

## The Search for Authenticity through ‘Style-Fashion-Dress’ among Adolescent Latina Immigrants

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In 2015, 42% of US residents who were born outside of the country were Latinx (López, & Bialik, 2017). For adolescents, immigration coincides with key forms of personal and social development (Erikson, 1968). As a result, adolescent immigrants must negotiate who they are and want to become across multiple contexts. This requires *acculturation* or "changes that individuals undergo as they move from their society of origin to a society of settlement" where the individuals are a culturally non-dominant group (Berry, 1997, 2001; Skuza, 2007, p. 448).

This work explored how adolescent Latina immigrants to the US navigate their culture of origin and culture of settlement through the lens of Tulloch’s (2010) concept of “style-fashion-dress,” which encompasses (a) clothing, accessories, and beauty routines that may or may not be in fashion and that reflect personal agency and self-narrative (style); (b) looks that change with the time (fashion); and (c) supplements and modifications to the body (dress). Style-fashion-dress is a key component of “subject formation...an ongoing sense of self and identity in a changing world” (Kaiser, 2012, p. 30). Each individual occupies multiple subject positions that intersect with each other (Hill Collins, 1990); the spaces in-between and across subject positions afford individuals the opportunity to exert agency and to express multiple subject positions through style-fashion-dress (Kaiser, 2012). Broad explorations of Latinx youths’ lived realities have revealed that style-fashion-dress may be a salient facet of their immigrant experiences. To expand understanding about the role that style-fashion-dress plays in the acculturation process, we sought to answer the following research questions: What role does style-fashion-dress play in the acculturation process of adolescent Latina immigrants seeking to meet the developmental task of growing up and negotiating multiple cultures? How do adolescent Latina immigrants use style-fashion-dress to form various subject positions, or to create a sense of “who I am” and “who I am becoming” as part of the acculturation process? We limited our focus to adolescent Latina immigrants because prior work suggests that appearance norms and the processes of “fitting in” for adolescent Latinx immigrants are highly gendered (Williams et al., 2012).

Participants included 12 immigrant women, ages 20-23 (mean = 21.25), who identified as Latina and immigrated before age 15. Open-ended interviews focused on participants’ memories of their immigration experiences during adolescence (ages 10-19). This approach captured change over time in the acculturation process (Skuza, 2007). All interviews were conducted in English with Spanish speaking researchers or Spanish-speaking research assistants. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and data were analyzed using the constant comparison process to identify emergent themes.

Analyses revealed that, as they sought to negotiate diverse cultures and forge a sense of “who they were becoming” through the acculturation process, participants confronted varied identity dilemmas underpinned by a goal of “knowing” the *authentic self* and expressing it through style-fashion-dress. Here, we borrow Erickson’s (1995) conceptualization of authenticity as a commitment to self-values and acknowledge her recognition of the complexity and inconsistency of the self as it is situated in a postmodern cultural context. Two key identity dilemmas were observed: (a) Identity Confusion: Who Am I? and (b) Straddling Two Cultures: Feeling Caught and Conflicted.

**Identity Confusion: Who Am I?** Entwistle (2015) states, “the clothes we choose to wear represent a compromise between the demands of the social world, in the milieu in which we belong, and our own individual desires” (p. 114). In their search for an *authentic self*, participants were attempting to answer the question: “What does a Latina immigrant in the United States need/want to look like/wear?”. With significant social and cultural ties in two “milieus” participants categorized theirs’ (and others’) style-fashion-dress as indexical of either Latin or American culture. Although the two categories constitute distinct expressions of (authentic) identity -- each with unique dress and appearance behaviors -- the consistency and depth of the interaction of the categories varied by individual in direct relation to the composition and integration of their “social worlds”. Similarly, Kaiser (2012) explained that subject positions “coexist and overlap” and though this was apparent in the findings, the path to full integration (i.e., transcultural dress) was not linear.

**Straddling Two Cultures: Feeling Caught and Conflicted.** Although, in some cases, participants navigated switching back and forth between cultures with relative ease, quite frequently, they experienced conflict and tension as they sought to reconcile cultural differences. Sometimes, they attempted to “overcome gaps” between Latin and American culture by melding the two cultures into a single, transcultural appearance (cf, Deepak, 2005; Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997), but this at times resulted in them “missing” one culture or the other. They also frequently felt “caught” between meeting divergent cultural expectations (e.g., as represented by family versus peer/media expectations or norms), sometimes leaving participants to sense that they were “falling short” in both cultures (cf, Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001, p. 92). Selected participants also expressed a desire to “fit in” to Anglo culture and a concomitant recognition that doing so was tricky, owing to their readily visible ethnic/cultural identity, prompting identity ambivalence. Still other participants questioned to what extent they could express their cultural identities, and in what contexts? For instance, one participant wondered how much she could express her Latina identity at work and still be considered “professional”? In such cases, intersections between participants’ Latin and American subject positions represented sites of identity ambiguity and uncertainty (cf, Kaiser, 2012, p. 37).

Thus, as participants sought to construct an authentic sense of self that corresponded to their adolescent, emerging sense of “who they were becoming” they experienced confusion/uncertainty and conflict/tension. For participants, style-fashion-dress provided an avenue to concretely express their evolving relationships to their subject positions

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