment, and even healing from all the forms of harm they have endured (Butler and Walter 1991; Solórzano et. al 2000; Harper and Hurtado 2007; Yosso et. al 2009; Nunez 2011; Grier-Reed 2010). A positive microclimate can create a counterspace for marginalized students in predominantly white institutions of higher education. However, they do not always create this type of sanctuary for all students that engage with it.

Latinx Narratives

For this study, Latinx will be used as a gender-neutral term to refer to individuals of Latin American descent. When discussing Latinxs in the United States, many scholars still focus on integration and assimilation to understand their experiences (Ballinas 2017; Feagin and Cobas 2014). However, by focusing on an individual's ability or willingness to integrate or assimilate, blame is assigned to them for their experiences and lived realities, while ignoring the discrimination and structural disadvantages that play a role in them. Additionally, the ideas of integration and assimilation assume that Latinxs are welcomed by the dominant white middle class, while studies have shown that regardless of citizenship status, individuals of Mexican descent are generally perceived as foreigners in the United States (Ballinas 2017). Yet, this is further complicated as not all Latinxs experience similar challenges when it comes to their identities. Latinxs that have a light complexion, lack Spanish fluency, and lack Latinx cultural knowledge often have complicated ties to their heritage and identity (Rivera et al. 2010; Ballinas 2017). Additionally, Smith (2006) states that second-generation Mexicans often face a two-

faceted struggle over Mexican authenticity and American assimilation. They "simultaneously feel embraced and judged, included and alienated" (157). Consequently, claiming a Latinx identity is complex specifically as a result of the lack of consensus among Latinxs over their panethnic and racial classification. However, Latinx studies scholars have come to a consensus over the awareness that Latinx identities are fluid, situational, and context specific (Castillo-Montoya and Verduzco Reyes 2018:3). Therefore, this study will investigate the ways Latinx undergraduate students' identities play a role in their various experiences on campus.

CRITICAL RACE THEORY AND LATINA/O CRITICAL RACE THEORY

As stated by critical race theorists, racism is "pervasive, systemic, and deeply ingrained" in our everyday lives (Delgado and Stefancic 2017:91). Critical Race Theory (CRT) is used in this study as a framework for examining the experiences of Latinx undergraduate students at a PWI because it engages the centrality of race and racism that they interact with on a daily basis (Tuitt and Carter 2008). Furthermore, I use CRT as a means to "challenge the traditional claims of the educational system's neutrality, objectivity, and colorblindness" (Smith-Maddox and Solórzano 2002:70–71). Claims of neutrality, objectivity, and colorblindness are often used to invalidate and minimize the power and privileges that are dominant and oppressive in these institutions. Therefore, to recognize and challenge those claims I center the lived experiences of the Latinx students which are often further marginalized. Additionally, I use Latina/o Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) as it addresses aspects that aren't taken into account by CRT which include language, immigration, ethnicity, and phenotype (Solórzano and Bernal 2001). LatCrit specifically highlights the variety and intersectional lives of Latinx individuals, specifically the intersectionalities of racism, sexism, and classism (Bernal 2002). Students of color are creators of knowledge but they are often told or shown that their histories, experiences, cultures, and languages are not valued, are misinterpreted, or omitted within education settings (Bernal 2002:106). Consequently, by engaging both CRT and LatCrit in this study, I attempt to use them as a means to bring equity and justice to the forefront of these experiences by centering their lived experiences as valid and important forms of knowledge.

METHODOLOGY

For this study, a qualitative approach was used to address the participants' experiences on a predominantly white campus and insights on how they managed and navigated them. This study used a CRT and LatCrit epistemology and a grounded theory methodology as a foundation to gather, code, and analyze the data. Furthermore, the data used for this study came from a larger study interrogating the lived experiences of Latinx undergraduate students in a PWI, specifically their experiences with discrimination, agency, and resiliency.

Research Site

The site for this study is a large, public, predominantly and historically white university located in the Midwestern United States. And for purposes of this study, the university has been given the pseudonym of Midwestern University (MU). At the time of the study, there was a total undergraduate student population of about 40,000 students. The majority of the students were white (75.5%), with the remaining students identifying as African American/Black (8.3%), Asian (6.3%), Hispanic/Latinx of any race (5.3%), American Indian or Alaska Native (0.2%), two or more races (3.6%) and ethnicity unknown (0.8%). Additionally, this campus also has a migrant student population which is predominantly Latinx. Students with migrant or seasonal farm work backgrounds were able to participate in a program that offers them academic, social, and financial support during their pursuit of higher education at MU. These students are recruited from the Midwestern and Southern United States regions.

Within MU, there are multiple organizations for marginalized students on campus and some have a physical space for their students to engage in. Specifically, for the Latinx undergraduate population at MU, the undergraduate organization that is central to them is the Latinx Undergraduate Organization (LUO). LUO is an umbrella organization for various Latinx

undergraduate student organizations on the MU campus. Their membership population includes students from various Latinx backgrounds, races, generational migration statuses, genders, and that come from different parts of the country. Their total membership count is not a set number, as they have students that are members of their umbrella organizations that join some events and meetings but not others. Therefore, their membership is anywhere between twenty to seventy students. One of the unique aspects of LUO is that they have a physical room where they and their affiliated organizations host their events and meetings. This space is used for academic conversations with fellow undergraduate students, graduate students, professors, and invited guests. It is also used for bi-weekly LUO general membership meetings, executive board meetings, dinners, political events, community-building events, and game nights. All four walls of this room are covered in murals of Aztec images, fraternity and sororities emblems, and other paintings representing the various LUO-affiliated organizations. For this study, this physical space will be referred to as the LUO room. The LUO room serves as a microclimate for Latinx students at MU.

Participants

Participants for this study were recruited using snowball sampling with a purposeful criterion-based approach (Patton 1990) at Midwestern University. I created a digital flyer which contained eligibility requirements and my email address. I shared this flyer with executive board members of LUO. They then shared the flyer with others, specifically through their LUO network. Additionally, a LUO executive board member shared the contact information of representatives of their LUO-affiliated organizations with me. I then emailed those students directly to recruit them to participate in the study and for them to share the flyer with their respective members. Students that met the criteria and were interested in participating contacted

me via email. We then coordinated to make the arrangements for the interviews. The participants met the following criteria: 1) Self-identified as individuals of Latinx descent; 2) Current undergraduate students at MU at the time of their interview; and 3) Previously attended an event or meeting in the LUO room. These criteria enable me to gather in-depth information regarding experiences within the LUO room since the participants that were eligible would have been the most familiar with the space. A total of thirteen participants were recruited for this study. They were given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonyms for this study. And for participants that did not choose their own, a pseudonym was assigned to them.

Additionally, the students that were interviewed varied in their student classification, giving insight on both initial participation and involvement and reflections of more senior students about their time at MU and the LUO room. Table 1.1 and 1.2 in Appendix A further illustrate the demographic information for the thirteen participants.

Data Collection

Qualitative methods were used to enable me to better understand the complexities of the lived experiences of the Latinx students in the study (Liang et al. 2017). For this study, I drew on data obtained through thirteen open-ended interviews, thirteen corresponding demographic questionnaires from the Latinx undergraduate students that were interviewed, and participation observation that spanned over seven months.

Participant Observation: October 2018 – May 2019

In October 2018, I attended my first event in the LUO room as a researcher. I had previously attended other events as a student and community member. Being in this space under a different role changed my experience there. I now had access to closed meetings which were

restricted to executive board members of LUO and LUO-affiliated organizations. Therefore, I attended a mixture of both public and private meetings and events throughout this time.

In the public LUO general members' meetings hosted in the LUO room, I was able to witness moments of community-building, support, and the undergraduate students enjoying themselves and the company of others in a safe and welcoming space. As I came across students I had not previously met, I was quickly embraced with a hug and introduced to other students in the room. They shared their space, time, food, and experiences with me.

However, in the closed executive board meetings I was able to witness discussions of broader issues impacting the Latinx community at MU, but also conversations of inclusivity and exclusion within the LUO room. These conversations were more contentious and evidently significant for the students that engaged in them. They discussed how the food, music, conversations, and activities which occurred in the LUO room were often Mexican-centric. This marginalized non-Mexican students that participated in the events in the LUO room. However, they also discussed the ways that Aztec images were central to the murals on the walls yet there were no images, symbols, or flags to represent the pride and heritage of other Latin American countries. Additionally, there was also the omission of various affiliated organizations from the murals as well. These conversations illustrated the complex feelings of exclusion some of the students experienced in the LUO room.

Demographic Questionnaire

To further understand these students' wholistic experiences, a demographic questionnaire was used to obtain the participants' information regarding Spanish-speaking abilities, generational migration status, student classification, major, minor(s), first-generation college student status, employment, and organization membership. Moreover, this questionnaire gave the

participants an opportunity to share their gender and ethnic identity on their own terms, not restricted to male and female for gender or Latino, Latina, or Latinx for their ethnic identity. However, all my participants identified as either male or female. And all but one student identified as either Latina or Latino. The student that did not identify as either of those, identified as Chicana for their ethnic identity. The information gathered through this questionnaire enabled me to gain a better understanding of the participants' experiences before their face-to-face interviews.

Face-to-Face Interviews

The interview protocol gathered information on the Latinx undergraduates' experiences at Midwestern University broadly, life off-campus, and specific on-campus experiences in regard to space, organizations, and relationships. The open-ended questions regarding on-campus experiences covered topics such as campus climate, current, and past major campus events, discrimination, belonging, networks, support, and identity (Garcia 2017). The use of an interview guide served as an instrument to ensure that participants had similar opportunities to engage with certain topics and themes. However, I was not constrained to only those questions and was able to pursue topics in further depths as they presented themselves (Patton 2015). Furthermore, grounded theory techniques were used to revise the interview guide as the I began to identify emerging themes from the initial interviews (Charmaz 2014). This enabled both the participants and I to engage and explore more topics than originally set in the interview guide.

On the day of the interviews, participants were briefed on the overview of the study, confidentiality, consent, and compensation. They completed the demographic questionnaire before their interviews. The participants were interviewed individually and were audio-recorded. The interviews occurred in a private on-campus office at MU for easy-access to the students and

confidentiality purposes. Interviews occurred throughout the day and late into the evening as I caught students between classes, work, organization commitments, and other responsibilities. The average interview time was forty-five minutes. And lastly, as a result of receiving a research enhancement grant provided by the Chicano/Latino Studies program at Michigan State University, I was able to compensate the participants with a ten-dollar Starbucks gift card at the end of their interview.

Positionality

Further, as a result of my intersecting positionalities, I was positioned in a unique role during this study. My race, ethnicity, citizenship status, language proficiency, gender, age, and education impacted my research design and my interactions with individuals involved in this study. Many of the identities and experiences of the individuals involved in this study resonated with my own. I was assumed to be an insider that understood the experiences they shared with me, this provided me with a unique methodological advantage where I was "less apt to encourage distrust and hostility, and the experience of being excluded (e.g. as a white researcher) from communities, or of being allowed to 'see' only what people of color want them to see" (Baca Zinn 1979:212). Being viewed as an insider to this community enabled me to gain incredible insights that I do not believe would have been possible otherwise. I recognize the parallels between the students in the LUO and my own. I am a Latina, daughter of Mexican immigrants. My immediate family and I are United States citizens, either by birth or naturalization. And most of my family members and I are fluent Spanish-speakers. Additionally, I was close in age to some of the undergraduate student participants which further enabled me to connect with them. Lastly, I completed my undergraduate degree at a predominantly white institution of higher education in Texas. And although the Latinx student population at the time I

was at that institution was about three times that of the Latinx undergraduate student population at MU during the time of the study, I was exposed to very overt acts of racism on campus, lacked institutional support, and lacked of a sense of belonging to the campus in general. Yet, throughout my experiences with the Latinx undergraduate students at MU, I recognize that I now possess a privileged position as I entered their space as a graduate student. I am not impacted in the same way by the issues that they were involved, invested, and experiencing in the LUO room and at MU at large.

During this study, I actively and purposefully engaged in reflexivity. I acknowledged my gaps in knowledge concerning campus history, undergraduate courses, Latinx undergraduate issues, and relationships between organizations. I addressed these by prompting interviewees to further explain these gaps from their own personal experiences and knowledge. I recognized that my positionality as both an insider and outsider influenced various parts of this study. It influenced my theoretical framework, research design, participant population, data collection, and analysis.

Additionally, I had previously established rapport with various individuals in this community. In September 2018, before beginning this study, I met with three Latinx undergraduate students and the LUO advisor to discuss the nature of the study, what it would entail, and to ask for permission to enter their space. This was important for me to do as I wanted to respect their space and only be there if I was welcomed. The meeting went smoothly, and I was invited in.

Data Analysis

Audio-recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. This measure ensured the reliability of the findings. Yet, the excerpts presented in the findings section have been modified

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by having repeating words or statements removed. These changes have been clearly marked in the excerpts. The interviews were either entirely in English or in a combination of English and Spanish. The transcripts were cleaned multiple times to ensure that any identifying information was removed, which included assigning additional pseudonyms to individuals, buildings, organizations, and other universities that were mentioned. I ensured that the pseudonyms were assigned appropriately as they appeared in multiple interviews. Furthermore, fieldnotes were written up after the end of each event attended. They were later typed and coded. I took an open-coding approach when examining interview transcripts and participant observation fieldnotes. Interview transcripts were coded using NVivo qualitative software. I conducted the first round of coding using an inductive approach (Glaser and Strauss 1999) which revealed themes of identity, belonging, community, fear, and discrimination. I then used a deductive approach to code themes of spaces – safe, exclusionary, white, Latinx, and home-like. Additionally, throughout the transcribing and coding process I created analytic memos to practice reflexivity, capture insights, and engage with emerging themes (Charmaz 2014).

FINDINGS

The following excerpts were selected to showcase the variety of experiences Latinx undergraduate students at Midwestern University had within the LUO room. The findings are broken up into different sections addressing how these students engaged, navigated, and experienced the Latinx microclimate, while specifically addressing the research questions.

A Validating and Affirming Space

As noted by scholars, positive microclimates and counterspaces create validating and affirming spaces for marginalized students on campus. In the context of this study, the findings demonstrate that a Latinx microclimate provided a safe, supportive, validating, and affirming space for Latinx undergraduate students with a salient Latinx identity.

This is exemplified when I asked Isabel, a 19-year-old, second-generation Latina, about the LUO room. She discusses how the LUO room serves as a counterspace and its ability to disrupt whiteness by making space for Latinx students and providing an alternative experience for them on campus. She specifically stated the following in regard to the LUO room:

Because being in the LUO room I don't have to worry about being too Mexican, or speaking too much Spanish, or looking too… like you know those shirts with the floral [design]… I feel like I wouldn't wear that on campus just because I don't feel too […] not safe but like […] I don't want to get judged, which is bad, but I shouldn't be thinking like that but sometimes it happens […] I don't want to be like too, too Mexican on campus but like when […] I'm in the LUO room, like that doesn't apply because like I can relate to them all so I don't have to worry about like speaking too much Spanish or yeah like being too naca. Like I can be myself, always, always in the LUO room […] Then when I come

more out here [predominantly white part of campus], I'm a little more reserved, to myself,

'cause it's just not my space.

Isabel describes her experiences in the LUO room as a place where she can be authentically

herself, in the way that she acts, dresses, and speaks, and that she feels safe and comfortable in

doing so as a Latina at MU. Participants like Isabel who have a salient Latinx identity are able to

feel represented when looking at the ethnic makeup of spaces like the LUO room, and feel

comfortable, safe, and included when they are in these spaces. However, Isabel also emphasizes

the differences in those experiences and the ones she has in predominantly white spaces. For

students like Isabel, predominantly white spaces are not only viewed as unsafe but also not a

space that is theirs to be in. Isabel describes the contrasting experiences in the following

statement:

> But then when I'm like in a meeting […] in the LUO room, I do raise my hand. Which is
>
> weird 'cause I never raise my hand in classrooms but here it's like I don't care, like I feel
>
> like my opinion is valid.

Isabel describes being in white spaces around campus, like a classroom, where she actively tries

to not stand out by not participating. She employs Tuitt and Carter's self-censorship coping

mechanism when she's in white spaces to shield herself from potentially racist or negative

experiences. Yet, when she is in a Latinx microclimate she is able to embrace her authentic

identity and exist in a way that she is not able to do so in white spaces. Additionally, Isabel

describes her experiences in a Latinx microclimate where she is surrounded by people that she

perceives value her opinions contrary to the perceptions others have of her in white spaces. The

social aspects of these spaces are significant in the way they impact the participants' feelings of

inferiority or the potential of confirming negative stereotypes. On the other hand, the positive

social relationships in the microclimate can add to a students' sense of support, acceptance, validation and belonging.

Furthermore, even some students that do not have a salient Latinx identity still find the Latinx microclimate supportive and affirming. Marta, a 19-year-old, third-generation Latina, that is not fluent in Spanish, is self-described as white-passing, and is half white, describes her experiences in the LUO room very differently than the students with salient Latinx identities. During her interview, Marta was asked how she believed her experience at MU would have been if she had not been involved in the LUO room, she stated:

> I think I would have like lost the half of me. Like I wouldn't … 'cause like the people I've met there, like, the way they talk like it isn't how I talk, they, they'll say things in Spanish, you know, and if I never went to LUO, like never went to that community, I think I would talk in English like all the time. Like, now I see the way they talk and the way they act kinda rubs off on me. And it's like a really good way for me to kinda learn Spanish. Especially, like I wasn't raised speaking it, a lot of them were. So, I think […] it's like heightened my other half and made me want to get more in touch with it.

The social aspects of the LUO room enabled Marta to feel safe and supported in her attempt to explore her identity in a way that she was not able to do so before. Although Marta does not necessarily find other students with similar positionalities in the LUO room, she is able to find common ground with them through their Latinx identities. She experiences the LUO differently than other Latinx students, yet she is still able to find support, affirmation, and a sense of belonging in this microclimate.

Still, predominantly white institutions often do not enable students of color to feel represented, connected, or supported in the university at large. Therefore, I explored how the

LUO room engaged these themes. When I asked Sandra, a 23-year-old, second generation Latina migrant student to describe the LUO room, she stated the following:

> It [LUO room] is literally the only space on campus, besides the migrant student services office, that reminds me of brownness. Because the migrant student services office has the eagle that reminds me of the Mexican flag, and it has fields in it.

Representation was significant for many students, not only in the people that are present in a space but what is physically represented in that space as well. The physical aspects of space represented through the art in the LUO room and the migrant student services office nurtured Sandra's sense of belonging at her predominantly white institution of higher education.

Furthermore, Sandra continues to engage the discussion of representation and belonging by acknowledging the history of the LUO room:

> I know that because of the LUO room, I can see that they have different murals, like on every wall, so just being able to see that and […] alumni from way back when drew that. So just knowing this is something that has been building up, you know. Something that every Latinx student that comes to campus can have because of the work that other, that people that came before us put in, so it's just like whether I am feeling empowered because I'm seeing people like me or just knowing that there were people here that are like me, that also struggled and had to you know, intentionally and unapologetically make a space for themselves, like even that makes me feel empowered. And like it makes me realize that like I'm not the first or last person that feels that I don't belong on this campus, but rooms like that remind me that even if you feel like you don't, you do because of our like community that has been doing this for so long.

Sandra describes the murals in both the migrant student services office and the LUO room as being an extension of the impact Latinx students have on the campus. Sandra's knowledge of the history of the LUO room adds to her sense of connectedness, confidence, and capability to thrive at MU. These add to her overall sense of belonging which enables her to no longer feel alone in her journey at MU. The historical significance of the murals in those spaces serve as reminders for Sandra and students like her, that they belong in the predominantly white campus regardless of any and all experiences and aspects that tell them that they don't.

Additionally, the Latinx microclimate offers students unique social interactions and relationships that they might struggle to find in other parts of the predominantly white campus. Sofia, a 19-year-old, second generation Latina, and LUO executive board member, describes her experience with individuals at the LUO room in the following statement:

> I feel like it's more of a support system but it's also just like a community that's trying to help students feel welcomed. And a lot of times like we are there to teach other communities about Latinx [issues] but I feel like our main focus is of just making sure of like the students already on campus feel like they have a home, that they can go there and make friends and stuff like that.

Sofia and the LUO executive board are very intentional in making the LUO room a space that nurtures social connections and support among their members. Through their own experiences, they recognize that having and providing a social support network is essential for student retention at the university. She continues this conversation by describing the LUO room as being a safe place where students don't have the same worries as they do when they navigate other parts of campus:

I feel like just because like when we're there I don't have to worry about anything. Like it's not… I'm sure people have… we have different political opinions, different religions, stuff like that, but it's not like everyone is there to talk about that stuff, like if it comes up […] hopefully it's like in a respectful manner. But it's not like you have to worry, 'cause everyone is Latinx in there so it's like you don't have to feel like an outsider, you don't have to worry about anyone, hopefully, being racist.

For these students, the space means so much more than just safety, it means that there are people that are actively looking out for each other and supporting one another in these spaces. This social space becomes important to students as they find others that add to their sense of mattering, acceptance, and validation, but also that it is a space where they are no longer the targets of racist attacks. However, as she has unknowingly overlooked, Latinx students with marginalized positionalities at times do not feel represented, respected, and accepted in the LUO room. Still, even then, these experiences are complex.

The Paradox of An Exclusionary Inclusive Space

Latinx microclimates are not always able to provide students with safe, supportive, and validating experiences. In the following section Alex, a 22-year-old, third-generation Latino, self-described as white-passing, and not a fluent Spanish-speaker, was asked about his experience with LUO and the LUO room. He shared that he attended a single event in the LUO room during his initial years at MU. However, at the time of the interview, he was a senior and had not gone back to the LUO room after attending that one event. He was asked why he had not returned, and he stated:

Never feeling connected. Never feeling like [Latinx] enough […] that's also one of the reasons why I didn't integrate myself in that community because I never felt like I would

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be accepted. Because of the type of life that I live and how differs from the lives that people

who look like me have lived.

He goes on to share his feelings of disconnectedness from LUO and the LUO room as a result of

not feeling represented and therefore prone to being rejected in that space. The LUO room is a

space that has visual Latinx images painted on the walls and on posters, where the majority of

the students are Spanish-speaking individuals, that play Spanish music, that serve Mexican food,

and speak on issues that impact the Latinx community. Therefore, when Alex engaged with the

space, it reinforced feelings of alienation because he perceives that he is not "[Latinx] enough" in

a space like the LUO room. He went on to describe the physical space as "ethnic" and the

students in the social space as "loud and proud," ending the statement with a scoff. He could not

relate to the other students' experiences that participated in that space. Alex's experiences

illustrate how the physical and social aspects of the microclimate can replicate feelings that add

to their sense of alienation, exclusion, and disconnectedness. Consequently, not creating the safe,

supportive, and welcoming aspects of a counterspace either.

Furthermore, I attended a LUO and LUO-affiliated organization executive board meeting

where they engaged in conversations about the murals on the walls of the LUO room. During

this meeting, multiple students spoke on feeling excluded as a result of their organizations not

being represented on the walls. They were then offered very small spaces compared to the large

spaces other organizations had previously received. This further opened up the discussion of

exclusion in the LUO room in general. Andrea, an executive board member of a LUO-affiliated

organization, stated: "I'm half Chicana and half Puerto Rican, so I didn't come around to LUO

for a long time because it felt exclusively like a Mexican space." These conversations of

exclusion and lack of action were not resolved by the end of the meeting. For students like

Andrea, the physical aspects of the LUO room and the unacceptable resolutions were a source of exclusion and discontent. Yet, their exclusion often extended to the social aspects of the LUO room. For students that were not Mexican, the LUO room often extended feelings of marginalization.

Yet, even when the LUO room created a space for students to be authentically themselves, feel comfortable, validated, and safe, it was also a reminder that they weren't seen as important or valuable to individuals outside of the LUO community. Many students felt that the location of the LUO room, located in the basement of a residential hall, without windows, placed by a boiler room, and its small size, was indicative of the low priority and lack of attention the MU administration felt towards the Latinx undergraduate student population. This further added to their feelings of marginalization and exclusion within the university.

I asked interviewees broadly to speak about the LUO room and often without being promoted to speak on the shortcoming of the space, students would comment on the physical limitations of the LUO room and how it was reflective of their low social position in the university. For example, I asked Stripes, a 19-year-old, second-generation Latina to describe the physical aspects of the LUO room. She began by noting the bookshelf that is filled with literature on Latinx history and culture and the paintings throughout the room. However, she abruptly ended that thought and mentioned the following:

> It [LUO room] is very small, though. It's something I noticed right away, and it gets really hot, really fast. […] I wonder why our room is so small. Like, was this really the only room that we could get? Like, [I'm] not blaming it on the LUO [executive] board but is it really the only tiny… like we are a huge community and that's the room we get. […] I wonder why like…but that was one of the big things I noticed right away when I first got there.

Like yeah, I noticed the art and all of that, and I loved it, but I was like we are a big

community, we need a bigger room.

Although having a physical space has been essential for the Latinx undergraduate students to

build a sense of community, find social support, have a sense of connectedness, experience a

short absence of microaggressions, and form a sense of belonging, the physical limitations of the

space reinforced the idea that they were not valued, cared for, nor respected by others,

specifically university personnel, on campus. Unfortunately, for these students, despite the

physical presence of Latinx individuals, feelings of affirmation, their ability to build a sense of

connectedness with, or become empowered by the murals, posters, or literature available to them

in that space was overshadowed by the physical limitations of the room.

In the fall of 2018, during an unusually warm day, I attended a general member meeting

in the LUO room. I quickly realized that the room was excessively warm, but it soon became

almost suffocating as more students filed in. I witnessed attendees ultimately become drenched

in their own sweat due of the lack of airflow, lack of an air conditioning unit, or windows in the

room. The unbearable heat in the room was overwhelming. Nonetheless, students still stayed for

the meeting and due to the room's small size, some students ended up standing in the hall

because the room unfortunately but not surprisingly became overcrowded. Experiences like these

were common. These were few of the ill conditions that do not allow the students to experience

the Latinx microclimate in a way that it was designed to provide for and benefit the Latinx

undergraduate students at MU.

During another LUO and LUO-affiliated organization executive board meeting, the ill

conditions of the LUO room was once again a topic of discussion. In the following section, Sara,

an executive board member of a LUO-affiliated organization, stated that "It [LUO room] is not a

priority. It is not meant to be visible." She compared the LUO room to the rooms other student organizations received and how the differences in location, condition, and maintenance were strikingly evident. The physical and symbolic aspects of the LUO room highlighted the Latinx students' feelings of being underappreciated, underserved, and disrespected by the MU administration. For these students, it served as a reminder that the university administrators did not see their wants or needs as important enough to address. Yet, throughout my conversations with LUO members, I realized that they actively work on demanding better conditions for the Latinx student community on campus and the LUO room. And although most of their demands have yet to be met, this has not discouraged them from continuing to organize and find innovative ways to get their messages across to the university administration and the campus community at large.

LIMITATIONS

Some of the limitations of this study concern the demographic makeup of the interviewees. I recruited students that self-identified as Latinx, which may have excluded students that identify differently, yet have experiences that could have been included in this study. And although I attempted to recruit students from a diverse Latinx background, all of my participants had some Mexican background regardless of how they identified. I did not know this at the time, but later when reviewing the participants' demographic data, I noticed that their parents' data was of Mexican origin for one or both parents. Furthermore, another limitation to this study was evident as I conducted the interviews. By not having an eligibility requirement for participants to have completed at least one full semester before participating in the study, I found that I had a participant that did not have many experiences at the university, the Latinx community at MU, and the LUO community that they could share.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this paper, I examine how Latinx undergraduate students live different realities as a result of their vast positionalities as they navigate a predominantly white institution of higher education. This study highlights the importance of understanding and acknowledging that Latinxs are not a homogenous group. I found that Latinx students experience the predominantly white campus and the Latinx microclimate on campus in a variety of ways depending on their unique positionalities and lived experiences and not solely because they identify as Latinx or being of Latinx descent. Consequently, I found that simply having a Latinx microclimate at a predominantly white institution of higher education does not lead to positive outcomes for all Latinx students and therefore does not always provide the conditions of a counterspace for those students.

By centering the Latinx undergraduate students' experiences and narratives, the findings suggest that spaces like the LUO room, a Latinx microclimate, are meaningful in engaging sense of belonging among students. Microclimates enable students to counter some of the structural disadvantages of attending a predominantly white university. And although they do not eliminate the exclusion, invalidation, and self-doubt that is perpetuated throughout the campus, a positive microclimate, like the LUO room, attempts to build a sense of support, community, and belonging among Latinx undergraduate students at MU. However, it is also imperative to acknowledge the exclusion that continues in those same spaces. Latinx undergraduate students with marginalized positionalities further experience exclusion and alienation in a space that could be welcoming, supportive, and validating. Additionally, the findings highlight the complexity of counterspaces. For the students that feel embraced in microclimates, the space becomes a counterspace where they receive the benefits of an empowering and healing space.

However, the existence and effectiveness of counterspaces are contingent on students'

experiences and relationships with others in the microclimate. Those that do not have positive

experiences in the microclimate do not experience that space as a counterspace.

The findings of this study illustrate that there is some recognition of the exclusion in

Latinx microclimates. Yet, it also highlights the gaps in acknowledgement and actions that need

to be taken to seriously address the concerns of students that feel alienated, devalued,

disrespected, and disconnected within the microclimate. The necessary actions needed to address

these concerns should arise from the students, as it is their space, yet there should be a focus on

centering the marginalized students' voices. Additionally, the findings of this study emphasize

the need for institutional university support in whatever form the students find necessary. This

can be done in the form of allocating funds to provide more inclusive conversations, inviting

guest speakers, obtaining a larger room, attaining better conditions within the room, or anything

else they would need to improve that space for the students. This study also serves as a call to

action for university administrations by stressing the urgency and significance of their role in

providing and maintaining appropriate Latinx microclimates on their campuses. Lastly, this

study supports existing literature confirming that a positive microclimate can be a source of

community, belonging, support, and validation. However, my contribution highlights the need to

ensure that racialized microclimates, like the LUO room, continue to improve the ways they

practice inclusivity and meet the needs of Latinx students that embody an array of positionalities.

Furthermore, future research should continue to investigate the disparities between Latinx

undergraduate students' experiences at PWIs and the various microclimates available to them on

campus.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A:

Tables

Table 1.1: Participants' Demographic Data					
Name	**Age**	**Gender**	**Identify as Latino/a/x**	**Speak Spanish**	**Primary Language at Home**
Stripes	19	Female	Yes	Yes	Spanish
Sandra	23	Female	Yes	Yes	Spanish
Julieta	19	Female	Yes	Yes	Spanish
Marta	19	Female	Yes	No	English
Grey	20	Male	Yes	Yes	Spanish
Alex	22	Male	Yes	No	English
Perla	22	Female	Yes	Yes	Spanish
Lu	23	Female	No; Chicana	Yes	Spanish
Sofia	19	Female	Yes	Yes	English
Rachel	19	Female	Yes	Yes	English and Spanish
Isabel	19	Female	Yes	Yes	Spanish
Tatiana	21	Female	Yes	Yes	Spanish
Maria	18	Female	Yes	Yes	Spanish

Table 1.2: Participants' Demographic Data Continued

Name	Place of Birth	Generational Migration Status	Student Classification	First Gen Student	Employment
Stripes	Michigan, USA	Second-Generation	Sophomore	Yes	Part-Time
Sandra	Florida, USA	Second-Generation	Senior	Yes	Part-Time
Julieta	Michigan, USA	Second-Generation	Sophomore	Yes	Unemployed
Marta	Michigan, USA	Third Generation	Freshman	No	Part-Time
Grey	Michigan, USA	Second-Generation	Junior	Yes	Part-Time
Alex	Michigan, USA	Third Generation	Senior	No	Full-Time
Perla	Florida, USA	Second-Generation	Senior	Yes	Unemployed
Lu	Texas, USA	Second-Generation	Senior	Yes	Part-Time
Sofia	Michigan, USA	Second-Generation	Sophomore	Yes	Unemployed
Rachel	Michigan, USA	Second-Generation	Sophomore	Yes	Part-Time
Isabel	Michigan, USA	Second-Generation	Sophomore	Yes	Part-Time
Tatiana	Kansas, USA	Second-Generation	Senior	Yes	Part-Time
Maria	Michigan, USA	Second-Generation	Freshman	Yes	Unemployed

APPENDIX B:

Demographic Questionnaire

Demographic Questionnaire

The purpose of this questionnaire is to provide basic background information about yourself. Please complete the following questionnaire.

Pseudonym: _____

Age: _____

Gender: ☐ Female ☐ Male ☐ Non-binary ☐ Prefer to self-describe: _____

Do you identify as Latinx/a/o? ☐ Yes ☐ No

    If not, how do you identify: _____

Do you speak Spanish? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Do you write Spanish? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Do you understand Spanish? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Primary Language Spoken at Home: _____

Place of Birth (State, Country): _____

Parent's Place of Birth (State, Country):

    Mother/Father: _____

    Mother/Father: _____

Generational Migration Status:

☐ First-Generation: Individual born outside of the U.S.

☐ Second-Generation: Individual born in the U.S. with at least one foreign-born parent

☐ Third Generation: Individual and both parents born in the U.S. with at least one foreign-born grandparent

☐ I do not know what generation best describes my situation

☐ Other: _____

Student Classification: ☐ Freshman ☐ Sophomore ☐ Junior ☐ Senior ☐ Graduate Student ☐ Other _____

Major(s): _____

Minor(s): _____

Estimated Current Undergraduate Cumulative GPA: _____ / 4.0 scale

Credit Hours Currently Enrolled: _____

First-Generation College Student: ☐ Yes ☐ No

Employment: ☐ Full-Time ☐ Part-Time ☐ Unemployed

Are you a member of the Latinx Undergraduate Organization (LUO)? ☐ Yes ☐ No

In addition to LUO, are you involved in any other MU student organizations? ☐ Yes ☐ No

    If yes, what organization(s)? _____

Were there specific things that made the organization(s) stand out in your mind?

☐ Other members ☐ Values ☐ Reputation ☐ Activities ☐ Other_____

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