

Quinceañera: a living cultural heritage safeguarding ethnic identity across borders

Choi Myoung-Ho

Ha Sang-Sub

Choi Myoung-Ho (Seoul, 1974), PhD, is an anthropologist currently working as HK research Professor at the Institute of Iberoamerican Studies in Busan University of Foreign Studies, professional areas of interest are Latin American (Mexican) regional studies, cultural dynamics, inequality, and ecological transitions.

Ha Sang-Sub (Seoul, 1969), PhD, is Research Professor at HK+ Institute of Latin American Studies (ILAS) Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (HUFS). He is participating in the Humanities Korea(HK+) project and conducting research with the Agenda of Transitioning to an Ecologically Civilized Society.

Quinceañera: a living cultural heritage safeguarding ethnic identity across borders

● Choi Myoung-Ho

Busan University of Foreign Studies

● Ha Sang-Sub

Hankuk University of Foreign Studies

ABSTRACT

In the context of an increasingly globalised world, indigenous rites of maturation – symbols of passage from one life stage to another – have seen a notable decline. Such rites, some of which might strike modern sensibilities as austere or even severe, are becoming vestiges of the past, relegated to commercialised ventures, as exemplified by activities such as bungee jumping, or confined to communities staunchly adhering to their ancestral traditions. Nonetheless, the *quinceañera* endures as a cultural artifact, not merely maintaining its ceremonial importance but witnessing a revival in its practice. This anthropological inquiry delves into the deep-seated traditions and origins of the *quinceañera*, its significance among diasporic communities, the structural and symbolic elements of the ceremony, and

its broader socio-economic ramifications. At its core, the *quinceañera* embodies a complex interweaving of cultural narratives, bolstering community identities at the crossroads of historical continuity and contemporary shifts. It also has notable implications for local economic structures. Ultimately, the *quinceañera* underscores the evolving tapestry of cultural heritage, anchoring community ties and enhancing collective self-awareness.

Keywords

Mexico, cultural heritage, *quinceañera*, ethnic identity, cultural artifact, cultural narratives, local economic structures, collective self-awareness

Introduction

In contemporary society, legal adulthood is demarcated by specific legislative criteria. Simultaneously, individuals validate their legal and societal adulthood by practising their electoral right in participating as enfranchised citizens. Interestingly, the absence of a universally recognised social rite for a young person coming of age is evident; instead, privileges accrue with physiological aging. Traditionally, the defining features of a cultural or civilisational domain are encapsulated within the life-cycle ceremonies practised within its communities. As the 2020 Mexican population and housing census data (INEGI 2020) elucidates, 77.7% of the populace adheres to

Catholicism, leading to a pronounced Catholic influence in matrimonial, funerary and ancestral commemorative rites. As earlier alluded to, rites of passage, which signify an individual's transition into societal adulthood, have been widely established. Such rites, affirming adulthood either communally or personally, play an instrumental role in shaping communal identity.

The *quinceañera*, a female rite of passage observed predominantly across Latin America and select Spanish regions, holds particular resonance in Mexico. This ceremonial event marks the transition of 15-year-old females towards sanctified maturity, symbolising societal

and familial recognition of their evolving maturity and responsibility. As with many life-cycle ceremonies, its religious implications are profound (Yokasta 2016, 28). However, a dichotomy exists. Despite its Mexican traditional roots, the *quinceañera* increasingly mirrors European debutante customs, with participants adorned in opulent gowns evoking European sensibilities within ballroom-esque settings. Notwithstanding, the medieval European social debut, paralleling a public betrothal, is fundamentally disparate from current practices. By drawing analogies with youthful characters in literary works such as *Romeo and Juliet* and *Chunhyangjeon* and referencing the age idiom of 'two-eighths youth' (Two multiplied by eight, signifying the age of 16), the *quinceañera* appears to perpetuate medieval or pre-modern traditions.

Contemporary inclinations, such as the allure of Barbie dolls and archetypal princess narratives for young girls, coincide with the romantic idealisation of the *quinceañera*, particularly the anticipatory reverence of the 15th birthday. This ceremony carries substantial economic and societal implications. An examination of Instagram, a prevalent social media platform, reveals posts with the '*quinceañera*' hashtag exceeding 4 million; this figure surges beyond 10 million when accounting for indirect mentions (Salyers 2022). Given Instagram's user dynamics, these statistics underscore the ceremony's vast societal reach, highlighting the *quinceañera*'s pivotal role within the Latin cultural landscape.

Interestingly, the *quinceañera* has burgeoned as a prominent cultural fixture, especially within the southern United States. Initially, it solidified its position as a rite of passage within the Mexican immigrant community, serving to fortify a distinctive community identity juxtaposed against other U.S. communities. Presently, it transcends its origins, resonating across diverse minority cultures within the United States, notably within Mexican and Latino demographics. This phenomenon may still be influenced by the enduring allure of the Prince Charming archetype or, perhaps more simplistically, by the universal romantic yearning to momentarily inhabit the realm of princess-hood.

The *quinceañera*, recognised as an intangible cultural heritage, has been pivotal in shaping minority identity, particularly in delineating the social coming-of-age ritual for Mexican immigrant females in the southern United

States. While it initially bolstered the cultural foundations and identity of immigrant communities, it is currently metamorphosing into a distinct social phenomenon. This paper elucidates the *quinceañera* as an emblematic instance of cultural inversion within the United States. Furthermore, by delving into the cultural connotations of the *quinceañera* and its centrality within the Mexican immigrant demographic, this research underscores the ceremony's cultural heritage merit and societal relevance, illustrating its burgeoning status as a novel trend. Discussions will span the inception and historical trajectory of the *quinceañera*, as well as its ceremonial constituents, geographical nuances and socio-economic facets.

Employing a multifaceted research methodology, this study integrates diverse voices and perspectives garnered from interviews, fieldwork and literary reviews, subsequently contextualised within scholarly paradigms. Through this synthesis, we aim to decipher the intrinsic cultural value of the *quinceañera* within the Mexican immigrant milieu. Concurrently, the study endeavours to chart potential policy and educational strategies that can bolster mutual comprehension and cultural pluralism within an increasingly multicultural society.

Of paramount importance is the realisation that while certain customs, such as the *quinceañera*, are categorised as intangible cultural heritages, they are not static relics of the past. Instead, they possess the vitality to be reinvigorated and contemporised, resonating as dynamic cultural expressions. The conditions propelling the revival of such intangible traditions within today's unique cultural contexts can also be ascertained.

***Quinceañera*: bridging cultural heritage and contemporary practice**

The *quinceañera*, a ceremonial recognition of a girl's transition to womanhood on her 15th birthday, parallels coming-of-age traditions observed globally. Yet, its distinctive Mexican nuances render it a unique rite. Its enduring presence across regions – including Ibero-America, Spain, Portugal, the southern United States and parts of Canada – attests to its cultural significance, symbolising a tangible cultural continuum.

Origins and historical context of the quinceañera

The *quinceañera* traces its roots to ancient Mexican

traditions, notably those of the Aztec civilisation, and has evolved over millennia in tandem with Mexico's cultural trajectory. Initially symbolising immediate adulthood, it underscored familial values and religious convictions. Over time, regional and societal variations have enriched its tapestry. Notably, academic explorations of the *quinceañera's* inception remain sparse, with many attributing its origins to Latin America's indigenous practices. In studying the cultural dynamics of Mexican-Americans, scholars often reference indigenous texts, albeit their formal recognition remains contested. The allure of cultural preservation, particularly in immigrant communities, and heightened ethnocentrism cannot be overlooked. For instance, while Korean immigrants may resonate with culinary staples such as soybean paste and kimchi, Mexican communities in regions dominated by white American culture might lean towards indigenous traditions. The *quinceañera's* appeal, transcending racial boundaries especially in the southern United States, exemplifies such cultural inversions.

Universally, coming-of-age ceremonies punctuate societal rituals across age groups and geographies. Fray Bernardino de Sahagún's *Florentine codex: the universal history of the things of New Spain*, which documents indigenous customs during early Spanish colonialism, elaborates on rites for 15-year-old girls marking their societal transition to adulthood (Figure 1) (Sahagún 2006, 274–277). Although certain chronicles suggest these ceremonies paved the way for the contemporary *quinceañera*, their veracity remains debated. Some postulations cite European cultural infusion during the colonial era, with Empress Charlotte of Belgium potentially introducing the *quinceañera*, amongst other cultural nuances. However, substantiating such claims empirically remains challenging. Arguments suggesting Charlotte's influence on Mexican gastronomy, particularly desserts and tea culture, need cautious interpretation. The trade dynamics of the era, with Latin America's silver exports juxtaposed against European and Chinese imports, refute any presupposition of cultural lag in Virreinato de Nueva España. It is plausible that the *quinceañera's* European-esque flair emerged during the Porfiriato era under Porfirio Díaz's leadership. Díaz y de Ovando's work hints at the *quinceañera* emulating European high society to some extent (2006, 365). In summation, the *quinceañera's* evolution can be perceived as a confluence of indigenous rituals, Catholic confirmation traditions and European societal influences.



Figure 1
The heroine and her male bridesmaids. Although she looks like a bride in a wedding dress, she is the heroine of a *quinceañera* celebrating her 15th birthday. The bridesmaids are selected from among her relatives and friends.
Source: Provided by the author

Symbolism of the quinceañera ceremony

Predominant in Mexico, this multifaceted event underscores religious themes and familial participation. The ceremony typically commences with the honoree, surrounded by family, relatives and from 7 to 14 pairs of friends, taking part in a mass that accentuates devotion to the Virgin Mary and culminates in a priestly blessing (Odekirk 2019).

Interpreting the *quinceañera*, we discern its multifarious significations. Foremost, it symbolises the girl's burgeoning maturity and her readiness to embrace adult societal roles. Concurrently, it bolsters familial ties, bridging generational divides and reinforcing the identity of Mexicans, especially within diasporic communities. This ritual necessitates familial involvement and both tangible and intangible support, heralding the girl's ascent to adulthood within her familial realm. Yet, it is noteworthy that legal adulthood, encompassing responsibilities such as voting, alcohol consumption and marital privileges, is demarcated at 18 in both Mexico and the United States. In this context, the quintessential coming-of-age essence of the *quinceañera* seems somewhat attenuated in contemporary times (Reyes and Garnica 2018).

The societal gravitas once attributed to the *quinceañera*, celebrating solely female societal maturation, may wane given evolving gender egalitarian perspectives and the establishment of legal adulthood. Not all girls are compelled to host a *quinceañera*. Consequently, its

traditional societal import seems increasingly diffuse, with other facets gaining prominence.

Evolving quinceañera traditions and contemporary realities

Over the decades, the *quinceañera* has been a tableau of cultural metamorphosis. Central to Mexican diasporas in the United States, the ceremony has imbibed and melded with American cultural nuances, resulting in a hybrid form (Podetti 2004). Today's *quinceañera* juxtaposes Mexican tradition with modern elements, epitomised in opulent attire and decor, and a blend of traditional and contemporary music. While familial involvement remains integral, its ascendancy in the United States, especially in the South, indicates a subtle attenuation of purely Mexican attributes, supplanted by prevailing popular cultural trends, rendering the event both modern and exotic. This syncretism reflects the shared histories and cultural confluences between northern Mexico and the American West, typified by shared elements such as cowboy culture. A prevalent trend, evident across Latin America, Spain and particularly in the southern United States, manifests in the *quinceañera's* evolution towards mirroring the lavish debuts of imagined aristocracy, combined with popular dance forms such as reggaetón and K-pop. Such transitions underscore the *quinceañera's* academic pertinence as a seminal representation of cultural pluralism, symbiosis and interconnectivity in diverse societies. A nuanced examination of its present-day iterations will be elaborated upon in subsequent sections.

Quinceañera within the Mexican immigrant community

Amid the cultural dislocation experienced in a foreign milieu distinct from one's homeland, there is often an evolution away from one's original cultural identity. In studying immigrant cultures, the emphasis should lean towards the heterogeneity vis-à-vis their homeland, rather than homogeneity. The *quinceañera*, a poignant cultural legacy yet simultaneously a contemporary cultural influence, often mirrors the conservative tendencies of first-generation immigrants in preserving the cultural norms of their time of migration.

Formation and historical context of the Mexican immigrant community

Mexican immigrant communities constitute a pivotal facet of America's multicultural tapestry. Comprised

largely of those who migrated for economic betterment, these communities endeavour to assimilate into American society while safeguarding their distinctive cultural ethos. The inception of the Bracero Program in 1942, designed to address the labour shortfall during World War II, solidified the rapport between northern Mexico and the southern United States (Ramírez 2013, 3–6; Ramírez 2023).

This liaison, encompassing initiatives such as Maquiladora, persisted and notably amplified after the 1980s following Mexico's fiscal crisis, leading to a surge in undocumented migration to the United States. In 2023, it was estimated there were more than 50 million Mexicans in the U.S. (United States Census 2023). Factoring in undocumented immigrants, multicultural Mexican families, and populations in states such as California, Texas, Arizona and Florida, the true number could potentially be double this figure. With a total U.S. populace of 334.3 million in 2023 (United States Census 2023), roughly a third can be broadly categorised as Mexican. This demographic foundation has facilitated the entrenchment of Mexican cultural practices, such as the *quinceañera* and culinary staples like tacos, within the United States. A pertinent observation would be the gender asymmetry in immigration, driven by economic motives, leading to a cultural dilution when Mexican males married non-Mexican females, contrasted against a heightened Mexican cultural preservation when Mexican females married externally. This possibly influenced the proliferation of *quinceañeras* even outside traditionally Mexican zones. Unravelling the *quinceañera's* role within Mexican immigrant communities can elucidate its continued prevalence and adaptation within non-Mexican and non-Latin communities.

Significance of the quinceañera within the Mexican immigrant community

Within Mexican immigrant enclaves, the *quinceañera* epitomises a salient societal rite of passage. Serving as a conduit for cultural continuity and transference, the ceremony aids migrants in bequeathing their unique cultural paradigms and identities to successive generations, concurrently solidifying familial bonds. Moreover, the *quinceañera* holds considerable social capital, acting as an emblem of status and validation within immigrant circles (Pentoon 1999, 164). Subsequent sections of this paper will elucidate the significant costs associated with the ceremony, at times rivalling the expenditure on weddings in locales such as South

Korea. An irrefutable dimension is the gathering of locally influential members of the Mexican diaspora during the *quinceañera*, fostering alliances, matrimonial engagements or affinities among influential lineages, reminiscent of societal debuts in broader circles. Viewed through an ethnocentric lens, a primary imperative might be preserving lineage purity. Intermarriage within cultural confines remains the most potent mechanism for cultural preservation among diasporas. For Mexicans, horizontal relationship expansions via Catholic-rooted godparentage sustain traditional affiliations in foreign territories, with the *quinceañera* playing a pivotal role in this cultural perpetuation.

Evolution and impacts of quinceañera in immigrant communities: a comparative analysis of Mexico and Latin American countries

The *quinceañera* within Mexican immigrant communities has metamorphosed and evolved over the years. While it retains semblances in rites and significances to its counterparts in Mexico and Latin America, discernible variations and unique characteristics have emerged, contingent upon regional influences. Mexican immigrants, while bolstering their cultural heritage, often imbibe and integrate elements from local traditions. This transformative nature of the *quinceañera* in immigrant circles mirrors the dynamic cultural interplay between Mexican immigrants and other Latin American diasporas. Such shifts not only indicate cultural exchanges but also underscore their role in fostering social cohesion within the broader Spanish-speaking immigrant milieu.

While Latin culture distinctly deviates from the conventional Anglo-American or Anglo-Saxon paradigms, the Mexican ethos closely resonates with the Spanish one, positioning Mexican culture as a potential epicentre of Spanish-speaking Latin America.¹

Furthermore, given the data indicating a mere 2 million Brazilian immigrants in the United States by 2020, the disproportionately large Mexican immigrant populace undeniably exerts a significant influence. The capitalist dynamics of demand and supply dictate that with the southern United States bordering Mexico, the latter emerges as a primary source for products emblematic of home, often substituting for Spain and other Hispanic nations. Nonetheless, it is essential to acknowledge that within the broad Latin cultural ambit, certain communities, owing to their pronounced national identity, racial



Figure 2
Preparations in progress for an event. The scale of the celebration indicates that it is not just for one girl, but for the community.
Source: Provided by the author

affiliations, specific migration advantages (as witnessed in the cases of Puerto Rico and Cuba), or concentrated settlements such as the East Coast, may not be extensively swayed by Mexican culture. Yet, the persistent relevance of the *quinceañera* in regions such as the Caribbean and associated immigrant communities has significant implications (Figure 2). Delving into the circumstances, cultural milieu and, crucially, the demographic thresholds at which varied Latino immigrant communities assert their independence offers a compelling avenue for scholarly exploration.

Ceremonial components of the quinceañera

The *quinceañera* is a revered tradition across Ibero-America, which encompasses regions such as the southern United States, and parts of Canada, Spain and Portugal; as such, it manifests diverse interpretations. The extent to which the ritualistic elements, often referred to as the 'form', are shared across these regions serves as an index for evaluating their cultural congruence.

Attire and ornamentation in the quinceañera

Central to the *quinceañera* is the attire, which accentuates the celebrant's transition into womanhood and her elegance. Historically, *quinceañera* garments have been characterised by opulent, ornate dresses, predominantly in hues of white or muted pastels. These ensembles, in their richness and detail, encapsulate the girl's juxtaposition of innocence and burgeoning maturity. They are often adorned with meticulous embroidery, lace and other embellishments. Complementing the dress, a pronounced hair accessory or tiara frequently graces the



Figure 3
The quinceañera begins with a mass to bless the girl. It is usually attended by the heroine of the day, along with her parents, godmother and siblings.
Source: Provided by the author

celebrant's head, accompanied by decorated footwear and other accoutrements. The choice of decorative nuances largely hinges on the personal predilections of the *quinceañera* herself. Typically, the attire is donned for the mass and the inaugural dance, often shared with the father, following which it might be substituted for outfits conducive to other dance forms such as salsa, norteño or contemporary performances. The ubiquitous imagery of a princess-like dress remains almost a staple, with subsequent events reflecting individualistic tastes. In certain iterations, global phenomena such as K-pop dances find a place, or attire inspired by Aztec or Mayan traditions might be showcased. The nature of the *quinceañera* – whether it commences with a Catholic mass or unfolds as a purely secular celebration – often delineates its unique character. Yet, amid this vast spectrum of variations, one constant remains: the *quinceañera*, aged 15, gracing the occasion with an aura reminiscent of a Disney princess or, at times, evoking the visage of a Barbie doll (Figure 3).

Culinary traditions and reception of the quinceañera

The culinary aspect of the *quinceañera*, coupled with its reception, is of paramount significance, marking a cherished juncture between the young celebrant and her family. Historically, the *quinceañera* has embodied the essence of a grand feast, replete with an array of dishes and beverages. Predominantly, offerings hail from Mexican and Latin American culinary traditions, featuring staples such as tacos and empanadas. These dishes serve as a nexus for family and friends, fostering communal celebration. Analogous to the cake-cutting ritual common in South Korean wedding receptions, the *quinceañera* witnesses

the celebrant sharing the cake with her kin, symbolising her nascent responsibilities and burgeoning adulthood. This tableau resonates with the *quinceañera's* Mexican roots. Interestingly, Mexican-American communities often preserve and amplify these traditional elements, sometimes even surpassing their Mexican counterparts in authenticity. While it is challenging to encompass the exhaustive culinary repertoire, occasionally, dishes that might be considered exotic even in Mexico, or that may jolt unfamiliar palates (akin to South Korea's fermented skate dishes), grace the table. In instances where cultural identity is accentuated, distinctive elements gain prominence. Conversely, celebrations that borrow from a palette of cultural motifs rather than a deep-seated identity tend to resonate more universally.

Musical and dance traditions of the quinceañera: an exploration of identity

The auditory and kinaesthetic components of the *quinceañera*, namely its music and dance, add vibrancy to the celebration while underscoring the celebrant's cultural roots. Traditionally, the *quinceañera's* inaugural dance, celebrating her 15th year, is shared with her father. In Mexico, this dance often unfurls to the strains of mariachi, but regional variations might favour a waltz or even a ballad. The choice of accompanying music for this seminal dance offers insights into the character of the *quinceañera*. However, just as with the culinary traditions, a direct correlation between indigenous foods and indigenous music for the dance has not been prominently documented in scholarly or popular sources. A plausible reason might be the challenge associated with sourcing and resurrecting paired dances from indigenous repertoires. In regions such as Cuba and its diasporic communities in the United States, family traditions sometimes dictate dances infused with African motifs, such as the Afro-Cuban rumba. The musical backdrop predominantly features traditional Mexican and Latin American rhythms, propelling the *quinceañera* and her peers into dance. Genres such as samba, cumbia and reggaeton find favour in Mexico, facilitating the celebrant's self-expression through cultural dance forms. Recent trends also spotlight the inclusion of K-pop routines. Furthermore, the dances symbolise the celebrant's journey from childhood to womanhood, shared in the company of loved ones (Figure 4). Paradoxically, occasional mismatches in makeup or attire reminiscent of a girl emulating her mother's wardrobe add a touch of imperfection, rendering the *quinceañera* all the more poignant and memorable.



Figure 4
Although it is difficult to specify from when, the heroine of the day teams up with male bridesmaids to perform as a group, and this is the same regardless of region. Of course, cases where the team performs like professionals are very rare.
Source: Provided by the author

Geographical variability and evolution of the *quinceañera* beyond Mexico

Geographical variations arise from multifaceted influences such as historical antecedents, cultural amalgamations, demographic compositions and the dynamics of immigrant communities. The manifestation and ceremonial attributes of the *quinceañera* vary across regions, influenced by these factors. For instance, in the southern United States, where there is a significant Mexican immigrant presence, the *quinceañera* strongly resonates with Mexican traditions. Conversely, in other territories, the *quinceañera* morphs, reflecting the nuances of the respective regional cultures.

The heterogeneous nature of the *quinceañera*, arising from regional disparities, offers a unique lens through which one can appreciate the rite from diverse cultural perspectives. This ritualistic celebration underscores the concept that intangible cultural heritages are not merely relics of the past, preserved in museums. Instead, they are living traditions, fostering community cohesion and individual identity. Like heritages that engender value as they are passed down, cultures too act as conduits, evolving and spawning fresh identities and narratives.

The southern United States stands as a prominent region actively celebrating the *quinceañera*, deeply entrenched in Mexican and Latin American traditions and echoing the cultural ethos of its immigrant populace. Elements such as attire, cuisine and music within this

geographical sector distinctly mirror Mexican influences. Furthermore, the *quinceañera* emerges as a robust platform reinforcing cultural identity, especially when there is a perceived dilution of said identity.

While Mexico remains the heartland of the *quinceañera*, the rite has transcended national borders, undergoing adaptations based on regional cultural imprints. Traditional rites of passage in societies, akin to cultural mainstays such as food, clothing and shelter, are vital socio-cultural markers. Yet, as societies evolve, traditional ceremonies experience a decline, often morphing in the face of secularism or modernisation. Despite this, certain rituals, including funerals, commemorations, nuptials and coming-of-age ceremonies, persist in varied forms. The *quinceañera*, in essence, bridges the chasm between traditional rites of passage and contemporary norms, uniquely requiring only age as its qualifying criterion. This very characteristic perhaps explains its widespread popularity beyond Mexico.

In diverse regions, the *quinceañera* doesn't merely replicate Mexican traditions; it also integrates distinctive cultural elements of those regions. From attire to music, regional variations are palpable, with each area lending its unique flavour, redefining the *quinceañera*'s meaning and ceremonial essence. Thus, while the appellation remains consistent, the form and essence of the *quinceañera* exhibit a dynamic fluidity. This inherent flexibility, allowing for cultural adaptations, underscores the ritual's universal appeal and resilience (Figure 5).



Figure 5
A *quinceañera* in Dollars, United States, where the latest club music combined with medieval attire creates a unique local flavour.
Source: Provided by the author

Socio-economic dimensions of the *quinceañera* and its implications

The *quinceañera* isn't merely a cultural or familial rite of passage. It often serves as a platform for local elites to exhibit their influence and stature. The magnitude of these celebrations can range from intimate gatherings among close kin to expansive local events, surpassing the scope of community feasts. Such grand celebrations, especially those involving bookings of cathedrals or large event spaces accommodating hundreds, are often contingent upon the family patriarch's desire to showcase his affluence and extensive social network.

A particularly noteworthy instance surfaced in 2016 in San Luis Potosi, Mexico, when Crescencio Ibarra utilised YouTube to extend an open invitation to his daughter Rubí Ibarra García's *quinceañera*. While an overwhelming 1.3 million people intimated their intention to attend through online comments, the actual turnout numbered around 30,000 (Alvarado 2022). This particular event has been dubbed the largest *quinceañera* on record (Figure 6).

A 2019 survey, focusing on southern Mexican communities in the United States, revealed that an average *quinceañera* sees invitations extended to a minimum of 200 guests with an overarching budget surpassing US\$21 (Salyers 2022). As of 10 July 2023, this converts to over 27.23 million won. Considering the prevailing context of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019, coupled with the inflationary trends observed in the United States, it is anticipated that these costs have only escalated by 2023. Allocating

such a sum for a 15th birthday celebration might seem the purview of those within the top 1% income bracket. Nonetheless, the intangible value of congregating with one's community amid the pandemic, relishing traditional food, music and dance, transcends mere opulence or indulgence. The resilience manifested through such identity-affirming events as the *quinceañera*, especially during the pandemic, mirrors societal revelations in times of crises as theorised by Karl Polanyi in his seminal work *The great transformation* (1944).

The lion's share of the *quinceañera* budget typically gravitates towards expenses such as elaborate attire, venue bookings, catering, decorations and invitations. Such outlays can exert substantial financial strain, prompting families to accumulate savings over extended periods. Yet, a grand *quinceañera* remains elusive without an upper-middle or higher socio-economic standing.

In the southern United States, where *quinceañeras* often involve inviting hundreds of guests and incurring significant expenses, the event is analogously reminiscent of the wedding industry in scale and significance. A multitude of sectors, encompassing costume designers, event planners, photographers, culinary establishments and hair stylists, cater to the burgeoning *quinceañera* market. These industries underpin thousands of jobs and invigorate local economies. Furthermore, the *quinceañera*, by leveraging establishments such as hotels and restaurants and by promoting targeted consumer purchases, fosters a beneficial cyclical effect

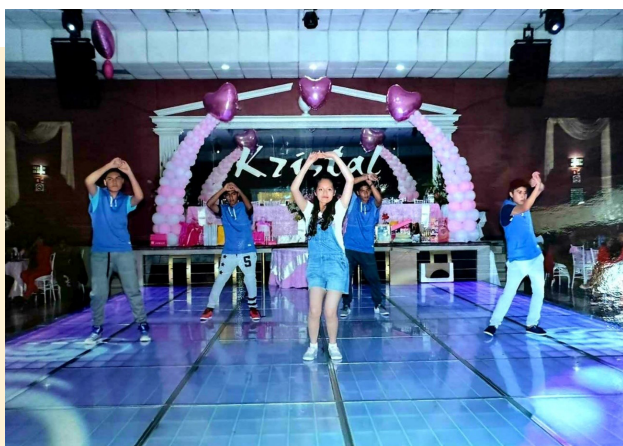


Figure 6
Crescencio Ibarra used YouTube to invite members of the public to attend his daughter's *quinceañera*.
Source: <https://youtu.be/Y18JpG8rN4>



Figure 7
The event often lasts past midnight, with the venue, size and duration affecting the cost.
Source: Provided by the author

on the local economy. Its positive economic footprint was particularly pronounced during challenging epochs like the pandemic. Not only does the *quinceañera* bolster local economic growth by offering avenues for small businesses and professionals, but it also stimulates consumer activity (Figure 7). However, on the flip side, the financial commitment required for a *quinceañera* might accentuate economic disparities and heighten societal pressures, especially among young girls, in a competitive milieu.

Conclusion

This study has explored the *quinceañera* – from its historical roots and significance within immigrant communities to its ceremonial facets and even its socio-economic implications. Drawing from our examination, it becomes evident that the *quinceañera* has a multifaceted nature. Paramount among its roles is its capacity to fortify community identity, bridging the traditional and the contemporary, and concurrently stimulating local economic activity. At its core, the *quinceañera* underscores the dynamic nature of true cultural heritage, emphasising its primary function of fostering communal cohesion and identity.

In an academic context, it is noteworthy that the gradual diminution of traditional elements in the current epoch might be perceived as a natural progression. Specifically, within the demographic of Mexican-American immigrants residing in the southern and eastern regions of the United States, the *quinceañera* continues to manifest attributes of a social ceremony deeply rooted in Catholic traditions. Conversely, within the broader spectrum of Latin immigrant communities, particularly among those not of Mexican descent, the *quinceañera* frequently eschews its religious undertones, evolving into an event more reflective of current societal trends rather than adhering strictly to its traditional religious foundations.

This shift signifies a notable departure from the religious and traditional Mexican components historically associated with the *quinceañera*. Nevertheless, the core significance of the *quinceañera* as a societal rite of passage into womanhood remains intact, underscoring its universal relevance across diverse cultures. Such rites of passage have been ubiquitously recognised throughout

millennia of human civilisation, transcending the legal definitions of adulthood – typically designated at 18 or 19 years of age in various jurisdictions – to emphasise a culturally acknowledged transition into social maturity.

Therefore, despite the evident attenuation of its religious and ethnic traditional elements, the *quinceañera* exemplifies a pivotal instance of how cultural rites of passage maintain their integral role in contemporary society. This phenomenon elucidates the persistence of cultural adulthood markers in the modern age, reinforcing the *quinceañera*'s position as a significant emblem of this enduring social construct.

However, it is not without its challenges. The capacity of the *quinceañera* to perpetuate conservative norms is undeniable. As the event garners larger prominence, the community's identity is emboldened. Yet, simultaneously, socio-economic disparities become more conspicuous, giving rise to inherent contradictions. The ceremony's roots in patriarchal traditions render it susceptible to critiques, especially given its potential reinforcement of antiquated female archetypes, seemingly incongruent with 21st-century realities. Originating within the Catholic socio-cultural framework of Mexico, characterised by its machismo, the *quinceañera* can be scrutinised – particularly through the lens of contemporary feminism. The manifestation of the 'Prince Charming' trope, for instance, invites critique, especially from modern educational perspectives.

Nevertheless, the *quinceañera* offers a unique perspective. By revitalising the coming-of-age ritual, a ceremonial tradition that has waned in modern nation-states, it proffers insights into how intangible cultural heritages can be contemporaneously integrated and appreciated within our modern societal fabric.

Acknowledgements

The authors conducted this study as Latin American Research Fellows in the Humanity Korea Plus Project of the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF). This work was supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2018S1A6A3A02081030 and NRF-2019S1A6A3A02058027). 

ENDNOTES

1. Fuentes (2013, 2016) posits that although Spain bequeathed its traditions, language, faith and governance systems to America, the latter reciprocated by imprinting its distinct cultural hallmarks on Spain. He characterises the Spanish-American rapport as intense and intricate, akin to introspective dialogues. In *'Figuras maternas'*, Fuentes underscores the shared cultural reverence for the maternal archetype between Spain and America. He portrays the maternal figure as an amalgamation of compassion and force, emphasising her pivotal role in Christianity and the profound veneration for the Virgin Mary in both regions. Essentially, Fuentes accentuates cultural consonance, articulating his insights through the lens of this shared cultural continuum.

REFERENCES

- Altamirano, I. 1972. *Paisajes y leyendas. Tradiciones y costumbres de México*. <City??>, México: Edinal Impresora.
- Alvarado, C. G. 2022. '¿Que fue de Rubi, la quinceañera mas famosa de Mexico?'. <https://www.chilango.com/agenda/musica-agenda/rubi-quinceañera-famosa-la-academia/>.
- Campos, J. 2009. 'Interculturalidad, identidad y migración en la expansión de las diásporas musicales'. *Razón y palabra* (49) [en línea]. Recuperado en marzo.
- Denner, J. and B. Guzmán. 2006. *Latina girls: voices of adolescent strength in the U.S.* New York: New York University Press.
- Díaz y de Ovando, C. 2006. *Invitación al Baile. Arte, Espectáculo y Rito en la Sociedad Mexicana (1825–1910)*, 2 vols, 1CD, México: UNAM.
- Dresser, N. 1999. *Multicultural celebrations: today's rules of etiquette for life's special occasions*, New York: Three Rivers Press.
- Erevia, Á. 1995. 'Religious celebration for the quinceañera Austin American-Statesman, June 8, 1991'. *Dallas Morning News*, 19 June. San Antonio, TX: Mexican-American Cultural Center, 1980.
- Erevia, Á. 2000. *Quince años: celebrando la vida (celebrating life)*. San Antonio, TX: Missionary Catechists of Divine Providence.
- Fuentes, C. 2013. *El espejo enterrado*, Editorial: Leer-e (e-book). <https://fliphtml5.com/ualp/gwtz/basic>.
- Fuentes, C. 2016. *El espejo enterrado* [Contemporánea], Editorial: DEBOLSILLO.
- Hoyt-Goldsmith, D. 2002. *Celebrating a quinceañera: a Latina's 15th birthday celebration*, New York: Holyday House.
- Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática (INEGI) [National Institute of Statistics and Geography]. 2020. <https://www.inegi.org.mx/>.
- King, E. 1998. *Quinceañera*. New York: Penguin Putman Books for Young Readers.
- Lankford, M. 1994. *Quinceañera: a Latina's journey to womanhood*. Brookfield, CT: Millbrook Press.
- Marling, K. 2004. *Debutante: rites and regalia of American debdom*. Lawrence, Kan: University Press of Kansas.
- Odekirk, S. 2019. 'Tradiciones e historia de la quinceañera'. <https://www.familysearch.org/es/blog/tradiciones-e-historia-de-la-quinceañera/>.
- Palfrey, D. H. 1997. 'La quinceañera: a celebration of budding womanhood'. *Mexconnect* [en línea]. Recuperado en julio, 2009 de.
- Pentoon, E. 1999. *Sólo para quinceañeras*. Miami, FL: Colonial Press International.
- Podetti J. R. 2004. 'Mestizaje y transculturación: la propuesta latinoamericana de globalización'. Universidad de Montevideo, Comunicación presentada en el VI Corredor de las Ideas del Cono Sur, 11 al 13 de marzo, Montevideo, Uruguay.
- Polanyi, K. 2001. *The great transformation: the political and economic origins of our time*. Beacon Press.
- Presilla, M. 2004. 'Lucky 15: the Latin "Quince" tradition', *The Miami Herald*, 'Tropical Life' section, 29 April.
- Prieto, G. 1996. *Cuadros de costumbres*. México: Conaculta.
- Ramírez, D. I. C. 2013. 'El Programa Bracero a 70 años de su inicio'. *Revista de Historia Internacional* 13, no. 52: 3–6.
- Ramírez, D. I. C. 2023. 'Programa Bracero'. https://memoricamexico.gob.mx/es/memorica/programa_bracero.
- Reyes, N., and M. A. Garnica [2018]. 'Cuando la fiesta de 15 años se volvió popular'. <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/colaboracion/mochilazo-en-el-tiempo/nacion/sociedad/cuando-la-fiesta-de-15-anos-se-convino-popular/>.
- Sahagún, B. 2006. *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España*. Ángel María Garibay K. (notas y apéndices), México: Porrúa, [Colec. Sepan cuantos, 300].

- Salyers, E. 2022. 'La importancia y el significado de celebrar una quinceañera para los Latinos'. <https://eldiariony.com/2022/05/10/la-importancia-y-el-significado-de-celebrar-una-quinceanera-para-los-latinos/>.
- United States Census 2023. https://www.census.gov/data-tools/demo/idb/#/country?COUNTRY_YEAR=2023&COUNTRY_YR_ANIM=2023/.

Yokasta, L. 2016. *Quinceañera: a celebration of life and a young woman's path to sainthood*. Goldhead Group Ltd, USA.