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Leveling the Playing Field: An Ethnographic Study of Latinx Youth Soccer Leagues in Las Vegas

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LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF LATINX YOUTH SOCCER LEAGUES IN LAS VEGAS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how youth sports privatization, family dynamics, coaching, and team organization affect Latinx youth's opportunities and interests in playing competitive soccer. It also examines the role that soccer plays in identity-making for Latinx people in Las Vegas, if and how they use these soccer spaces to develop kinship ties and build community, and it documents how these soccer spaces are developed as counter-spaces. I employ Critical Ethnography paired with 36 interviews with youth and adults. I observed two club soccer teams and one soccer league in Las Vegas (the league was a public community league that primarily caters to the Latinx population in Las Vegas) to gain a better understanding of the different types of teams and leagues that operate in Las Vegas, who plays in these leagues and why, and what their experiences in these respective teams and leagues are.

SC is a large club team whose goal is to become a nationally recognized academy. It is located in the general downtown Las Vegas area. They set themselves apart from other teams by having access to the highest quality facilities, coaches, and training environments. While classified as a non-profit, participation in the club is expensive as it competes in multiple tournaments throughout the year. Justice FC is also part of the same league as SC, but its focus and target are slightly different. They focus on low income and Latinx communities and their mission is to ensure the local low-income soccer community has a chance to play club soccer. The Spanish Soccer League (SSL) refers to a local Las Vegas community league that offers low-cost soccer participation for youth and adults. The league has 15 youth teams and 40 adult teams. The Spanish Soccer League is relatively low cost for youth and adult teams as there is no registration fees, participants only have to pay referee fees.

Participants across the board (coaches, parents, and youth) indicated that the high costs of sport participation limits opportunities for youth. I explain how the high costs of sport participation are making it difficult for families and youth to participate in soccer. Despite the costs of participation, some families and youth continue to view soccer participation as a vehicle for social mobility. Among Latinx participants, some viewed soccer as an opportunity for advancement and social mobility while others were happy to participate in the sport because of the sense of community and joy they experienced through it. I discuss how soccer spaces offer people from the Latinx community the opportunities to maintain a sense of their ethnic identity and build kinship ties. Overall, more work is needed on finding ways to make sport participation in general—and soccer participation specifically—more affordable for families from lower economic statuses.

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DEDICATION

Para mis padres, que me dieron la vida y todo lo que pudieron. Nino, gracias por siempre creer en mi. El apoyo de ustedes me ha ayudado a cumplir todas mis metas. To my love, thank you for your love and support as I finished this journey. To Dr. Michael Barnes, I would not be where I am today without you. Thank you for your inspiration, support, and guidance. And to Little and Lola, thank you for your wonderful company and for staying up with me while I worked through comprehensmive exams, prospectus drafts, and this dissertation.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines how youth sports privatization, family dynamics, coaching, and team organization shape Latinx youth's opportunities and interests in playing competitive soccer. I draw upon my three-year ethnographic study of youth who play soccer in Las Vegas, Nevada along with 36 in-depth interviews with coaches, parents, and youth to understand their hopes, experiences, and family expectations. I explore these experiences in a context in which costs for sports participation are rising at the same time that Latinx youth participation has declined. This dynamic raises questions about how privatized youth sports are affecting families as well as how intersecting oppressions related to race, class, and gender are expressed and experienced in youth sports, and how cultural ideals for inclusion and advancement through sport are nullified for many. This study also explores themes of community, specifically the role that soccer plays in the Latinx community and whether they see soccer as a vehicle of social mobility or not. I examine how Latinx families make sense of soccer as a counter-spaces as well as the challenges they face in maintaining these spaces.

Personal Connection to Study

Soccer was and still is a big part of my family. My family watches soccer games religiously and my two brothers played soccer growing up. The first time I can recall watching soccer games was in 1994 when the World Cup hosted by the U.S. While in college, a friend of mine asked if I wanted to play in her local team because her team needed players. I joined her team and quickly developed a deep respect for the sport. I later worked as a tutor at a middle school. One day the physical education teacher who also ran the school sports programs asked me if I would be willing to coach the seventh-grade boys' soccer team since she was having a difficult time finding someone to coach. I had previously only played soccer for fun on my

friend's team, so I was hesitant to agree. I told her I would talk to my brother who had more experience playing soccer instead. My brother was interested in coaching the team, but at the time he was working and attending college, so his schedule did not allow him to fully commit to the team. He suggested I take the team, saying he would attend practices and games when his schedule allowed, and he would informally coach the team—and me. Together, we coached the boys' soccer team for two years.

In August 2013 my 11-year-old brother had a soccer tournament in Las Vegas. He played for a California club team that is relatively well-known around Southern California. We traveled four hours from Los Angeles to Las Vegas with the rest of the families from the team. Some drove in their own cars, while others hitched a ride with some of the other families. The team fundraised for months leading up to this tournament to help families with expenses. They participated in *kerméses,* which were fundraising parties or community events, where they sold food to raise money to attend the tournaments. The mothers of the players and the coach's wife would gather together to prepare enchiladas, which were tortillas fried in a red salsa that were stuffed with cheese and chicken and topped with lettuce, onion, and sour cream. Those who attended the *kerméses* were the extended families of the players who came to enjoy some good food and help raise funds for the tournament.

Families of players took turns hosting a *kermés,* so, at one point it was my family's turn to host. The events felt like any other Sunday with family, even if those attending were not all related. Most, if not all, families were Mexican and seemed to connect well with each other because of their common nationalities and language. Words like *mijo* (son) were commonly used by parents to refer to the other players on the team. Even when the families did not need to come

together to fundraise, they would still get together to socialize. This included family birthday parties, Christmas parties, and regular *carne asadas* (barbeques).

After fundraising and pooling resources together, the team had enough money to attend the tournament. When we arrived in Las Vegas, I stayed in a small room with my parents, and three siblings in a hotel called Whiskey Pete's about 45 minutes away from the Las Vegas strip. Most of the families also stayed in rooms in this hotel. Since most of the families were low-income, like ours, we would eat at Cardena's market in Las Vegas, which offered great deals on family-sized food. I found myself at this same Cardena's five years later when I first moved to Las Vegas for my doctoral program. Thinking about what I wanted to research, I decided then to further examine soccer in the Latinx community. One day after the tournament games, we met at the hotel lobby for an early dinner. The moms had packed bread, ham, lettuce, tomato, mayo, and jalapeños to make tortas and feed all their families. My mother had brought a small George Foreman-like grill to toast the bread, and the women formed what seemed to be a small assembly line of moms coming together to prepare the tortas for everyone. Thinking back on it now, there was not such a thing as a singular soccer mom since most of the women (usually mothers) took on the role of sharing responsibility and helping in any way they could to support and feed the team. I noticed a similar situation during my field site observations that speaks to some of the unpaid labor experiences of women in these spaces.

We encountered some weird stares from the other guests who would walk by and would see us eating while the moms prepared more food in the lobby. But it was a moment where we — as Latinx people carved out a pocket of space to enjoy a communal meal instead of going out to eat like most other club teams. This was in part because the families were already struggling to pay for the cost of club participation and its related travel fees, so tortas was an economic way of

feeding large families. Ultimately, my brother's team won second place in the tournament. When I began writing about this research, I realized that being able to experience all of this made me privy to the barriers that Latinx families and their children face when trying to participate in club teams and how they navigate sport participation.

Later, as a graduate student at California State University, Fullerton I conducted a study of Latinx youth who were suspended or expelled from secondary school. I interviewed 10 Latinx youth and eight out of ten of these youth played soccer. Some of these students had played in the middle school soccer team that my brother and I coached. From the participants' perceptions, punitive disciplinary action was not effective in deterring unwanted behavior but their engagement in soccer did influence their behavior in positive ways. All of these moments are relevant as to how/why I became interested in exploring the experiences of youth soccer players in Las Vegas.

Problem Statement and Background

The privatization of youth sports has vastly increased the costs of playing soccer in the U.S. (Carpenter 2016). Although the U.S. youth-sports economy has grown significantly since 2010 and was estimated at $37.5 billion in 2022 (Gough 2024) this growth does not reflect equal sports participation for all children. Families from lower incomes are less likely to afford sports participation (Solomon 2020). The Aspen Institute's State of Play data report shows that children from lower incomes face more barriers to sport participation than children from wealthier families. "In 2018, 22% of kids ages 6 to 12 in households with incomes under $25,000 played sports regularly, compared to 43% of kids from homes making $100,000 or more" (The Aspen Institute 2019). Families whose children do not participate in sport cited cost as the main barrier to participation (Zarrett, Veliz, and Sabo 2020).

Carpenter (2016) further argues that Latinx youth are finding themselves almost completely shut out from participating in a sport that is central to their identity and an integral part of their community (Carpenter, 2016). The Chairman of the U.S. Soccer's diversity task force states that "The system is not working for the underserved community. It's working for the white kids" (Carpenter 2016). According to the Project Play – An Initiative of The Aspen Institute (2019), Hispanic kids' regular sports participation declined from 39% in 2012 to 33% in 2018. This is particularly the case with soccer participation, which is a sport that is commonly played by Latinx youth. "The sport lost 474,000 kids ages 6 to 12 in five years. More kids have stopped playing soccer than the combined number of newcomers and returning players to the sport. In a change from a decade ago, soccer's participation rate is now closer to that of tennis than it is to baseball's and basketball's" (The Aspen Institute 2019: 15). The purpose of this work is to examine the challenges that Las Vegas families, especially Latinx families in accessing soccer participation.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand the barriers that families and youth in Las Vegas face with soccer participation. Many families face challenges in being able to afford the cost of sport participation, particularly families from lower-income backgrounds and those with multiple children who play. Additionally, I wanted to explore the experiences of youth soccer players in Las Vegas. I wanted to understand the goals they had, how they managed parental and soccer expectations, and how they navigated playing in certain teams and made sense of their soccer participation. Lastly, I examine what soccer means to the Latinx community to better understand the role that soccer plays in identity-making for Latinx immigrants, if and how they

use these soccer spaces to develop kinship ties and build community, and to document how these spaces are developed as counter-spaces.

My research questions include: 1) How has the privatization of soccer affected families and youth — especially Latinx families and youth? 2) What does soccer look like in the larger Las Vegas community? 3) What role does soccer play in the Latinx community? I seek to center the voices of those who have been most influenced by the growing costs and other barriers to soccer participation to offer a corrective to youth sport research which has highlighted white male youth much more than Latinx and other non-white youth experiences. I will discuss the nature of the study and the research question in greater depth in chapter three.

A Critical Analytic Approach

Understanding how raced, classed, and gendered processes exclude youth from soccer and other related opportunities can help us link how these processes are related to exclusionary patterns in other areas of society. I draw from a Chicana Feminist Epistemological framework to contextualize the experiences of participants in this study. A Chicana Feminist Epistemological framework questions the idea of objectivity and is grounded in the life experiences of Chicanas and allows Chicana researchers to use these life experiences to guide their work (Delgado Bernal 1998). Delgado Bernal argues that "cultural intuition" recognizes the "unique viewpoints that many Chicanas bring to the research process" (1998: 555). I see my purpose in this critical ethnography as one that challenge oppressive assumptions and outline the power relations that are often taken for granted (O'Reilly 2009).

I provide a critical analysis of how race, gender, and class intersect and shape the experiences of Latinx youth who play soccer in Las Vegas. The exponential growth of the youth sports complex and the subsequent growing cost of sport participation impacts all youth but

especially those whose families cannot keep up with the costs (Gregory 2017). My work can inform us of the ways that youth of color, specifically Latinx youth and their families navigate and make sense of the changing landscape of youth sports. Additionally, I am interested in examining how Latinx youth in Las Vegas make sense of their soccer participation. More work is needed on finding ways to make sport participation in general—and soccer participation specifically—more affordable for families from lower economic statuses so that youth of all racial, ethnic, gender, and class backgrounds can participate in sports.

Operational Definitions

I make the following distinctions throughout this dissertation when discussing soccer teams and leagues. Soccer clubs refer to elite travel teams that are also referred to as premier, select, or private teams (Farrey 2008). These teams are part of larger leagues that are either nonprofit or private, but ultimately function as businesses that market the development of skills that other leagues do not offer. I observed two clubs (SC, Justice FC) and one league. The Spanish Soccer League (SSL) refers to a local Las Vegas community league that offers low-cost soccer participation for youth and adults. The term rec team refers to recreational soccer teams, these are typically much more affordable than club teams and focus on the introduction to soccer skills and rules associated with the sport. Youth who play in these teams are often beginning to learn the technical terms and skills of the sport, such as learning that "offside" refers to the rule that "players should not be allowed to score a goal by being in a position on the field where they are closer to the opponent's goal line than both the ball and the second-to-last opponent (usually the last defender)" (Casteel 2023).

Furthermore, I use the term Latinx to refer to any person of Latin American origin or descent. Though the terms, Latino or Hispanic are widely used to describe this population, the term Latinx provides a more gender-inclusive approach that does not center colonial legacies.

Latino or Latina fails to include the various gender identities of people like non-binary or gender non-conforming people (people who do not conform to men/women gender roles or expectations). Additionally, the term Hispanic refers to any person from Spain, or a Spanish-speaking country, however, many Latinx people have distanced themselves from the term as it relates to the experiences of their country's colonization by Spain while. Others, like some participants in this study, continue to use the term as a form of self-identification.

Most participants in this study identified by nationality, using terms like Mexican, Guatemalan, and Costa Rican when responding to the question of racial or ethnic background. This is important to note because although Latinx people share a lot in common based on ethnic or racial background (such as language or common cultural practices), they are not a monolith and some base their ethnic identity mostly as it relates to their country of origin. However, for the purpose of this study I grouped participants of Latinx descent together in the participant demographics table in appendix A. I use the term "Latinx" more broadly because I focus mostly on the common experiences this group faces, especially as it relates to their experiences of migration and discrimination. I still attempted to include participants' personal identification by nationality when I introduced them throughout the chapters.

When I first began this study, I was interested in examining educational pathways among soccer players. I wanted to understand the process and experiences of youth soccer players who were looking to play collegiate soccer, so I was open to interviewing people from various racial and ethnic backgrounds to understand their overall experiences. Because of this, I interviewed non-Latinx participants, specifically parents and youth. I decided to keep the data collected from these participants interviews after the focus of this study changed as they provided great insight about topics related to this updated study such as experiences with Latinx clubs and leagues.

After a few interviews, it was clear that barriers to participation and themes of community were significant topics worthy of exploring further.

Chapter Outline and Findings

Following this chapter, I review the research literature review on youth sports, privatization, soccer in the Latinx community, and racialized and gendered experiences of athletes. My purpose is to offer the reader some background in youth sports, specifically how the privatization of youth sports is currently affecting youth sport participation generally in the U.S. I outline how conservative-backed neoliberal policies defunded youth public sports and resulted in the privatization of youth sports that we see play out today. I also discuss how the privatization of youth sports has influenced early youth specialization, the effects of early youth specialization, and the increased costs of sport participation. Additionally, I bridge some of the existing literature on the raced and gendered experiences of Latinx people as they relate to sports.

In chapter three, I discuss my methodology and data. I employed a qualitative approach using textual data analysis to examine how people construct and ascribe meaning to their life experiences (Creswell 2014; Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011). Whereas quantitative data uses numerical data analysis to reach generalizable conclusions, qualitative methods rely on the in-depth description of the themes developed in a particular field site (Creswell 2014; Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011). I discuss Critical Ethnography (CE) as an inductive approach that uses a reflexive analysis of data collected through sustained observation to attempt to objectively report participants' views, and how I apply CE to this study. (O'Reilly, 2009). CE uses ethnographic data collection tools – observation, participant observation, interviews, and textual analysis – to expose hidden agendas, challenge oppressive assumptions, lay bare power relations, and offer

critiques about taken-for-granted assumptions of underlying persistent inequalities. The purpose of critical ethnography is "to understand social life in order to change the way that those in power marginalize those with less power" (Bailey 1996:25).

I observed two club soccer teams and one soccer league in Las Vegas (SC, JC, and SSL). The SSL league was a public community league that primarily caters to the Latinx population in Las Vegas. My goal was to gain a better understanding of the different types of teams and leagues that operate in Las Vegas, who plays in these leagues and why, and to understand experiences in these respective teams and leagues. During my time in these field sites, I observed interactions between families, coaches, and youth players and established rapport to speak to them about their experiences. In addition to these observations, I conducted 36 interviews with youth, parents, and coaches in Las Vegas. This offered me ground-level, meaningful, experiential data that provides a certain kind of in-depth understanding that is different than a more generalized survey approach. This study can offer us insight into the experiences of youth, parents, and coaches, but is not generalizable to the larger population. Although this may be considered a limitation, the purpose of this study was to understand how families navigate the costs of soccer participation and how youth make sense of their soccer participation.

In chapter four, "'Selling a Dream': Privatization, Youth Sports, and the Costs of Participation," I outline the shift of organized youth sports from a publicly-funded model to a privatized model. I discuss the effects of privatization on youth sports programs and their consequent focus on sport-specific skills and competition. Furthermore, I detail the growing costs of youth soccer participation and how this has affected families in Las Vegas. I also discuss the "costs" (downsides) of a youth sports model focused on adult-centered values. Additionally, I

demonstrate how private soccer clubs may not always lead to the desired success most parents and youth covet despite their intense marketing claims.

In chapter five, "Leveling the Playing Field: Competition, Opportunity, and Mobility in Las Vegas Soccer Leagues" I discuss the ways participants view opportunity and social mobility through youth sports, specifically soccer clubs. Soccer clubs are viewed as spaces that could provide opportunities to learn and develop the skills necessary to secure an athletic scholarship. I talk about the ways that soccer clubs can provide access to networks that can shape opportunities for youth. I use Bourdieu's concept of social and cultural capital and demonstrating how capital exchange occurs in these soccer leagues. Most parents in this study viewed the expenses associated with soccer clubs as an investment in their child's future education. Therefore, parents see soccer participation costs as potentially paying off if their child secures an athletic scholarship or ends up playing professionally. I discuss how the pursuit of "competitive" soccer clubs can undermine the legitimacy of local Latinx leagues, by excluding them, overlooking their significance and the types of cultural capital that are available in these spaces.

In chapter six, "The Role of Soccer in the Latinx Community," I examine the role that soccer plays for some Latinx people in Las Vegas. Previous literature shows that many Latinx immigrants leave behind their families and communities when they leave their native countries. As a result, they seek to maintain a sense of their ethnic identity, seek community, and create counter-spaces and they often do these things by playing soccer in spaces like parks (Price and Whitworth 2004; Trouille 2021). According to Scott Waalkes (2017), "soccer is a global culture, a global language and a global community of play . . . It creates participation in a transnational community" (p. 174). For the Latinx community in the U.S., soccer is not just a source of entertainment, but also provides a site for creating social ties, especially for Latinx immigrants

who have limited access to social spaces and networks (Trouille 2021). Soccer's role in the Latinx community has been explored in previous studies, such as Figueroa's (2003) case study of Mexican farmworkers in Salinas, California, Price and Whitworth's (2004) study of Central Americans in Washington D.C., Messeri's (2008) study of Latinx immigrants in Richmond California, and Trouille's (2021) study on Latino men in Los Angeles, California. However, soccer's place in Latinx life in the U.S. remains understudied and the communal spaces where people play and connect have not been fully documented.

Limitations

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of youth, parents, and coaches with soccer leagues in Las Vegas. Although this study can offer us insight into the experiences of youth, parents, and coaches, this qualitative study is not generalizable to the larger population. This may be considered a limitation, but the purpose of this study was to understand how families navigate the costs of soccer participation, how youth make sense of their soccer participation as it relates to the kinds of teams they play in and why. The sample size is not a representative sample of the entire Las Vegas or Latinx population. Additionally, this study focuses on the experiences of youth, parents, and coaches and their interpretations may be considered subjective.

Conclusion

I now move to review the research literature review on youth sports, privatization, soccer in the Latinx community, and the racialized engendered experiences of athletes. Specifically, I discuss some of the already existing literature on youth sports. I argue that more work is needed to understand the experiences of youth of color as it relates to sports participation as it is an understudied area (Brooks, Knudtson, and Smith 2016). As I previously mentioned, based on the

themes outlined in this literature review, this study seeks to answer the following questions: 1) How has the privatization of soccer affected families and youth — especially Latinx families and youth? 2) What does soccer look like in the larger Las Vegas community? 3) What role does soccer play in the Latinx community?

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The privatization of youth sports has increased the cost of playing soccer in the U.S. (Carpenter 2016). The U.S. youth-sports economy has grown significantly since 2010 and was estimated at $37.5 billon in 2022 (Gough 2024). However, this growth does not reflect equal sports participation for all children. Families from lower incomes are less likely to afford sports participation (The Aspen Institute). Carpenter (2016) further argues that Latinx youth are finding themselves almost completely shut out from participating in a sport that is central to their identity and an integral part of their community (Carpenter 2016). The Chairman of the U.S. Soccer's diversity task force states that "The system is not working for the underserved community. It's working for the white kids" (Carpenter 2016). The purpose of this work is to examine the challenges involved in youth soccer participation on a ground level, with Las Vegas families, especially Latinx families.

This literature review connects some of the existing research on the privatization of youth sports and its effects on early youth specialization and the increased costs of sport participation, as well as the raced and gendered aspects of sports participation more broadly, to understand the intersectional experiences of youth soccer players from different backgrounds. Most of the research on sports tends to focus on elite amateur and professional athletics and overlooks the experiences of children and adolescents (Messner and Musto 2014). For example, Ortega and Grafnetterova (2023) explored the recruitment experiences of Latinx college athletes to understand the pathways for Latinx college athletes who go on to play in Division I institutions. Similarly, McGovern (2018) also looks at the experiences of Latina athletes and their experiences with recruitment, specifically looking at the role that capital plays in their sport opportunities. McGovern found that all three forms of capital—economic capital (money), social

capital (networks), and cultural capital (knowledge) — led to better opportunities and a more robust understanding of the recruitment process. As a result, Latinas had varying experiences that were shaped by their class background and McGovern argues that the college sports system reproduces a stratified society. The problem with this is not only that youth sport experiences are under-researched, but that adults are also failing to study youth as "active subjects" in the social world (Messner and Musto 2014:107). This means that youth voices are not often centered in the work that researchers do. Although I will also be interpreting the experiences of youth, I am doing so in a way that is grounded in their own words. Though the number of Latinx youth who play college sports has increased, Hextrum (2019) argues that the pathway to playing college sports still favors white, middle- and upper-class families. This work can shed some light on youth of color from lower incomes who are seeking access to college sports and how they navigate this white, middle class pathway.

More work is needed to understand the experiences of youth of color as it relates to sports participation (Brooks, Knudtson, and Smith 2016). This is especially true for work that captures the experiences of Latinx youth and examines how their families navigate the increased costs of sports participation (Coakley 2021). This study seeks to answer the following questions: 1) How has the privatization of soccer affected families and youth — especially Latinx families and youth? 2) What does soccer look like in the larger Las Vegas community? 3) What role does soccer play in the Latinx community? Outside of school, sports are the primary organized activity for most kids (Farrey 2008). This makes this work important as it focuses on Latinx youth who the growing costs and barriers to soccer participation have affected the most.

Youth Sports Privatization

The privatization of youth sports was intentionally driven by a congressional-industrial complex to mold youth sports into a capitalist-elitist framework (Coakley 2021). Congress passed the Amateur Sports Act in 1978 which gave the U.S. Olympic Committee control of grassroots sports in the country and reshaped the role of the Amateur Athletic Union. Before Congress passed the Amateur Sports Act in 1978, the Amateur Athletic Union's role was to select Olympic teams. After the act, the AAU reorganized to stay relevant by organizing youth sports national championships, especially in basketball, that raked in large tournament fees. Now the AAU oversees highly profitable youth national championship events in 35 sports, including soccer (Farrey 2008). The AAU's shift instead led to broader moves toward the professionalization of youth sports, which created a narrow pipeline of youth sports participation and set the tone for the increased cost and privatization of youth sports that disproportionally affects youth of color from lower income households.

The Amateur Sports Act of 1978 was, ostensibly, intended to build up amateur youth sports as a broad-based participatory system to create a large pool of child athletes with two benefits: 1) broadening youth sports participation would address concerns around health and physical fitness and 2) the emphasis would draw larger numbers of youth into athletic competition, which would give the U.S. Olympic Committee more and better athletes to select from when picking out Olympic teams (Farrey 2008). The broad claim was that the bill would enable mass participation and establish a meritocratic system of youth sports where the best of the best youth athletes would be selected to compete at the international levels. Republican Senator Ted Stevens from Alaska argued that this bill would make it "easier for all Americans to find programs and facilities through which they can further their athletic interests" because the bill intended to "mesh" club systems with school sports programs (Farrey 2008:188-189).

However, the proposed subsidies to fund the initiative at the levels needed were never fully funded. (Farrey 2008). Private interests stepped into the vacuum created by the limited government support to take over the youth sports pipeline to college, professional, and Olympic participation.

In addition to the reshaping of the AAU, conservative-backed government policies also contributed to the privatization and commercialization of youth sports. The elimination and reduction of public subsidies for programs outlined in the Amateur Sports Act reflected the larger economic policies at the time. Republican politicians pushed neoliberal economic policies in the 1980s that contributed to narrowing opportunities for marginalized groups even more (Farrey 2008; Hartmann and Manning 2016; Sagas and Cunningham 2014). Neoliberalism is "an ideology emphasizing free markets and economic deregulation, privatization and the reduction of government power, the pursuit of self-interest, and competition to boost efficiency and stimulate progress" (Coakley 2021:86). Neoliberal policies fully materialized during the Reagan administration in 1981, and this free-market approach extended to the privatization of public services that have exacerbated economic and social inequality (Klees 2008; Vandermeerschen et al. 2016; Rasmus 2020). These policies involved an increase in war-defense spending, big tax cuts, and the slashing of social welfare programs (Rasmus 2020). By promoting competition, proponents of privatizing youth sports sought to reduce the financial burden on public resources (Spaaij 2011). This meant that the government pulled back on investing in public programs like sports and education, leaving them open to privatization efforts to commodify and sell what should otherwise be "public goods" to those with the means to afford them. (Spaaij 2011). In youth sport, as school and community programs shrank, private leagues and expensive travel and club teams increased in number and popularity during the late 1990s (Farrey 2008).

Youth Sports Model

The shift to a more privatized, neoliberal youth sports model led to an array of issues, especially a narrowed sports participation pipeline with an increased focus on youth sports specialization rather than broad participation in many sports opportunities for kids (Farrey 2008). What we currently know about youth as it relates to sports is that children are experiencing earlier specialization of skills that can result in injury and burnout (Coakley 2021; Ferguson and Stern 2014). Early sport specialization "refers to intense year-round training in a specific sport with the exclusion of other sports at a young age" (Ferguson and Stern 2014). According to Ferguson and Stern (2014), early specialization is encouraged among young athletes to hone skills and gain a competitive edge to increase the likelihood of attaining an athletic scholarship or playing professionally. Early specialization is one of the focuses of a youth sports model based on an adult-organized system that is modeled after professional sports where rules, competition, and winning are the main focus (Coakley 2021).

While some parents do encourage youth sports participation among their children for fun or to stay active, the majority of parents see youth sports participation as a way to get a college scholarship (Farrey 2008; Coakley 2021; Youth Athletes United 2024). The odds that youth sports participants will earn a college scholarship at any level are very low. Only 2% of high school athletes go on to play Division I college sports (Gregory 2017; National Collegiate Athletic Association 2020). And, of that 2%, most who receive scholarships are from families who can afford increasingly expensive youth sport participation (MGovern 2018). The main driving force behind pursuing sports for scholarships comes from the high costs of higher education that exist today as the U.S. currently does not offer free college and the average cost of attendance at a public 4-year in-state institution is $26,027 per year (Hanson 2023; Thompson

2018). Meanwhile, the average household income in the U.S. is about $74,580 (United States Census Bureau 2024). When looking at the average income by race we can also see a clear distinction between White people's and Latinx people's average income; In 2022, the average income for Whites was $81,060, whereas the average income for those in the Latinx community was $62,800. Given the high costs of sports participation, this difference in income can pose issues around who can afford to have their children play sports to even have a slim chance of securing a college scholarship.

We know that due to the privatization of youth sports, the costs of sports participation have increased significantly and are creating barriers for low-income youth and youth of color. "In 2018, 22% of kids ages 6 to 12 in households with incomes under $25,000 played sports regularly, compared to 43% of kids from homes making $100,000 or more" (The Aspen Institute 2019). The number of kids aged 6 through 12 who played soccer in 2018 dropped by 3% (The Aspen Institute 2019). Families whose children do not participate in sports cited cost as the main barrier to participation (Zarrett, Velizand, and Sabo 2020). Increased costs have greatly affected all youth as elite travel teams have come to replace community leagues and are significantly more expensive (Gregory 2017). Like other youth sports in general, soccer's privatization has increased the cost of participation and affected all families across Las Vegas to play in more competitive teams, but this is especially the case for Latinx working-class families (Carpenter 2016).

Soccer in the Latinx Community

There are a few studies that document the experiences of Latinx people and soccer (Jensen and Limbu 2016; Coakley 2021) despite there being a majority of Latinx people who list soccer as their favorite sport (Lee et al. 2010). Although Harrolle et. al (2010) argue that ethnic

identity does not influence soccer fandom among Latinx people, Figueroa's (2003) historical analysis of the development of soccer among Mexican farmworkers in Salinas, California demonstrates how Latinx people use soccer as a way to maintain their ethnic identity. He argues that Mexican immigrants brought cultural and social practices (like playing soccer) from their home country and played the sport as a way to "escape" their work-life identity in the U.S. (Figueroa 2003). Other studies have also shown how soccer can reduce alienation among recent immigrants while providing a sense of community (Kleszyneski 2008; Wallace 2003). Kleszyneski (2008) argues that soccer offers Mexican migrants the ability to integrate into already existing communities in the U.S.. Kleszyneski (2008) demonstrates how the Latinx community comes together not only to play soccer but to provide support and resources to participants who lack them.

This may be why Price and Whitworth (2004) describe soccer as a "cultural necessity" for Latinx people from Mexico and Central America who have sought to maintain a sense of their ethnic identity and cultural ties, seek community, and create counter-spaces in the U.S. They argue that one of the ways Latinx people carve out cultural spaces is through their participation in Latinx soccer leagues (Price and Whitworth 2004). Wallace (2003) also discussed how Latinx immigrants adapt to their lives in the U.S. by playing soccer but find themselves competing for fields to play on. Wallace (2003) points out that Latinx people often could not afford to play in the local, private league as fees were too expensive. As a result, the Latinx league held games "on a piece of privately-owned land with three tiny, rock dirt fields" (35). As a "cultural broker," Wallace (2003) attempted to negotiate affordable access to fields for Latinx immigrants but stated that the private league administrators failed to understand the cultural and economic barriers the Latinx community faced. Although Wallace was eventually

able to secure fields for the Latinx league to play on, this experience gave rise to a different set of issues that the Latinx community faces in accessing social spaces.

In "The Soccer Wars: Hispanic Immigrants in Conflict and Adaptation at the Soccer Borderzone," Wallace (2009) uses the concept of a "soccer borderzone" to discuss how Latinx immigrants adapt to their lives in the U.S. by participating in soccer leagues. The term borderzone by Bruner (2005) describes the "interaction among tourists and local residents in areas with frequent tourist visits" (18). Though Wallace (2009) does not refer to Latinx immigrants as tourists in the U.S., he uses the term to describe how Latinx immigrants "from many different nations, cultures, and communities come together to participate in the international sport they love and then return to their (often) segregated living spaces" (65). Wallace uses his experience as president of a Hispanic soccer league in Raleigh, North Carolina to explore the experiences of Latinx immigrants who negotiate their participation in soccer leagues with the "effects of being an outsider in a new community" (64). He wanted "to provide my own emic view (although I am not Hispanic) of the immigrant–nonimmigrant 'borderzone'… to better perceive the issues that affect us all in the United States as we better comprehend our roles in coping with the fairly recent arrival of so many people from south of the Rio Grande" (65). However, Wallace's (2009) "holistic" account (which details accounts of "Futbol Madness," experiences of embezzlement by other Latinx soccer league administrators, drinking, and violence) fails to fully problematize this behavior as these actions are not endemic to the Latinx community and could reproduce harmful stereotypes of Latinx people being violent and criminals. He also does not take into account that this type of behavior happens throughout all facets of U.S. society, sometimes to a greater degree as we often see CEOs and government institutions embezzle or "lose" millions of dollars (Stone 2023; Office of Public Affairs 2024).

On the other hand, Trouille's (2021) ethnography of immigrant Latino men who play soccer in Los Angeles humanizes their experiences. These men play soccer to maintain an ethnic identity, create friendships and community, and build networking relationships. The men were viewed as "racial and class outsiders" by local residents because they lived and played in a predominantly white, middle and upper-class area (Trouille 2021). Trouille (2021) details how the men in his study engaged in behavior others would deem risky; they would drink beer at the park and would sometimes fight one another. But Trouille (2021) demonstrates how these actions functioned to reaffirm their relationships—the men drank to create community in one of the few social spaces they inhabited and they fought as a form of "status negotiation" or to resolve conflict (141). These experiences ultimately functioned to build camaraderie and was what "bounded the men together" (141).

Zepeda-Millan (2017) also notes how soccer leagues have also functioned as sites of resistance. He details the experiences of Latinos who organized to push back against the Border Protection, Anti-terrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005, H.R. 4437 that racialized Latinos based on their perceived racial and cultural attributes. On the other hand, Alamillo's (2003) analysis of Mexican-American community-based baseball clubs in Southern California during the 1930s and 40s demonstrates that even though participants used baseball as a space to contest the racial discrimination they faced and to promote ethnic consciousness, these same clubs also reproduced gendered hierarchies by typically excluding women. These rich accounts of the experiences of Latinx people in sport are important to understanding their experiences of assimilation, acculturation, and discrimination. The studies listed above focus overwhelmingly on the experiences of Latino men but reduce women's involvement to their social status of "wives or girlfriends" (Kleszyneski 2008). These also fail to include the

experiences of youth and there is hardly any discussion about youth soccer players in these leagues and teams. This study aims to add to the existing research by providing the experiences of youth who play soccer in Las Vegas.

Soccer Participation Among Latinx Youth

Coakley (2021) states that there is not much current research on Latinx youth in sports. Historically, organized sports created safe spaces for young white boys, while excluding players of color and girls (Wiggins 2013). The integration of working-class youth and youth of color was a strategic effort by elites to help shape workers and citizens into the developing industrial-capitalist society (Messner 1992; Hartman 2016). Once sports organizations did allow players of color, they typically did so as a response to risk discourses that sought sport as a site for risk prevention and control. This became the model for contemporary sport-based programs that reproduced deficit notions of inferiority rooted in pseudoscietific racist discourses that frame people of color as having limited intellectual abilities, and sought to control and discipline kids of color (Hartmann 2016).

Hartmaan's work (2001) on midnight basketball also demonstrates how sport was used as a way to "contain, control, resocialize, and reeducate" Black youth. Hartmaan points out that the U.S. avoids any real accountability for failing to provide communities of color with adequate resources for schools, jobs, housing, and health care by using sports programs as a pretense for investing in communities of color (Hartmaan and Manning 2016). Soccer has also been used in school and community programs as a form of social control that targets "at risk" Latinx youth (Cryan & Martinek, 2017; Schober, Zarate, & Fawcett, 2014). For example, Cryan and Martinek (2017) describe a program that used soccer as a "hook" to engage Latino boys in a middle school after-school program that sought to use a sports development approach through soccer to reach

"desired outcomes of improved self-control, respect, and cooperation with others" (127). The "desired outcomes" included increasing participants' social responsibility and personal responsibility for these youth by taking on these values through soccer and transferring them to the classroom and society as "productive" adults. The program used a model called "Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility" to instill "values" or "life skills" with these youth. This deficit approach implies that Latino youth do not already hold important values or life skills and are at risk of becoming unproductive adults.

Based on the popularity of the sport among the Latinx community, soccer has been used in some school and community programs to target risk narratives about the Latinx population, specifically risk narratives around crime propensity and narratives rooted in fatphobia (Cryan & Martinek, 2017; Schober, Zarate, & Fawcett, 2014). Schober, Zarate, & Fawcett (2014) examined a community partnership that aimed to promote soccer-based physical activity among Latinx youth. While the Latino Health for All Coalition developed an action plan to tackle chronic disease among Latinx youth in Kansas City through weekly soccer sessions, the targeted participants were Latinx youth who were considered overweight or obese. The program claimed to promote strong relationships between academic and community partners to promote physical activity, but it centered around the risk narrative of Latinos being prone to obesity and its underpinnings were rooted in a fatphobic narrative that overshadows other reasons why Latinx youth might want to play soccer. Lin et al. (2016) further argue that youth of Mexican origin have experienced ethnic and racial microaggressions in organized sports such as ethnic teasing, racial slurs, and discriminatory behavior based on implicit ethnic stereotypes from both peers and adults.

Gender Inequality in Soccer Spaces

In addition to racial and ethnic inequities among youth in sport, gender inequality also persists. Girls and women in the U.S. still face cultural and gendered barriers to access, fewer opportunities in some popular sports (e.g., American football), and lower financial rewards in professional sports compared to men, despite some advances made during the last few decades that meant to increase fairness and participation in sports (Coakley 2021; Allison 2018; Carrington 2013; Acosta and Carpenter 2000). Messner (1992:8) characterizes sport as a gendered social institution buffered by "struggles for power between groups of people" (Allison 2016; Allison 2018; Acosta and Carpenter 2000). Gender inequity is long rooted in sport ideology. In the 1930s, social conventions framed women as biologically incapable of participating in sport and defined them as best fit for housework and child-rearing. Women who did participate in sport were labeled as lesbian or seen as unfeminine (Messner 1992; Allison 2018). Myths that sport activity was damaging to a woman's reproductive health or that athleticism "masculinizes" a woman's appearance, effectively prevented women's participation in sport (Frey and Eitzen 1991; Allison 2018). Despite their marginalization and stigma, women have contested these ideologies by refuting the ideologies and challenging discriminatory practices through lawsuits. But these efforts have not yet fundamentally altered male-dominated gender relations in sports (Messner 1992; Steidinger 2020).

That said, there have been some advancements that have increased fairness and access for women and girls in sports. Title IX of the Education Amendments stated that any program or activity that received federal funds from the Department of Education should not discriminate based on sex and gave women the legal basis to demand equity in high school and college athletics (Kaestner and Xu 2010; Allison 2018). Womens' and girls' access to sport participation increased significantly since Title IX was passed (Kaestner and Xu 2010; Meân and Kassing

2008; Allison 2018; Acosta and Carpenter 2000). In 1972, only 300,000 women were participating in sports (Steidinger 2020). Today, more than 3 million girls participate in sports (Steidinger 2020).

However, women and girls from marginalized groups continue to face unique barriers to sport participation and success. These barriers include gender/ethnic-based teasing from peers (Lopez 2019), lower levels of sport participation, and unfair media misrepresentations (Lopez 2021; Coakley 2021). Sport participation among girls increased significantly within the first 25 years of Title IX's enactment, which gave women the legal basis to demand equity in high school and college athletics as it outlined sex discrimination of educational programs from any institutions receiving federal funding (Messner 1992; Allison 2018). However, this growth was mostly among white, middle-class girls, demonstrating how Latinx girls have not benefited from this policy the same way that white girls have (Allison 2018). Lopez's (2019) focus groups with 78 Latina girls ages 12-15 shows Latina girls face three main forms of "othering" when participating in sports: ideological othering through beliefs and culture, institutional othering through school policy and practices, and interpersonal othering through interactions with peers and coaches (Lopez 2019). These girls experienced implicit and explicit messages that marginalized them based on gender, ethnic, and class distinctions. In *"Peloteros in Paradise: Mexican American Baseball and Oppositional Politics in Southern California, 1930-1950*," Alamillo (2003) examines community-based baseball clubs among Mexican Americans in Southern California, filling in the gap that often excluded the experiences of Latinx baseball players and discusses how these baseball clubs functioned to reproduce gendered hierarchies as they often excluded women. When women did play baseball they were often the opening games for the boys' teams and were excluded from positions of leadership.

Legal battles that challenge institutional gender discrimination continue today (Steidinger 2020). Most recently, the Women's Sports Foundation along with the ACLU and other organizations banned together to challenge institutional discrimination against transgender youth (Women's Sport Foundation 2021; ACLU 2021). In 2021, 31 states introduced legislation to prohibit trans youth from participating in school sports (ACLU 2021). Excluding trans youth from participating in school sports or forcing them to play in teams that correspond to their sex at birth not only limits trans youths' ability to participate fully in sports but can also pose detrimental effects to their health and wellbeing as this can contribute to suicidality and violence (Lenzi 2018; ACLU 2021). Because of this, private sport leagues and teams — if inclusive — can offer trans youth the opportunity to participate in sports in a way that affirms their gender identity.

Critical Liberatory Analysis

Scholars acknowledge that sport sociology does not do enough to include the experiences of people of color (Brooks, Knudtson, and Smith 2016; Simien, Arinze, and McGarry 2019). Some researchers adopt a hegemonic white narrative that focuses on white athletes' experiences or use dominant frames rooted in whiteness to explain the experiences of athletes of color. This means that most scholarly work about athletes from marginalized backgrounds can perpetuate false raced and gendered dichotomies. For instance, sport scholars will either focus on White women or Black men, ignoring Black or Latina women's experiences. I argue that a critical analysis is essential to understand how organized youth soccer can exclude some youth of color. Common pay-to-play systems not only exclude some youth from participating but widen social inequalities along racial, class, and gendered lines (Coakley 2020). I understand youth soccer leagues as sites of stratification that reproduce and perpetuate inequality in the larger society. I

am specifically interested in understanding how coaches, parents, and youth participate in reproducing inequities through their practices and belief systems as expressed through youth soccer.

Understanding how raced, classed, and gendered processes exclude youth from soccer and other related opportunities can help us link how these processes are related to exclusionary patterns in other areas in society. I will draw from and Chicana Feminist Epistemological frameworks to understand how organized youth soccer can exclude some youth of color. A Chicana Feminist Epistemological framework questions the idea of objectivity and is grounded in the life experiences of Chicanas and allows Chicana researchers to use these life experiences to guide their work (Delgado Bernal 1998). Delgado Bernal argues that "cultural intuition" recognizes the "unique viewpoints that many Chicanas bring to the research process" (1998; 555). I see my purpose in this critical ethnography to challenge oppressive assumptions and outline the power relations that are often taken for granted (O'Reilly 2009).

Nevada has the fifth largest Latinx population in the U.S., trailing behind New Mexico, California, Texas, and Arizona (Brune 2020) and as of 2018, it was reported that there were 656,274 Latinx people living in Las Vegas (United States Census Bureau 2024). Despite the recent growth of the Latinx population, Latinx people continue to face barriers to full participation in Las Vegas society. These barriers include but are not limited to access to fair housing, employment, and equitable schooling conditions. Because of this, it is important to explore the experiences of Latinx youth as they make up part of the fastest-growing population (Coakley 2021; Krogstad, Passel, Moslimani, and Noe-Bustamante 2023; Ortega and Grafnetterova 2023). The increase in cost for youth sport participation has affected Latinx youth who find themselves locked out of soccer participation. The cost-access barrier is critical given

that this can also limits their opportunity to play collegiate soccer. Most parents cite putting their child in soccer in hopes that they will receive a college scholarship. Aside from the fact that there are more academic scholarships available than there are sports scholarships, scouts tend to attend large tournaments that are expensive and often times inaccessible for Latinx who cannot afford to travel or cover the tournament fees.

The exponential growth of the youth sports complex and the subsequent growing cost of sport participation impacts all youth but especially those whose families cannot keep up with the costs (Gregory 2017). My study will use a critical analysis of how race, gender, and class intersect and shape the experiences of Latinx youth who play soccer in Las Vegas. This work can inform us of the ways that youth of color and their families navigate and make sense of the changing landscape of youth sports. Additionally, I am interested in examining how Latinx youth in Las Vegas make sense of their soccer participation. More work is needed on finding ways to make sport participation in general—and soccer participation specifically—more affordable for families from lower economic statuses so that youth of all racial, ethnic, gender, and class backgrounds can participate in sports.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

The purpose of this study is to examine how youth sports privatization, family dynamics, coaching, and team organization affect Latinx youth's opportunities and interests in playing competitive soccer. I also examine what soccer means to a local Latinx community to better understand the role that soccer plays in identity-making for Latinx immigrants, if and how they use these soccer spaces to develop kinship ties and build community, and to document how these spaces are developed as counter-spaces. My aim was to understand the barriers that families and youth in Las Vegas face with soccer participation. Many families face challenges in affording the cost of sport participation, particularly families from lower-income backgrounds and those with multiple children who play. Additionally, I wanted to explore the experiences of youth soccer players in Las Vegas. I wanted to understand the goals they had, how they managed parental and soccer expectations, and how they navigated playing in certain teams and made sense of their soccer participation.

To capture these experiences, I decided to observe youth, teams, and families in Las Vegas soccer leagues. This allowed me to gain a better understanding of the different types of leagues that operate in Las Vegas, who plays in these leagues and why, and their experiences in these different leagues. During my time in these field sites, I observed interactions between families, coaches, and youth players and established rapport to speak to them about their experiences. In addition to these observations, I interviewed parents, coaches, and youth [1]. This offered me ground-level meaningful, experiential data that provides a certain kind of in-depth understanding that is different than a more generalized survey approach.

Qualitative Methods

[1] A table with participants' pseudonyms, age, racial/ethnic background, and occupation can be found in Appendix A.

Qualitative research methods use textual data analysis to help us examine how people construct and ascribe meaning to their life experiences (Creswell 2014; Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011). Whereas quantitative data uses numerical data analysis to reach generalizable conclusions, qualitative methods rely on the in-depth description of the themes developed in a particular field site (Creswell 2014; Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011). The methods used in this dissertation study include Critical Ethnography paired with 36 interviews. I employed participant observation to gain insight into the context that participants experienced and their interactions, attitudes, and motivations underlying their behavior. The role of the participant observer is to "participate in the ongoing activities of the research setting and members of the setting know the identity of the researcher" (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011:206). In addition to participant observation, I conducted interviews with participants to understand their experiences as they relate to youth sports in more in-depth.

Critical Ethnography

Critical ethnography (CE) is an inductive approach that uses reflexive analysis of data collected through sustained observation to attempt to objectively report participants' views (O'Reilly, 2009). CE uses ethnographic data collection tools – observation, participant observation, interviews, and textual analysis – to expose hidden agendas, challenge oppressive assumptions, lay bare power relations, and offer critiques about taken-for-granted assumptions underlying persistent inequalities. The purpose of critical ethnography is "to understand social life in order to change the way that those in power marginalize those with less power" (Bailey 1996:25). A CE approach combines ethnographic methods with critical theory and reflexivity to disrupt tacit power relations and address issues of inequality. CE is distinguished from traditional ethnography in that it seeks an outcome from the research outside of academic influence. This

can mean bringing awareness to the structural issues or oppressions that a particular group faces or bring dignity to a marginalized and denigrated population (O'Reilly, 2009). This work engages with CE because this research will not only reveal how inequality is reproduced through youth sports, but can help shift the current youth sports model to one that is more accessible and inclusive.

I chose the methods in this study because they are directed toward the type of data I need to answer my research questions: 1) How has the privatization of soccer affected families and youth — especially Latinx families and youth? 2) What does soccer look like in the larger Las Vegas community? 3) What role does soccer play in the Latinx community? Participant observation allowed me to gain specific insight into the experiences of coaches, youth, and their families as well as their behaviors, and motives for soccer participation (Hesse-Biber 2011). My role as participant-as-observer was to immerse myself in the day-to-day activities by attending soccer practice, try-outs, games, and tournaments to see and experience the interactions between coaches, players, and families. These interactions gave me a direct understanding of how youth are making sense of their soccer participation and how power dynamics play out between players, coaches, and parents. It also helped me understand the place that soccer occupies in their lives and community. By using different methods — interviews, observation, and content analysis— I was able to triangulate my data collection efforts to produce multiple data points each research question and find convergences (and divergences) to enhance the validity in my findings (Hesse-Biber 2011).

Interviewing

The purpose of interviews is to understand participants' points of view and to draw out participants' opinions on the topic (Creswell 2014; Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011). In-depth

interviews draw out participants' points of view about their experiences, aspirations, obstacles, and opportunities (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011). I used in-depth, semi-structured interviews to center the voices of those who have been most affected by the growing costs and other barriers to soccer participation. Interviews consisted of open-ended questions from semi-structured interview guides that I used to carry out a conversation with participants. My questions focused on the experiences of coaches, youth soccer players, and their families and while some questions were similar, responses to these questions were specific to participant's roles and experiences. (See Appendix B for the full interview guide).

Questions for coaches focused on their experiences as coaches—when and why they began coaching, what they believe youth get out of playing soccer, and what barriers they perceive for players and their families. Questions for youth focused on why they play soccer, the role soccer plays in their life, how they make sense of their soccer participation, and what barriers they perceive impede their ability to play competitively. Questions for parents/families focused on why they want their children to play soccer, how they manage their child's soccer participation, and what barriers they perceive are associated with their child's soccer participation. I specifically chose to interview coaches, parents of youth, and youth soccer players to understand how families in Las Vegas whose children play soccer in Las Vegas manage their soccer participation, especially as they negotiate any limited resources and other challenges. My goal is to understand how families navigate the challenges associated with youth soccer participation.

I also conducted a focused content analysis of Las Vegas soccer club websites to contextualize and compare the experiences I detailed in this study. This content analysis systematically examined mission statements and other similar written material that the soccer

club(s) provided on their websites. This analysis described the mission statements on the soccer club's websites, any team promotional materials, and any internal messaging. I aimed to examine the team's mission statement to look at the club's intent and compare it to the data I collected from my observations on the field and during my conversations with participants. This helped me contextualize my observations.

My inductive process exposed themes and concepts in the data, which I organized through memoing, a process that helps researchers maintain reflexivity and awareness of how their positionality influences their observations. These memos helped produce ideas for coding and assisted me in the process of thinking through what something means (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011). I did an initial coding run-through after transcribing each interview and used literal codes (words that appeared in the transcribed text and are typically descriptive in nature) (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011). Once I did this for a few interviews, I created a tally based on the descriptive codes looking for any preliminary themes and collapsed categories if needed. After the first round of initial coding, I moved on to more focused coding where I refined and built concepts after examining the data and the emerging themes. I then created working definitions for any concepts that were prominent and continued this iterative process until I reached data saturation and no longer found new information (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011).

I used a quasi-grounded theory approach to collect, refine, and categorize coding during the analytical process (Cresswell 2014). Grounded theory requires that the researcher engages with the data to arrive at a theory that is produced from or grounded in the data (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011). I used an inductive approach that generates theory from the data collected while accounting for social inequities. The inductive process was systematic to reveal patterns in the

data. However, the interpretation process draws upon pre-established ideas that drive my research questions.

My main pre-established ideas that drove my research questions included my previous family experience, particularly how my parents struggled and navigated the costs of club soccer participation for my younger brother. This experience informed me about the importance of accessibility and affordability of youth soccer. In my previous research, I explored the disciplinary experiences of Latinx youth in secondary school and found that their engagement in soccer was a much stronger determinant in managing behavior than punitive action. Based on these experiences, I wanted to continue to examine what soccer means to and looks like for Latinx families/communities, as well as the challenges and incentives to participation. Although I knew about some of these dynamics (like the rising costs of sport participation and how soccer is used in the Latinx community as a site for creating social ties and networks), the field is limited and my goal was to fill this gap with a ground-level ethnographic accounting of these experiences (The Aspen Institute; Trouille 2021).

My personal values rooted in social justice, equity, and social change also guided this work. As a first-generation Chicana from an immigrant-parent household, I faced challenges in pursuit of my education and witnessed the limited opportunities of my parents and other Latinx families. These experiences have led me to tackle research questions about the social inequality that the Latinx and other marginalized communities face in their day-to-day lives. As researchers with certain values and predispositions, we all bring biases to our research, but I believe that my experience should not be viewed as a limitation but instead as an insight to my research. This is why it is important to practice critical reflexivity, “an understanding of the diversity and

complexity of one's own social location" (Hesse Biber and Leavy 2011:39) by paying attention to our positionality and how our insider/outsider status can shape the research process.

My position as someone who identifies as Latina may allow my participants to feel comfortable in a way they may not be with someone who they may consider an outsider. At the same time I can also be considered an outsider as someone who is a researcher. While some scholars argue that non-marginalized (outsider) researchers are better equipped because they are objective, insiders as researchers still hold a unique position of privilege, and if not careful can also reproduce and maintain oppressive structures regardless of the social location that people occupy (Hesse-Biber 2011). As a critical ethnographer, I am engaging with the data collection and analysis process with a set of established ideas about the pervasiveness of various forms of oppression. According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011), "critical theorists are wary of notions of absolute truth and base their concerns on the historical inequities produced by this rigid view of knowledge espoused in positivism" (20). Thus, my CFE theoretical approach aims to account for these existing and historical inequities.

Positionality

Patricia Hill Collins (1986) argues that Black women academics have used the marginality of their outsider status to make sense of their work as the standpoint of their social standing provides them with a unique analysis of the intersections of race, class, and gender. She cites bell hooks' (1984:vii) observation that "we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside and in from the inside out." By this, hooks means that Black women take on both insider and outsider roles as researchers because of their positionality. My position as someone who identifies as Latina may allow my participants to feel comfortable in a way they may not be with someone who is an outsider.

I grew up in a similar way as many of my participants and this experience allowed me to bring a certain social capital to the field site and the interactions I had with many during this process. When I began this research, I realized that being able to experience all of my prior experiences made me privy to the barriers that Latinx families and their children face when trying to participate in club teams and how they navigate sport participation. This influenced not just the research but my approach to it. However, this insider status offered me the opportunity to be able to access and connect with participants in a way I may not have been able to do so if perhaps I did not share the same ethnic background and language. As mentioned previously, researchers from marginalized backgrounds can be considered outsiders in spaces like academia as these institutions often reinforce and validate experiences that relate to whiteness while excluding experiences that do not align with whiteness (Collins 1986). Yet as a researchers we still hold a certain privilege (Flores 2016). Flores (2016) describes the unique positionality of Latina researchers like me as one that holds a "hidden privilege," since it this privilege is not readily visible unless it is disclosed by the individual (191). Scholars have referred to this unique position of being an outsider in the academy but an insider in certain spaces as having an insider/outsider status (Flores 2016; Zinn 1979: Merton 1972). This is important in understanding how researcher positionality impacts the data we collect due to how we are perceived by participants.

My positionality as a Latina who came to this work with a community-oriented, soccer-related experience has shaped my research process. I received access to my field site pretty easily and although some people may have had some early skepticism about my research intentions, this did not impede my study. I was able to communicate with people in the community by speaking Spanish and by having a familiarity of soccer. Although not everyone who identifies as

Latinx speaks Spanish for various reasons, to some this can be a "marker" of intragroup ethnic boundaries (Jimenez 2008). For some of my participants, the sense of community and family were important, and this showed when they took an interest in me and my background.

Many of my informants asked questions about my heritage and how I came to do this work. During a conversation with Sonia, one of the parents I interviewed, I shared with her that my parents were from Mexico, she told me she was from Guatemala and her husband from El Salvador. She then asked what I was studying and when I told her I was working on my doctoral degree in Sociology, she began to tear up and expressed her pride and joy at me accomplishing this as a first-generation Latina. This was a common experience I shared with some of my Latinx participants, Diego responded in a similar way after he asked me the same question. "Güey. No mames, que bien pues, qué bonito lo que me estás diciendo, me esta llenando de felicidad." ("Dude. *No mames*. How beautiful what you're telling me, it's even filling me with happiness"). *No mames* is a crude Spanish slang term used to express disbelief but is used jokingly among friends or family. There were multiple times during this study that I felt a deep sense of community with my participants, probably because I felt a sense of connection due to our shared ethnic identity.

Preliminary Work Leading to This Study

My previous work with Latinx youth in California who were suspended/expelled from secondary school initially propelled my interest to examine youth soccer players in Las Vegas. Eight out of ten of these youth played soccer, some of whom played in the middle school soccer team that my brother and I coached. From participants' perceptions, punitive disciplinary action was not effective in deterring unwanted behavior but their engagement in soccer did influence their behavior in positive ways. I later found myself eating at a Cardena's supermarket one night

during my first year as a doctoral student in Las Vegas. I saw a mother with two children eating dinner as well. The older boy was about 10 years old and must have just gotten out of soccer practice since he was wearing a uniform and long socks.

This triggered a memory from 2013 when I traveled to Las Vegas with my family for my brother's club soccer tournament. Since most of the families we traveled with were low-income (ours included), we would eat at this same Cardena's market in Las Vegas because it offered great deals on family-sized food. I thought about how these families pooled their resources and shared spaces to be able to afford an experience that could expose their children to the opportunities offered through these tournaments. I then decided to further examine youth soccer in Las Vegas and the role that soccer plays in the Latinx community, specifically. Having personally experienced this helps me empathize and understand the barriers that many Latinx families and their children face when accessing sport participation.

In this ethnographic study of children and youth who play soccer in Las Vegas, I pursued a holistic mapping of their experiences with organized sports, coaches, trainers, and other sport administrators. The institutional review board at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas approved my study in March of 2019. I then began collecting observations in April of 2019. The primary field site included soccer fields at either parks, schools, or sports complexes, and other relevant settings. My initial field site was a local youth soccer club in Las Vegas with various boys' and girls' teams that served children ages 5-18. I gained access to this field-side after reaching out to a colleague who has coached youth soccer in California for many years. I asked if he knew anyone who coached soccer in Las Vegas, and he introduced me to a coach from this soccer club.

After meeting with Gio and talking to him about my research interest, he agreed to let me observe his practices, games, and even a couple of tournaments. These observations began after obtained IRB approval in the spring of 2019 and briefly stopped a year later after Gio quit. I struggled to gain access to another field site but began recruiting for interviews on social media in the meantime. During my interviews, I asked another parent and coach, Mario, if he would be willing to let me observe his teams. He agreed and I began to attend games and practices. As a coach, Mario was vocal about seeking more access and resources for Latinx youth who play soccer in Las Vegas. Mario described access to resources such as having safe playing fields and access to lighting in parks, support for Latina youth who play soccer, and community outreach for parents who wish to be informed on the opportunities and processes for Latinx youth to play college soccer.

Ethnographic Observations

For the first few months, I focused solely on observing and held off on conducting interviews until I had built rapport with the youth, coaches, and families. Coaches introduced me to their teams and told them that I was a UNLV student who would be observing them. I began to attend practices and would sit or stand by simply observing and would only take brief notes in my car once I left. Later in the evening I would expand these notes more at home. After spending some time at the site, I would write down keywords during a game or practice that would serve to jog my memory later when I would expand my field notes.

I focused particularly on describing the field and the people around me, especially the interactions between coaches and their teams. Other times I recorded some of my thoughts or observations on my phone and would later type them up when I would get home. When I would arrive home, I would sit down and type up any recordings or expand in more detail any of the

notes I took at my field site or in my car. I had two types of running documents, one was a record of my field site observations which I time stamped based on the date, time, and location and the other was an ongoing analytical memo where I focused on developing any preliminary themes that I would observe. When I was ready to begin analyzing my data, I printed my notes and memos out, coded them using descriptive words, and made connections between the field notes and interview data.

Interviews

In addition to observations with youth, parents, or guardians, as well as coaches, trainers, and sports administrators, I conducted a total of 36 interviews — 12 with coaches, 15 with parents/guardians, and 9 with youth. The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two hours. Interviews were semi-structured, and digitally recorded after receiving participants' consent. Interviews consisted of informal, open-ended questions (see Appendix B) and were carried out conversationally. I asked questions about participants' experience with soccer – as coaches, players, or parents/guardians. Interviews with coaches focused mostly on their experience coaching youth soccer in Las Vegas though they also spoke about their own experiences playing soccer or their experiences as parents. When interviewing parents, I focused on why they decided to put their children in soccer and what they hoped to get out of it. When I began interviewing youth, I focused on asking what soccer means to them to understand how their reasoning aligns or differs from what I heard coaches or parents say.

While I encouraged parents to accompany their kids to the interview site, for confidentiality purposes they were not present during the interview. I wanted to make sure youth felt comfortable enough to share their experiences with me without any concern over what their parents would think. Their responses may have been different if they felt they would potentially

disappoint their parents with any of their responses. All participants were asked to provide assent or consent (both verbal and written), and I wanted to make sure that anyone who participated in an interview would feel comfortable about being open with me. I was as transparent as possible when discussing the purpose of my research when approaching potential participants.

After I fully informed study participants, I explained the purpose of consent in the research process and reminded them that their participation was voluntary. Youth were asked to provide a signed parental consent form before they could participate in the study. After obtaining parental consent, youth were given an assent form to read and sign. Once I received the consent from parents and assent from youth, I scheduled the interviews. One method of safety to account for when interviewing youth was to conduct interviews in a public yet safe setting (YMCA). I received approval from the YMCA to conduct interviews there back in 2019 prior to submitting my IRB materials.

Interviewing youth comes with a particular set of challenges. Youth are a vulnerable population to study and as a result, research that directly involves them requires additional steps, but it was important for me to include youth's firsthand experiences in this study. Another challenge I faced was that I found that talking to the youth was more difficult for me during this study. Whereas in my previous study where I interviewed youth I had known for years, I did not know these youth and the lack of rapport sometimes made it difficult for me to talk to them. Youth were often more shy and reserved than the adults I interviewed and their answers tended to be much shorter. I found myself having to probe more than usual, having to ask follow-up questions, or asking them to tell me more about a topic they mentioned.

Yet there were also moments where some youth felt comfortable enough to share things they had not shared with others. One of the girls I interviewed thanked me for asking about and

hearing her experience and shared that it was not common for others to ask about her experience. She also felt that she could be more honest about her experience playing club soccer with me, possibly because she felt that she could not tell her mother who has invested time and money into her soccer participation. For the most part, parents were interested in having their children participate and willing to consent to their confidential participation. There was only one parent who initially agreed to have their child participate but later withdrew. The parent did not have any concerns about the study itself but felt that his son was juggling a lot with school, soccer, and private training sessions and he did not want to put more on his plate, which spoke to some of the burnout experiences of youth who participate in sports.

Sample and Recruitment

I used a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. I selected participants because they: 1) were soccer coaches/administrators/trainers in Las Vegas, 2.) are youth who play soccer in Las Vegas, 3). are parents or guardians of youth who play soccer in Las Vegas. To gain access, I tapped into my community networks and reached out to other people who work with youth. I also shared a script on a Facebook Las Vegas soccer group that stated the purpose of the research and received various inquiries. I met with coaches and discussed my research interests to examine young players' experiences. These coaches agreed to participate in an interview and to introduce me to other potential participants including other coaches, youth, and parents. A couple of coaches introduced me to parents during practices and explained to them the significance of my research. This helped some parents feel more at ease when I asked if they would be willing to participate in an interview.

I also used a snowball sampling technique to recruit other participants through those who already participated in the study. This recruitment approach was effective in getting me access to

a diverse set of participants. I was able to interview parents of different economic and racial/ethnic backgrounds. One of the limitations I did face in taking this approach was the inconsistency that came with participants who would initially agree to participate but would not respond when I would follow up. I believe this could be attributed to any lack of rapport or being perceived as an outsider, making it easier to not respond or no longer being interested in participating in the study.

Data Analysis

I transcribed and coded the first 13 interviews to look for common themes. This allowed me to go back to the literature and re-examine these themes in future interviews. I also revised the interview protocol to include the concepts that arose in those first interviews. Once I completed the rest of the interviews, I moved into coding them as well as the field notes. I started to attend practices and games where I took more detailed notes that I would later code using keywords that summarized and captured an experience or interaction. I continuously expanded my field notes using analytical memos after each observation. Field notes consisted of descriptive words used to describe verbal or non-verbal cues that I later used to write analytical memos (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011).

Some of the prominent themes I encountered centered on access to the sport and opportunities related to sport participation. Participants across the board (coaches, parents, and youth) indicated the cost of sport participation and how this limited opportunities for youth. Another theme I came across was the theme of social mobility, specifically the goals around playing college soccer and/or a career in professional soccer. This indicates that soccer is perceived as a vehicle for upward social mobility because of the rising costs of higher education, but the effects of the privatization of youth sports are palpable among Las Vegas families and

youth. These themes are related to my research questions that focus on how the privatization of youth sports has affected families and youth in Las Vegas — especially Latinx families and youth.

I developed three analytic chapters based on these themes. The first analytic chapter focuses on how Las Vegas families and youth navigate the rising costs of soccer participation and ground their experiences in the aftermath of youth sports privatization and neoliberal policies. The second chapter deals with how families and youth view competition, opportunity, and mobility in Las Vegas soccer leagues. I interrogate what participants mean when they cite the importance of playing "competitive soccer," their reasons for pursuing certain soccer teams over others, and their perceptions of social mobility. The third chapter examines the role that soccer plays in the Latinx community, specifically looking at why they participate in soccer (whether or not it is viewed as a vehicle for social mobility), their experiences participating in soccer, and how they may use soccer as a counterspace. I argue throughout these chapters that neoliberal policies that lead to privatization have had far-reaching effects not just in the rising costs of youth sports participation and its subsequent barriers to sport accessibility, but also in the experiences of Latinx immigrants. The following chapter will detail the privatization of youth sports and its effects on Las Vegas youths and families.

CHAPTER 4: "SELLING A DREAM": PRIVATIZATION, YOUTH SPORTS, AND THE COSTS OF PARTICIPATION

As I walked toward the soccer field I planned to observe that night, I saw a teenage boy who had just parked his car and was walking toward the same field I was. It was raining despite it being July in Las Vegas, adding layers of humidity that usually does not exist in the scorching Valley. I noticed that he was wearing a soccer uniform and long socks, so I figured he was heading towards the tryouts I was going to be observing too. I decided to approach him since I was hoping to interview youth soccer players and was looking for participants. I quickly looked for my informed consent forms, walked up, and said, "Hi!" and introduced myself before explaining a little bit about my study. The boy seemed a bit apprehensive at first and this reminded me that I would also probably be apprehensive of strangers approaching me when I am out.

I asked him his name and age. He said his name was Ivan, and he was 18 years old. Ivan seemed interested in the study and was willing to participate in an interview, though he said that he had limited time since he worked a lot and played soccer. I assured him his participation was voluntary and agreed to work around his schedule if he was interested. I handed him a consent form before he ran off to the field. A week later, I got the opportunity to interview Ivan, who like other youth I spoke to, was trying to play club soccer hoping it could lead him to achieve his dream of playing college soccer.

During the interview, Ivan spoke about some of his challenges as a working-class youth who wanted to play club soccer. At the time, Ivan had just started playing for a club team founded by the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department. LVMPD created this club, which had both a boys' team and a girls' team, as a form of community outreach. The club was relatively new, only in its second season at the time of the interview. The club was free, so youth

who made the team did not have to pay fees to play. The clubs' website explains that: "There is no monetary cost to the players or their families due to multiple sponsors who have provided donations through the LVMPD Foundation. However, the coaches expect the players to show discipline, leadership, and determination on and off the field."

Although the club was free, Ivan still worked a lot and struggled to manage balancing his job and playing soccer. Ivan believed that playing soccer was a way for him to achieve social mobility and to show his mom he did something. But Ivan talked about his struggles in learning to advocate for himself and trying to find the right teams to play in. He mentioned wanting to play for a bigger club to increase his opportunities, but these were too expensive for him or his mother to afford. Unfortunately, his dream of playing college soccer seemed slim. He was 18 years old, and most youth are on scouts' radars by the age of 16 and youth are now typically recruited from club teams, not high school teams. The privatization of youth sports has created many obstacles for Ivan and other youth like him who want to play in competitive clubs.

In this chapter, I outline the shift of organized youth sports from a publicly funded model to a privatized model. I will also discuss the effects of privatization on youth sports programs and their focus on sport-specific skills and competition. I detail the growing monetary costs of youth soccer participation and how this has affected families in Las Vegas. I also discuss the "costs" in terms of the downsides that follow from having a youth sports model that is focused on adult-centered values. Additionally, I demonstrate how private soccer clubs may not always lead to the desired success most parents and youth covet despite their intense marketing claims.

Youth Sports Economy

The U.S. youth sports economy has grown by 55% since 2010, making it a $15.3 billion industry (Gregory 2017) and it is projected to grow to $69.4 billion by 2030 (Gough 2024). This

growth does not reflect equal sports participation for all children. The Aspen Institute's State of Play data report shows that children from lower incomes face more barriers to participating in sports than children from wealthier families. "In 2018, 22% of kids ages 6 to 12 in households with incomes under $25,000 played sports regularly, compared to 43% of kids from homes making $100,000 or more" (The Aspen Institute). Families whose children do not participate in sports cited cost as the main barrier to participation (Women's Sports Foundation). Increased costs have greatly affected all youth as elite travel teams have come to replace community leagues and are significantly more expensive (Gregory 2017).

In addition to the costs of playing in a club team, travel teams must also consider playing in competitive and expensive tournaments aside from the costs of participating in the soccer leagues. Tournaments are organized events where various soccer teams play and compete against each other. These tournaments are made up of multiple matches played over several days and winning teams move forward until there is a declared, final champion. These tournaments are often organized by sports leagues as well as sport-governing bodies like the Amateur Athletic Union. There are regional, national, and even international tournaments where players can showcase their skills to college recruiters who attend these tournaments. Recruiters or scouts typically identify potential players they wish to recruit during these tournaments so attending these is crucial for players who have the desire to play college soccer (Iyengar 2023).

These tournaments have also been used as a marketing scheme whereby winning teams can increase their visibility as successful training grounds, and parents often respond by paying whatever price for their child to play on these teams (Coakley 2021). These tournaments are costly and can create barriers to participation for families that cannot keep up with growing participation costs, especially if they have more than one child involved in sports. The expenses

associated with tournaments can significantly limit a local team's ability to compete with other more elite teams. Without these competitions to enhance a team's skills and potentially expose players to scouts and coaches, their opportunities are limited.

Parents I spoke with knew that many club teams have an agenda. They often described club teams operating as businesses that were selling them a dream. This dream was a shot at upward social mobility through their child's soccer participation, which could lead to the opportunity to play collegiate soccer, or even at a professional level. The messages about opportunity as a part of social mobility often implies a meritorious system in which those who work hard enough and demonstrate talent will have the opportunity to play on the club team, find a spot on a college team, and ultimately experience upward social mobility. Yet these clubs that operate as businesses often gatekeep opportunities for those who can pay to "get in." Opportunity in this sense is an affordance cost – those who can afford to access their opportunity to play and compete do so first then get the chance to show their skills or "merit" on the field. The myth of modern meritocracy is that one must be part of a private club for even a shot at a new, commercialized American Dream.

So, the reality is that youth soccer opportunity is commodified. Families purchase access to a space where their child can then demonstrate merit that might turn into an opportunity for upward mobility. This commodified American Dream tells us that for some parents, soccer is the "dream" and a signifier of mobility and success. Clearly, there are flaws in this so-called meritocratic system. If there was access to free or affordable college with good overall life chances evenly distributed among all people in society, then there would not be a need to rely on buying one's child's way into club soccer in a search for upward social mobility.

Some parents bought into the dream. As I will discuss in chapter five, some parents justify paying high costs for club soccer because they view it as an investment. Others whom I will center in this chapter made a distinction between the services and possibilities offered by these clubs and the likelihood of their child actually playing in college or professionally. These parents wanted their children to participate in soccer but recognized that the promises clubs made were unrealistic and the possibilities of "success" were not worth the high costs of participation. Some parents found ways to avoid paying high costs for clubs, while others chose to focus on smaller, independent clubs that were not as expensive.

Privatization of Youth Sports

The privatization of youth was no accident, but instead an outcome of many decisions driven by a congressional-industrial complex to mold youth sports into a capitalist-elitist framework (Coakley 2021). Organized youth sports were created by wealthy industrialists with the intention to "build children's character" and instill values of cooperation, hard work, and respect for authority (Coakley 2021). These values were particularly geared towards working-class boys whereas proponents of organized youth sports believed that sports would "toughen up" middle and upper-class boys and influence them to become more competitive. By promoting competition, proponents of the privatization of youth sports sought to reduce the financial burden on public resources (Spaaij 2011). This meant that the government was no longer responsible for investing in public programs (like sports or education) instead, these items were commodified and sold to those with the means to afford them. (Spaaij 2011).

As Coakley notes (2021), "formally organized sports could not be developed without economic resources. Those who control money and economic power use them to organize and sponsor sports" (297). At the beginning of the twentieth century, educators and wealthy

industrialists created a winner-take-all structure to organize children's sports which had political implications that changed the landscape of youth sports in the U.S. (Farrey 2008). Congress passed the Amateur Sports Act in 1978, which gave the U.S. Olympic Committee control of grassroots sports in the country and reshaped the role of the Amateur Athletic Union. Before Congress passed the Amateur Sports Act in 1978, the Amateur Athletic Union's role was to select Olympic teams. After the act, the AAU reoriented its role to include overseeing youth national championships to rake in large tournament fees and currently oversees highly profitable youth National Championship events in 35 sports, including soccer (Farrey 2008).

The AAU's shift instead led to the professionalization of youth sports, which created a narrow pipeline of youth sport participation and set the tone for the increased costs and privatization of youth sports. The reasoning behind reshaping the AAU's role was that by building up amateur youth sports as a broad system with a large pool of child athletes, the U.S. would not only tackle concerns around physical fitness but would also create a large pool of youth athletes to select from when picking out Olympic teams (Farrey 2008). This process would inevitably allow for mass participation and a meritocratic system of youth sports where the best of the best youth athletes would be selected to compete. Republican Senator Ted Stevens from Alaska argued that this bill would make it "easier for all Americans to find programs and facilities through which they can further their athletic interests" (Farrey 2008: 188) because the bill intended to "mesh" club systems with school sports programs (Farrey 2008:189). However, the proposed subsidies to fund the initiative were eliminated. (Farrey 2008). In addition to the reshaping of the AAU, Republican-backed government policies also contributed to the privatization and commercialization of youth sports.

The elimination and reduction of public subsidies for programs outlined in the Amateur Sports Act reflected the larger economic policies at the time. Republican politicians pushed neoliberal economic policies in the 1980s that contributed to narrowing opportunities for marginalized groups even more (Farrey 2008; Hartmann and Manning 2016; Sagas and Cunningham 2014). Neoliberalism is "an ideology emphasizing free markets and economic deregulation, privatization and the reduction of government power, the pursuit of self-interest, and competition to boost efficiency and stimulate progress" (Coakley 2021:86). Neoliberal policies fully materialized during the Reagan administration in 1981, and this free-market approach extended to the privatization of public services that have exacerbated economic and social inequality (Klees 2008; Vandermeerschen et al. 2016; Rasmus 2020). These policies involved an increase in war-defense spending, big tax cuts, and the slashing of social welfare programs (Rasmus 2020).

These anti-welfarism policies were "racial reactions" by Republicans whose rationale behind these policies was that federal spending amounted to state handouts for racial minorities (Edsall and Edsall 1992). Negative racial sentiments (explicit negative feelings toward racial/ethnic minority groups) were at the core of these policies as Republicans convinced voters that White worker's taxes were being used to support lazy racial minorities even though the majority of the recipients of welfare were White (Omi and Winant 2014; Baranauskas 2024). Thus, republicans and sport organizations supported the privatization of youth sports along with other previously publicly funded programs (Farrey 2008). The legacies of these policies and sentiments have disproportionally affected youth from low-income backgrounds—particularly youth of color (Coakley 2021). These changes set the stage for a shift from a sports-for-all model that emphasized publicly funded sport access for kids to a privatized, winner-take-all model that

emphasizes competition, winning, and elite athletics for those who could afford them (Farrey 2008; Thompson 2018).

The new youth sports model created an adult-organized youth sports system modeled after professional sports where rules, competition, and winning are the main focus. The shift to a neoliberal youth sports model consequently led to an array of issues like a narrowed sports participation pipeline with an increased focus on the specialization of skills, a big business approach to youth sports, and an over-emphasis on winning (Farrey 2008). Coakley (2021) explains that sports programs used a marketing approach as a response to privatized youth programs, claiming that their "method of producing skilled athletes would create the excellence that parents expected" and paid for (89).

Like other youth sports in general, soccer's privatization has increased the cost of participation and affected all families across Las Vegas who seek to play in more competitive teams, but this is especially the case for Latinx working-class families. Oscar — a parent of three who himself played college soccer —describes this new youth sports model as a "bureaucracy" with a clear hierarchy of authority, procedural rules, and a paid staff. Bureaucracies, ostensibly, create efficiency and clarity in role, but as they grow, they also increases costs for those who pay to support it.

> You got to deal with the bureaucracy of coaching and the coach. The whole club language and the whole, "They need this, they need that. He could do this." This is a business. It's a huge business. They're salesman and they are great at marketing, trying to sell you the dream, right? "I can make your kid the best player, I can teach them this. We're connected with professional clubs in Mexico," all of his BS, right? "Oh we're connected with this university in California, Utah, I'm connected with some people in Colorado," so they sell you the dream. Shame on me if I bet on a coach the future my children, right? So, my point is that I am going to drive that bus. I have that background. Now, here's where it gets sad. How many people have that background? They don't. So they fall into that [trap].

Oscar played soccer at a junior college in Upstate New York and later transferred to a four-year university where he continued to play. During my conversation with him, he mentioned how he knew his oldest son was not prepared to play Division One soccer despite the claims clubs made. Oscar felt that his oldest son may not be ready to make the sacrifices necessary to be a student-athlete. He argued that these clubs are "selling a dream" to parents by claiming that they have connections to schools that they can help their kids attend on scholarship. Oscar also pointed out how coaches are just one part of the business model of club teams. These bureaucratic clubs hire program managers, coaches, and trainers creating "career tracks" for young people interested in a career in sports. Whereas coaching used to be a mostly volunteer-based position, it is now a job. Leonardo who coached soccer in Las Vegas for over 43 years also criticized the bureaucratic aspects in club soccer:

> It's expensive [to play], you look at the cost now, compared to when I first started. You never got you know, maybe at the end of the year, parents would buy you dinner, you know, buy you a gift. Now, every coach wants to get paid. You have some of these coaches that are coaching five teams and you can't do that effectively. So you're seeing them do this because they're trying to make a living off of something that should be, you know, fun.

Leonardo attributes part of the growing costs of soccer participation to coaching fees. While none of the coaches I interviewed agreed to disclose how much they made coaching soccer, a few did make a living out of it as that was their only job. Others worked full-time jobs apart from coaching. For instance, Mario worked as a plumber and electrician and coached two teams in the Latinx side of town where his wife helped him as she was in charge of distributing the players' uniforms. Mario talked about having to reinvest the majority of his coaching fees back into his team to make it more affordable for parents who could not afford to have their children play. Whereas some parents are likely able to afford the costs of participation in club teams, more

specifically the coaching fees, parents like those in Mario's team who earn less are less likely to afford the growing costs of club soccer participation.

Oscar and Leonardo also described youth sports in Las Vegas as businesses that emphasize winning at the expense of community teams. Oscar claimed that certain clubs control some fields and that these clubs go to smaller teams to poach players and convince parents of these talented players to switch teams. They propose not having to pay any fees to bring the player over to their team in order to win and get rid of any other competition. By recruiting talented players at no cost, these clubs may miss out on coaching fees from a few players but will more than make up for it by creating a winning team that they can continue to market as successful. These clubs know that winning records are a great way to recruit players whose parents are willing to pay whatever price to get their children a spot on the "best teams" (Coakley 2021). Oscar further described these clubs as a monopoly:

> The big clubs, they got what is called a monopoly. They control the fields, they control everything. And what happens is from time to time, you'll find a small club, a good coach who gets a bunch of little kids and puts them all together and when they beat the big clubs and everything. Then the first thing that the big clubs will do is grab the main parents and main kids and they offer them everything, "We're gonna offer you no fees, you don't have to pay anything. No uniform just come to our club" and what they do is they destroy the little clubs.

Matt was able to bypass paying any costs related to his granddaughter's soccer participation. Matt, a 59-year-old Sicilian-American, worked as a rideshare driver at the time I interviewed him. He said being a rideshare driver allowed him the flexibility to support his granddaughter's soccer commitments. Matt called himself "working-class" and he stated that he wanted his granddaughter, Lauren, to play in an elite club because he believed it would help her achieve her dream of playing Division I soccer. Lauren was a talented 14-year-old goalkeeper who caught the eye of several clubs in Las Vegas as well as clubs in California. She played in a California

team while still living in Las Vegas at one point, traveling weekly for practices and games and staying in hotels with her grandfather. Matt eventually negotiated her spot in an elite Las Vegas team after another club in California attempted to recruit her:

> Back in November, I got four phone calls from So Cal [Southern California] clubs saying you know, "We really want to bring Lauren over, you don't have to pay any fees," stuff like that. So I just went back to her coach and said "Look these clubs want her, I'm driving four hours and they're telling me I don't have to pay to play or pay for uniforms." He said he was gonna take it up at the club and I was on my way home from Thousand Oaks, California when the club owner called and said, "As long as Lauren is a part of our club, you never have to pay a dime."

Matt was able to leverage the fact that his granddaughter was wanted by another team in California to not pay fees in the club in Las Vegas. According to him, this guaranteed Lauren's spot on the team for free (uniforms included) as long as she played for them. This lessened both a financial and time burden for Matt who no longer had to pay for his granddaughter's soccer participation and no longer had to drive out to California for her practices and games. Alan, the 24-year-old youth[2] I interviewed also referenced this informal, merit-based voucher. During one of our conversations, he explained:

> My friend's kid, she's 10. And the club pays for everything for her. Because she's so good at what she does. And she's been there for so long that he cannot afford to pay the fees or tournaments. But they help him out just because of the talent that she has. And it's really believed that she's gonna be a success story for the club. So, she'll make it to college soccer, and then they can use it on their website. And then they can bring more players in because now look, you know, they show you played for this club and she's in college now playing in New Mexico or Texas, or whatever. So, they can use those success stories to drive more people in.

[2] When Alán first reached out to me after seeing a Facebook post about the study, I asked if he was over 18 to determine if he would a parental consent form or not. He stated he was over 18 and because he was not a coach or a parent, but played soccer in Las Vegas I interviewed him using the youth interview schedule to understand his experiences playing soccer as a youth in Las Vegas. Once the interview started, I found out he was 24 years old. I decided to keep his interview and data shared based on his youth experience.

Alán shared that his friend was able to get the club team his daughter played for to pay for any expenses related to her playing in the club. The family could no longer afford to play but the club wanted to keep her in their organization. By letting the players play at no cost, the club not only gets to keep their talents while they play for them but can also use their success stories as Alán mentioned to recruit more players who will pay to play in the club. In turn, this grants legitimacy to clubs, making them desirable to other parents who will want to pay for their child to play for them. Clubs seem to have some discretion over who they allow to play for free. Carlos, a university coach who created his own goalkeeper training academy, confirmed that this happened:

> A lot of low-income families have no idea about that or don't even bother because "well I can't afford it," or "I don't want to pay $100 a month," but they can qualify for a scholarship, or they can even talk to the coach themselves and say, "Look my kid's the best kid here." You can pull that card.

It is great that Lauren and other kids like her can play for free, but not all youth from working-class families get this opportunity. While some clubs do have scholarships or other forms of financial assistance that can help pay the club fees for families that qualify, traveling expenses that are often part of the travel club experience are not covered and can amount to thousands of dollars per year. Fees and travel costs continue to price out lower-income families (Gregory 2017) and those that have more than one child participating in these clubs can experience an increased financial strain. The privatization of youth sports changed the youth sports landscape and has almost eliminated affordable sports programs. The cost to participate in youth sports today is high despite there being a slim chance of it paying off in the form of an athletic scholarship — let alone making it to the big leagues.

Cost

The privatization of youth sports not only changed the ways youth sports were organized but also changed how sports were funded. Whereas youth sports were previously funded by publicly funded government programs, the defunding of parks and recreation meant that parents were now responsible for paying playing fees for their children's sports participation (Farrey 2008; Coakley 2021). This shift from public to private sports also meant that elite private teams were seen as a "scare resource," which parents were willing to pay for (Farrey 2008; Coakley 2021). The cost for participating in these elite, club teams includes registration fees, coaching fees, uniform fees, specialized training, and travel expenses that can all amount to thousands of dollars per year. These extensive costs can limit sports participation for youth whose families cannot afford the expenses.

Cost is one of the first challenges listed on the Project Play website regarding Youth Sports Facts (The Aspen Institute). According to the Commission on the State of U.S. Olympics and Paralympics, 57% of U.S. adults who make $40,000 or less have struggled to pay for fees, sporting equipment, uniforms, travel, and other costs related to sports compared to 38% of U.S. adults who make $80,000 or more (The Aspen Institute). "For some sports, average annual costs are over $1,000 – and can balloon well into five figures. Of the four major sports, parents spend more money on soccer ($1,188 average cost) and basketball ($1,002) than baseball ($714) and tackle football ($581). Soccer, basketball, and baseball all have pay-to-play models that impact access to sports" (The Aspen Institute). The price of playing organized soccer—which can cost an average of $1,395 a year—has made it difficult for almost any child to play. It has made it especially difficult for the children of Latinx families and other marginalized communities to play competitive soccer. This creates inequitable experiences for youth because of the inaccessibility of affordable sports participation. This means that children of parents who can

afford their children's sports participation and specialization will have varying experiences than children of parents who struggle to afford their children's sports participation.

Ben was one of the few parents I interviewed who had the financial means and work-life balance to pursue his child's soccer participation in private clubs. His son played on a club team and participated in the Olympic Development Program. Ben is an architect and adjunct professor at a university who also worked remotely and was open about how his work gave him the resources of time and money to support his son's soccer participation. He was not only able to pay the travel fees, but was also able to accompany his son to most of his travel games, which were sometimes out of state or out of the country. However, Ben was aware that this was not a common experience for most people. He talked about how he knew not all parents — especially those in the Latinx community and those with limited incomes — had the same opportunities and resources as his family and made their experiences drastically different:

> I work remotely on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday and then spend the weekend you know, in a hotel with three meals a day. So, I mean, I think a lot of us [from the current team] don't have any barriers. I can probably do anything my son would want to go do if he wanted to go do like, for example, in February, we're going to Sweden for an international tournament and that's no issue for us, we can just go. I can take all three of us and do it and probably take a couple days off and tour Sweden a little bit. But where the barriers come in is with the disenfranchised, between parents who have money and the parents who don't. So, you know, every once in a while, I'll run into some of the parents from his old team and they're like, "Oh, I saw I saw your son is playing on ODP." And the first question, they asked us is "How much?" and when I run into parents from this team, that just would never be a question that they would ask. And at some point, you know, some of these ethnicities, specifically Hispanic communities, these kids are going to be forced to make a decision between work or soccer. And then the parents have to make a decision about whether or not they can take time off work or whether or not they can afford like four or five nights in a hotel room. So I think my answer to you is, most of us [here] don't have any barriers. Most everybody that I'm playing with at this level, would have no inability to send their kid to another country to play.

Ben's son had played on a different team that was primarily Latinx and from a lower socioeconomic status before playing in the club team he played in now. Ben talked about how

most parents in the current team who were of a higher socioeconomic status did not face the same barriers as the parents he knew from his son's previous team that was predominantly Latinx and lower income. He also touched on how some of these children from disenfranchised communities will have to choose between being able to participate in sports or having to work, like Ivan, whose experience I discussed at the start of this chapter. The most significant aspect of these sporting experiences is the ability to travel and pay for traveling when it comes to these teams since traveling is "the costliest feature in youth sports" (projectplay.org). In addition to the travel team experience, Ben's son has also been able to participate in the Olympic Development Program (ODP), which is an additional expense aside from travel team expenses. The travel experience that is available to youth who play on these teams has a significant meaning for one's learning, traveling experiences offer youth opportunities beyond just the chance to compete. This experience of traveling outside of their communities allows these youth to have an opportunity to gain a worldly experience that teaches them how to engage with others and gives them exposure to other people and other cultures. These experiences could vastly shape the future of these youth in positive ways that extend beyond just soccer participation.

Matt also spoke about the lack of economic diversity in his granddaughter's team. "It's weird because her team *is* diverse. . . The problem there is economic diversity. You know, I would say that of that group, we're the only ones that probably don't own a home. They're all you know, they're probably upper middle class." Matt mentioned how Lauren's team was racially diverse but still lacked economic diversity. While he claimed that this did not affect the girls' ability to relate on the field, he claimed that the differences in economic background affected their ability to relate off the field:

> There's no sense of community. I don't feel that sense of community with them. And it's funny because they had a birthday party at a beach house in Manhattan Beach for one of the teammates and the girls were divided among economic class, and then one of the girls says, “it's kind of sad that we have almost like two teams within our team.” That's because they're all fucking rich. You know, but they see it. When they play together that shits out the window. But when they're off the field, you can see it. When they're on the field, they play, and I respect them for that.

The issue here is not precisely that the girls on Lauren’s team come from different economic backgrounds, but that teams like these are not accessible to more kids like Lauren. As Matt mentioned, the girls get along on the field despite their different economic status and racial/cultural background, but their economic status does create challenges for them to be able to connect across economic and cultural lines. This experience does not just limit how players in the same team can relate to one another but can also restrict other youth from less advantaged backgrounds to even access teams and spaces like these. This is a microcosm of broader society where there is a wide gulf in stratification, demonstrating that we live in a society where meritocracy does not broadly exist. The experiences of Lauren and youth like her show us that there is no even playing field in U.S. youth sports and that material advantages and disadvantages affect the cultural and social connections that youth soccer players and their families experience.

The lack of community that Matt says some of these girls from a lower income experience in the team reflects the broader trends in individualism that exist in the broader society and strain community connections. Outside of sports, in settings like education or the workplace, people throughout the U.S. struggle to connect with others from different backgrounds. These girls, like Lauren, are experiencing social disconnection in a space that claims to teach positive values, especially teamwork which are supposed to translate to their broader life experiences. The only time that all of the girls on the team are able to connect with

each other is when they play, indicating that the values they are learning through sport include disconnection, individualism, and competitiveness, which are antithetical to the values they should learn in sports. In a truly diverse and meritocratic society, youth should be able to play and compete with other youth from different racial and ethnic backgrounds as well as different socioeconomic backgrounds and feel included throughout their experiences while learning values around community and connection.

Lauren was able to play on this team without having to pay because she is talented and skilled and her grandfather was able to leverage that and negotiate her spot on the team for free. But not all parents have the same cultural capital of knowing that this is something they can do. As mentioned previously, not all parents will be able to pay for the costs of participation or negotiate their child's position in a club team where they do not have to pay to participate and clubs will not cover or eliminate expenses for all youth, just a few they view as a worthy investment. The issue lies in the youth sports model that has not only privatized youth sports but also limits the racial and economic diversity of children who do play. At the same time, these clubs have come to replace community leagues, which were more affordable and accessible (Gregory 2017). The privatization of youth sports has limited soccer participation to those who can financially afford it (Allison 2018).

There is a harsh irony in today's prohibitive costs for youth soccer. One of the reasons that soccer is the world's most popular sport is that it's so inexpensive to play. It only requires a ball and some space. Kids can organize games with ease. Even teams and leagues do not require all that much gear. Some of my older informants recall their entry into soccer as very different from today's youth. For instance, Oscar played soccer while growing up in New York and recalled a time when playing the sport was inexpensive, readily available, and accessible to

people of different backgrounds. He claims that his only expense at the time was buying soccer cleats and he lamented how that is not the reality today for youth soccer. The changes in youth sports strain families of children who play soccer — especially those with multiple children. Oscar has three children who play soccer, and he talked about the challenge of parents with multiple children in the sport:

> I grew up in New York City. And when I played, I played with Ecuadorians I played with people from Chile, Argentinians, I played with Jamaicans, Africans. New York is like a Mecca of culture, and it was absolutely amazing. And I remember, the only thing I had to worry about is buying a pair of cleats. Well, now that's not the case. Now you look at it from the point of view as a family — being a parent of three that love of soccer, now its club, now its uniform, now its fees, now it's everything times three. So, it makes it so much harder, *much* harder to keep up.

Among clubs, some struggle more than others to retain participation and to be able to compete with other clubs for players. Aside from the costs of participating in the soccer league, teams must also consider playing in expensive, competitive tournaments. For players to gain exposure to be recruited by college scouts, they must consider competing in prominent tournaments with more elite teams. Some club teams, like Mario's, are sponsored by small local Latinx businesses that are not always able to give a consistent amount of money to his team. One of these businesses was a Latinx grocery store and the other was a Mexican restaurant. When asked what is one of his main challenges as a coach, he stated that the cost of soccer participation for Latinx families limited his teams' ability to compete in tournaments:

> Recursos económicos. Es muy difícil porque nosotros estamos en él medio Hispano entonces es muy difícil para muchos papas. Es muy difícil si queremos jugar en ligas competitivas donde los niños puedan tener poquito más exposición. Cuestan. Cuestan mucho. Entonces también por eso a veces ese es un impedimento para muchos equipos y no pueden jugar en los torneos.
>
> Economic resources. It is very difficult because we are part of the Hispanic community so it is very difficult for many parents. It is very difficult if we want to play in competitive leagues where children can have a little more exposure. They cost. They cost

> a lot. So that is why sometimes that is an impediment for many teams and they cannot compete in these tournaments.

Mario talked about how the lack of economic resources, both from parents and sponsors, limits his team's ability to travel and compete in bigger tournaments. While he is aware that these tournaments can bring more exposure to his team and his players, they are not always able to pay to participate in these tournaments. Again, the reality is that opportunities cost money; without the resources, opportunity is fleeting. During my observations, he often talked about having to subsidize some of his player's fees or giving players free uniforms who would otherwise not be able to afford them. Parents confirmed this. Mario was passionate about his team and his community and was doing what he could to make sure children who wanted to play, were able to. But, he also knew that he and his players' parents could not afford all the opportunities they felt the children deserved.

The Youth Sports Model at the Intersections of Race, Class, and Gender

Youth are a marginalized group in society who face different levels of exclusion and often find themselves in difficult positions trying to navigate life as people who are no longer considered children but are not quite considered adults. Youth are a vulnerable population, and their experiences are not always included in research about them. In the sports literature, youth experiences are widely discussed but rarely from their own perspectives. I wanted to capture youth experiences in this study to better understand how youth participants make sense of their own soccer participation and how the privatization of soccer may affect their participation. During one of my interviews, a girl thanked me for listening to her saying she had not had the opportunity to talk about her experiences playing soccer before. This helped me realize even more how important it is to center youth voices in this work.

During our interviews, I asked youth participants why they chose to play "club" soccer, what it was like for them, and some of the differences they noticed while playing club versus previous teams. These youth made some clear distinctions between club and other levels of soccer like recreational soccer or Spanish Soccer League. They also perceived club soccer as leading to opportunities for mobility that are not available in other leagues.

Ivan was one of these youth. As I mentioned earlier, Ivan was an 18-year-old Mexican American boy who worked as an arcade operator at the Circus Circus hotel and casino and played at a no-cost club created by a local police department. Ivan initially played soccer in the local Spanish Soccer League and was a starter for his high school team. But, he had only started playing club after graduating high school. He decided to take a year off before going to college to play on a club team, though he claimed he did not know much about club soccer. He said that growing up his mom could not afford for him to play club so he was limited to playing in his school's team and in the Spanish Soccer League, but he believed that by playing club he had a better chance at getting recruited to play college. "I didn't hear about club until I was 16 years old," which is the age where players are already on scouts' radars. Ivan described the difficulty of some Latinx youth being able to participate in soccer clubs because of costs. He also spoke about clubs offering different opportunities like exposure to scouts that could offer college scholarships.

> I started looking into players and I just wanted to be just like them. I was young, I wanted, you know, everyone's wanting to become a pro. I guess I felt like I had time. But at the same time, I didn't realize there was other opportunities. I was staying in the same [Spanish] league and I didn't know there was like club soccer or anything like that and what I'm looking for is like a scholarship to go to school. I still have friends that play Hispanic leagues, like they just play it for fun. But I want to show my mom that like, you know, I done something with this. Like, this was all for something. I feel like in this country, a lot of people that come from other places don't have — it's harder for them to basically become stable. They work hard, but barely have enough to survive or become stable enough to have kids who play club soccer.

Ivan talked about initially wanting to play professional soccer, calling it “a dream” that most youth have. He expressed that he now wanted to get a scholarship to play at the college level despite taking a year off from school. Ivan explained that even though he played for his high school team, he was unaware of the opportunities that were available from playing club soccer. Whereas in the past college scouts would recruit youth through their participation in high school sports teams, today it is primarily the club system that provides exposure to scouts for recruitment. Ivan also made distinctions between clubs and other “less competitive teams.” He stated that clubs typically had better training facilities, are more competitive, and provide a better experience — meaning an emphasis specifically focused on winning. This shift in youth sports makes it difficult for youth like Ivan to navigate the sports landscape. For him, both awareness of and access to club soccer opportunities seemed almost exclusively reserved for those who can afford them.

I met Lauren after interviewing her grandfather, Matt, for this study. Lauren began playing recreational soccer before she quickly moved on to play club soccer. Matt told me a story about how he used to referee basketball and would take Lauren with him and she took an interest in a soccer game that was going on nearby. After that, he signed her up in a free recreation league. Though Lauren had no prior soccer experience, she ended up scoring 29 of her team’s 40 goals that year. Matt quickly realized she had a natural ability in soccer and began learning more about the sport and her position as a goalkeeper before looking for another, more competitive team for her to join.

When I interviewed Lauren, I was immediately impressed by her mature demeanor. She was bright-eyed and even though she smiled she seemed a bit shy. She sat upright with her hands neatly folded in front of her. I could tell she was serious and meant every word about how

dedicated she was to soccer and to accomplishing her dream of playing professionally. She spoke candidly about her dreams of playing professional soccer, the difference in pay between the U.S. women's national team versus the U.S. men's national team, and described club soccer as more competitive than recreational soccer. For her, this meant she had to be more dedicated to the team and focus on winning. I asked Lauren to tell me about her experience playing recreational soccer:

> It was pretty low level. Since we're just learning, nobody could really, nobody really knew how to pass. But it was like we're still learning everything. So now we're all pretty competitive and you know do high level, back then you know you're just starting to learn all the rules and stuff like how to pick up the ball, no offsides. Like you're just getting introduced to the sport and now you're like, ok let's win. We know what to do now. Let's get serious about it.
>
> JH - Is winning a major focus for you when it comes to playing?
>
> Yes. I believe we all want to win. And I feel like winning is like, it's *never* ok to lose. So everybody wants to win but I feel like it should never be ok to lose.

Lauren described recreational soccer as a "low level" experience where she was beginning to learn the rules of the game. Her rec league experiences helped her learn the rules of playing soccer and helped her develop her skills. But playing club soccer forced her into a "high level" of soccer with more competition and a clear emphasis on winning as the highest value. Her description of club soccer reflects the Skills and Excellence Model of organized youth sports that we often see in the U.S. Coakley (2021) describes programs that fall under this model as emphasizing a performance and outcome ethic in which youth are "evaluated in terms of the progress made in developing on-the-field skills in a specific sport, moving up to higher levels of competition, and building a record of competitive success" (Coakley 2021:88). In recreational soccer, the focus is to learn the game and develop skills whereas in club the focus is on honing these skills, competition, and, of course, above all, winning (Eitzen 2016).

Maria, a 14-year-old Mexican-American girl I interviewed, also talked about her experiences with both recreational soccer and club soccer. Whereas Lauren had a "natural" ability for soccer and quickly outgrew recreational soccer, Maria said the following about playing recreational soccer: "I didn't really know I was on a rec team. I didn't really know much about positions. I didn't even know how to shoot or pass the ball. I didn't know how to do anything." Maria's mom, who played soccer growing up, worked with her to develop her skills so that she could move on to play club soccer. Maria said she did not initially make it past the tryouts for a club team and once she did make it on the team, she described it as mostly a negative experience:

> The girls were more advanced because they were already five years old, so when I didn't get accepted it kind of got my motivation down. I just didn't want to play soccer. And I just quit. I just didn't think I was good enough. And then they would just put me down and I would cry, I didn't even want to go. I didn't feel comfortable. Not being racist or anything but they were all a certain color. And going to [club] Justice made me feel like I fit in.
>
> JH-What made you feel uncomfortable about being in the first club?
>
> When I would walk by, they would be giggling, and I knew they were making fun of me because they weren't the same color as me. I didn't tell my mom this, obviously that didn't feel right because I don't think she would understand so I was kind of scared. But since Justice is the same color as me, I felt more attached to the players.

Maria faced a double challenge in her club. She was not as skilled as the other players, and she stood out as a person of color. Both distinctions felt like obstacles to performing and integrating into the group. She initially felt she did not belong in the club team because the rest of the girls on the team were more advanced than her. She felt unmotivated, uninterested, and wanted to quit. She also felt uncomfortable about being one of the few players of color in her first club team. Most of the girls on the team were White and she felt devalued and out of place.

Maria picked up on other racialized incidents while she was in that first club team. I asked her what were some of the things she heard and she said, “They have a left-winger that’s really fast and she’s Black and [pauses] they won’t say like racial things about her, they just say ‘she’s *really* fast’.” This seemingly innocuous comment about the Black player’s athleticism that Maria picked up on has racial undertones rooted in racial ideologies in sports. Being described as “fast” does not necessarily carry a racial connotation, but it does speak to how Black athletes’ abilities are often discounted and minimized by being described as “natural.”

Racializing players was not uncommon. During one of my experiences observing one of Mario’s games, I saw a similar racialized moment. Mario’s team was losing, one of the girls in the opposing team was Black, and there was an increased focus on her because of her perceived athleticism. The opposing team was good — but the parents and players were hyper-focused on the single Black player. The parents made comments on her athleticism and questioned her height and her age, insinuating that she was too old to be playing on that team.

Linking race and athletic ability is not surprising. This attitude is grounded in longstanding assumptions about “racial fitness” lodged in Western culture. Racial ideologies that ranked people with distinct, non-European characteristics emerged during the 18th century (Coakley 2021; Hoberman 1997). This ranking used physical characteristics that focused on the incorrectly perceived, biological inferiority of non-whites. These ideologies have been used, especially, to make a distinction between the athletic abilities of Black athletes from the athletic abilities of White athletes. Sports radio, television, and other media often reinforce stereotypes of Black athletes particularly as being physically dominant (Lapchik 1999). When Black athletes are thought as having “natural speed and jumping abilities” rooted in faulty racial ideologies, their athletic accomplishments are discounted or diminished (Coakley 2021; Hoberman 1997).

Another discriminatory assumption I encountered was during an interview with a parent who described youths' gender transitions as a threat to girls' soccer. Johnny's concern was that despite Title IX creating more funding options and opportunities for young girls to play collegiate sports — boys who transitioned into girls posed a threat to these opportunities. Title IX was passed in 1972 and stated that "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance" (U.S. Department of Education). Educational institutions that did not comply with the law could risk losing funds from the federal government so some of these institutions saw soccer as a "cost-effective" way to comply with Title IX regulations (Petri 2022). Title IX funding influenced the significant growth of women's soccer in the past 50 years as more girls and women were able to play (Petri 2022).

> I do know that soccer doesn't get a lot [of funding] Women's Sports doesn't get a lot compared to like football. But I know that Title IX, whatever the Title IX is, helps equalize the playing field a little bit. But what worries me now, the biggest thing right now is that there's kids that are transitioning into — there's boys that are transitioning into girls and are taking those scholarships from the girls. That kind of bothers me a little bit. But I don't know, I don't know how I feel about that yet too much. But I know that there are there are boys doing that.

Johnny assumed that although Title IX has increased opportunities for girls, boys who transitioned into girls had an unfair biological advantage that afforded them the ability to take opportunities reserved for "natural" girls. This worried him as he felt that this could lead to limited opportunities for girls like his daughter. Massey (2006) refers to Johnny's worries and desires to close off access to trans youth as "opportunity hoarding" — "when one social group restricts access to a scarce resource, either through outright, denial or by exercising monopoly control. Opportunity hoarding is enabled through a socially defined process of exclusion" (6) and

in competitive, elite soccer, the opportunities are already significantly narrowed by cost. By making this claim, Johnny wanted to reinforce the idea that trans girls should not be able to compete for the very same limited opportunities. However, later in the interview, Johnny said the following about his daughter which complicates his position on biological advantage:

> We did a test with my daughter, when she was like maybe eight years old, they did a bone density test. So they test your bones to see how old you are. So when she was eight, they said she's like a 10 year old. So when she's like 15, she'll be like an 18 or 19 year old. So they said we could slow this process and give her some, whatever, some hormones, to shut it down, and slow it down. But I didn't want to do that.

Although he previously spoke about the potential unfair biological advantage of trans girls in soccer, Johnny did not seem to see how that claim was any different from his daughter's experience. His daughter having a higher "bone density" because of unregulated hormones could give her an unfair physical advantage over other players. Yet when doctors presented the option to regulate her hormones, he declined. His daughter's "bone density" is indicative of the bodily diversity that exists among all youth. Bodily diversity can influence the variation of athletic ability which is not exclusive to trans youth.

Although there are no laws that prohibit children like Johnny's daughter from participating in sports because of bone density or other physical advantages, "37% of youth ages 13-17 live in states with laws preventing transgender students from participating in sports consistent with their gender identity" (Movement Advancement Project). It is also important to note that within the first 25 years of Title IX's enactment, which gave women the legal basis to demand equity in high school and college athletics as it outlined sex discrimination of educational programs from any institutions receiving federal funding (Messner 1992; Allison 2018), the number of girls who participated in interscholastic sports increased eightfold (Lapchick 1999). But despite there being more funding available for girls' sport teams because

of Title IX and increased sport participation among girls, Latinx girls have not benefited from this policy the same way that white girls have (Allison 2018). Mario spoke on the lack of structural, institutional, and familial support for girl teams:

> Desgraciadamente para las Hispanas aunque haya mucho talento es muy difícil ser parte de una selección nacional porque se dice que hay un requerimiento que se busca mas a la niña Americana. Se dice que "hay política" por decir, dentro de eso entonces hay jugadoras de decencia Mexicana qué se formaron aquí como una niña, se me olvida el nombre de una de ellas pero antes del mundial pasado la entrenadora le dijo que mejor buscar a un lugar en México porque aquí en Estados Unidos no lo iba a encontrar.
>
> Unfortunately for the Hispanic girls, even if they are talented, it is very difficult to be part of a national team because it is said that there is a requirement that the American [white] girl is more sought after. It is said that there are "politics" to say the least, for players of Mexican descent who were trained here as young girls. I forget the name of one of them but before the last World Cup there was a girl whose coach told her that it was better to look for a place in Mexico because here in the United States, she was not going to find a spot.

It's evident that the "politics" that Mario refers to here is how racism and its intersection with sexism impacts Latina girls who play soccer in the U.S. He continued to talk about how sexism exists not just at the institutional level but also at the cultural level. Mario coached two teams — a 12-year-old girls' team and a 10-year-old boys' team. He said that from his experience as a coach, parents seemed to be more invested and supportive in their sons. He claimed this made it difficult for him to develop his girls' team and take them to tournaments:

> Con mi equipo de niñas aunque es un equipo decente yo he querido que salgamos a competir afuera [de Las Vegas] con las niñas pero los papás no se entregan tanto con las niñas como con los niños. Con el niño si hay juego fuera de aqui a California, "Amonos con el niño!" Con la niña ponen mas pretexto.
>
> With my team of girls, although it is a decent team, I have wanted us to go out to compete outside [of Las Vegas] but the parents do not invest as much with the girls as with the boys. With the boys, if there is a tournament in California, "Let's go!" With the girls they have more excuses.

However, Mario's experience does not reflect everyone's. For instance, Maria's mother, Isela, offered a different perspective. I asked Isela if she noticed any differences between the support

for girl's teams versus the support for boy's teams, and she saw them as equal. She attributed this to moms who previously played soccer who now support their daughter's soccer participation. Isela played soccer growing up and she spoke about not knowing certain things that could have led her to develop her soccer career further. She thinks that moms who have daughters who play are just as committed to their daughter's participation:

> I think the Hispanic culture has realized that it's a different generation. And they're willing to support their kids. And like I said before, honestly, a lot of them and I spoke to them personally, in Maria's team, a lot of them [moms] have played before. And therefore, they know, the type of discipline that it takes to be at the level they want to be. And like I said, I spoke to them and they have played in the past. And it's in her team in particular, I can't speak for other teams. But those moms are really involved all the time. Which is pretty, pretty unique. I've never seen that in another Hispanic team. But that's what I've noticed.

The youths' experiences speak to some of the racial, gendered, and classed complications they encountered while participating in youth soccer. The current youth sports model not only limits participation for some youth because of cost, but can also add layers of barriers for players with intersecting, marginalized identities who do play. Their experiences prompt the need for centering youth sports around youth needs — not around adults' desires (Farrey 2008). Doing so could not only increase the number of youth who might participate in sports, but would also likely make that participation more just and equitable. A youth-centered model where the focus includes play and fun, not solely competition, could reduce opportunity hoarding and create a more equitable and inclusive playing field for youth of all races, genders, and socioeconomic statuses.

Outliers, Transnational Experiences, and "Making It"

Throughout the interview process and conversations with participants — specifically youth and coaches — I discovered multiple patterns and variability between youth and coaches. Youth had high expectations about their soccer participation which included playing

professionally or getting a scholarship to play at the college-level soccer. Most parents also expressed the same desires for their children. Some coaches touched on having had similar goals when they were younger and some did actually play collegiate soccer or semi-professional soccer in Mexico. Two of the participants I interviewed who were coaches in Las Vegas at some point, had children who played professional soccer but did not get there by playing in a private Las Vegas soccer club and being scouted by college teams. Instead, these players began their professional careers in Mexico's first division teams before moving on to play in teams for the Major League Soccer in the U.S.

Diego, the director of the Spanish Soccer League talked about not relying on Las Vegas clubs for his son's soccer development. He talked about taking the Spanish Soccer League team his son played on, and which he coached, to a tournament where they won first place. After the win, a bigger club from the "American" league approached him and offered him a team to coach. They promised to provide any resources and support he would need. The players on the team were one year older than his son, but his son "played up" to continue under his father's coaching. A year later, the club took the team away from Diego and said they would accommodate his son on a different team and after that Diego stopped trusting clubs: "Los clubes me apoyan mucho en las ligas, soy muy agradecido con ellos, pero como entrenador dije no vuelvo a ir a un club," "The clubs support me a lot in the leagues, I am very grateful to them. But as a coach, I said I will never go to a club again." He took his son back to the Spanish Soccer League where he continued to coach him until he believed his son had a better shot by changing positions from midfielder and to goalkeeper. After convincing his son to play the goalkeeper position, Diego reached out to Javier — the goalkeeper trainer from Guadalajara — to train him. His son went on to play professionally in Mexico and now plays professionally in the U.S.

Victor appeared to be in his 80's and claimed to be one of the creators of the first soccer leagues in Las Vegas. When we met for the interview, Victor said that he typically did not do interviews but that my research script on Facebook had caught his attention. At the moment, I did not know that his son was a commentator for ESPN who previously played professional soccer and who is relatively well known in Las Vegas. I thanked him for taking the time to meet with me and we began to talk about soccer in Las Vegas. Like Diego, Victor also talked about his reservations about his son playing in academies or club soccer, though he did play in them at one point. He said:

> Todas las academias son caras. Y los equipos que lo querian — no era lo que yo buscaba, yo buscaba a alguien que explotara su talento. Si usted se mete en una liga aquí de los Americanos, ellos le hacen firmar un papel donde no puede jugar en ningún otro equipo. Pff. Entonces, si ese chavalo tiene aspiraciones de algo más o quiere cambiar de equipo, no puede porque está firmado ahí.
>
> All academies [clubs] are expensive. And the teams that wanted him — it's not what I was looking for, I was looking for someone who would grow his talent. If you join a league here with the Americans, they make you sign a paper that you cannot play for any other team. Pff. So, if that kid has aspirations for something else or wants to change teams, he can't because he is signed there.

Victor was looking for a team that would help his son develop his talent and would translate that into a professional career and he felt that the local clubs here would hinder that. Instead, he reached out to a friend who knew a scout in San Diego, California. Before sending his son to tryouts for a professional Mexican team, Victor felt that he had to mentally prepare him for what he would experience. "Mucha gente va a México con la creencia que van a ir a llegar a jugar, no señor, en México hay mucho talento también y son colas y colas y colas de jugadores esperando la misma oportunidad," "Many people go to Mexico with the belief that they are going to get to play. No sir. In Mexico there is also a lot of talent and there are lines and lines and lines of players waiting for the same opportunity." Victor and Diego sons' professional experience are

outliers in Las Vegas. They did not go through the club-division-one professional pipeline. Their successes using a transnational approach thus negated the need for club pathways to success. Victor and Diego may have opted for this transnational strategy because they may have felt the club system was ineffective. Arthur, an English coach who played professionally in England and now coaches a girls' academy team in Las Vegas, states the difference between academies in Europe and clubs in the U.S. (who claim to operate like European academies in that they function to develop professional athletes):

> Well, here open tryouts to a certain extent, don't exist at the professional level. You get invited, you know. So I often get a situation where someone says, "I've been invited to a campus," and the thing is, if you're paying for it, in my opinion, that means it's just a way of producing income for that college. Maybe they'll find one kid out of the 327 that go. Whereas in England, if you get invited into an academy, you know, if you're nine or 10, I think eight is the youngest that you can get an invite into an academy, you get invited, and then you don't pay for anything. You know, because you're in you're in the system, because you've been scouted. If you're any good, in a European country, it would be very unusual for someone not to see you. So you can be playing for a local Sunday team, and somebody will see you, you'll get recommended and somebody will come and watch you. And if they think you're good enough, you'll get an invite to go in and train or go in and play in a game.

Arthur is saying that there is more meritocracy in youth soccer in Europe than there is in the U.S. He states that someone as young as eight, who is talented, can have the same level of exposure by playing in a regular Sunday league team in Europe as someone who plays in a club team in the U.S. That exposure can lead to an invitation to play in Europe's academies that are typically housed under professional teams and will develop the player to potentially play professionally for that team at no cost, unlike club teams who charge for athletic development and exposure with no guarantee. This academy-to-professional soccer pathway also exists in Mexico and parents like Victor and Diego will send their kids to Mexico, where they can have their children play for a professional academy and only pay for room and board. These parents could also opt for this option if the parents have certain networks or connections in Mexico that they may lack

in the U.S. Jose Alamillo discusses a similar instance where he examines the sporting experiences of Mexican youth who engage in a transnational connection between the U.S. and Mexico (2020). Alamillo (2020) argues that "Mexican-origin males and females in the United States have used sports to empower themselves and their communities by developing and sustaining transnational networks with Mexico" (197). However, as Victor mentioned, there is still a lot of competition in places like Mexico, and the youth from these countries are also competing for the same opportunities as youth from the U.S.

A few other coaches I interviewed also spoke about their experience as youth players in Mexico. They left for Mexico having just graduated from high school, though some did not graduate at all. Pablo, who was in his early 20's and coached a club in the Las Vegas Valley, was recruited to play for a third-division team in Mexico while he was playing soccer at a junior college. He played for three years until he was injured and cut from the team. I asked about his experience playing soccer in Mexico as a youth and how he navigated being released from the team to understand the experience of a youth who had dreams of playing soccer and what their actual experience looked like:

> I thought it went great. It was what I was looking for, especially after getting done with college. Well, not done, but you know, I just thought it was the time to go and give it a try. When I was younger, I had been recruited before to go to Mexico and I always wanted to play professionally, especially in Mexico. So, I enjoyed it a lot. I didn't get to play as much as I wish I could have just because a lot of you know, agent problems, injuries and stuff like that… It was tough to be honest. I mean, I went through my little phase of depression when I came back home. It was months where I felt lost just because, you know, soccer has been the thing that I've been doing for the longest time ever and, you know, being back home with my family and stuff like that was great. But, you know, I've been out of my house from a very young age, so I kind of, you know, felt out of place. I was doing what I loved. And so it was pretty tough to be honest. It was a very tough time.

Youth like Pablo probably never consider the fact that the pro soccer experience comes with a set of challenges like the ones Pablo describes — not having significant playing time, injuries, and

the dissolution of those dreams and having to "come home." Carlos was an undocumented youth who became a U.S. resident during his junior year in high school. Before attaining residency, Carlos was unsure if he would be able to play college soccer despite being on scouts' radars. He eventually went on to play at a junior college before playing in Mexico. Carlos described his experience playing in Mexico as a rude awakening. He said that as a goalkeeper trainer, he now talks to youth about the potential cons of a professional career pathway:

> So, mentally, you grow up a lot faster. Emotionally you work a lot faster. But more than anything, it's that, you know, you're 14. They don't see you that way, you're a professional adult, and you have to play against the 21-year-olds. You tell that to a parent here, they'll be like "Oh no, I can't put my 13-year-old boy against 15-year-olds! What do you mean? They're just going to run them over!" You know, it's a whole different world. The moment they told me that they weren't gonna sign my contract, I was out. I was gone within two days. So those are the things that no one thinks about. It's a work environment and when they don't need you no more, they'll let you know, "We need you to get out in two days." It was just like, okay I guess I'll go back home. I need to now arrange a bus ticket or whatever to get to Mexico City to fly out of there, and I got some days to do all this. So again, it's a bad experience and I keep telling kids it's a whole different world when you're involved in a professional setting.

Carlos' and Pablo's transnational experiences varied from Diego and Victor's sons. However, they spoke about transitioning from playing in Mexico to coaching in Las Vegas as an overall positive experience. They believed they were now in a position to mentor youth soccer players. These coaches are connected to clubs, but Carlos also owns his own goal-keeping training academy and has coached at a local university. Vazquez-Tokos and Norton Smith's (2017) study of Latino men's experiences with controlling images as either gang members or athletes touches on how Latino men "serve as models of professionals" who work to increase the younger generation's knowledge. Having acquired some life experience on the journey to professional soccer, coaches like Carlos and Pablo can provide a more holistic view of professional soccer to parents and youth who may otherwise not know about the potential challenges a soccer career can lead to and can help us reimagine what the youth sports landscape should look like.

Conclusion

The reshaping of the Amateur Athletic Union along with the defunding of parks and recreation centers has changed the landscape of organized youth sports in the U.S. This has created a pay-to-play model that requires participants to pay fees to play. These costs include registration fees, coaching fees, uniform fees, travel-related expenses, and sometimes additional private training fees. This system has made youth sports participation an incredibly expensive, and profitable, activity and the high costs of participation are creating more barriers for families from low-income backgrounds and those with multiple children who play. This privatization and defunding are not limited to just youth sports, neoliberal policies that emphasize a free-market approach have affected other facets in society and further increased economic inequality at the broader level. Due to this, youth and parents view sports, specifically soccer clubs, as a vehicle for upward social mobility. As a result, elite soccer clubs are seen as spaces that provide specific opportunities to learn and develop the skills necessary to secure an athletic scholarship or play professional soccer.

My participants' experiences that I detailed in this chapter indicate how this shift to a pay-to-play sports model is not only increasing the cost of sport participation but is also exacerbating inequality and contributing to an already stratified society. This has implications for families and teams who are encouraging opportunity hoarding and promoting individualism at the expense of mor vulnerable communities. Additionally, while parents like Matt are able to navigate and negotiate their children's spot on a club team and parents like Victor and Diego are able to manage their child soccer career in another country — this does not restructure the youth sports model in the U.S. to make it more inclusive and accessible to all children. Doing so would offer all youth the same level of exposure and opportunity, providing them with an experience

where they can truly demonstrate merit and talent. I detail these themes and experiences in the next chapter, where I discuss how participants view competition, opportunity, and mobility through soccer in Las Vegas.

CHAPTER 5- LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD: COMPETITION, OPPORTUNITY, AND MOBILITY IN LAS VEGAS SOCCER LEAGUES

In this chapter, I discuss the ways participants view opportunity and social mobility through youth sports, specifically soccer clubs. Soccer clubs are viewed as spaces that could provide opportunities to learn and develop the skills necessary to secure an athletic scholarship. I talk about the ways that soccer clubs can provide access to networks that can shape opportunities for youth. I do this by drawing on Bourdieu's concept of capital and demonstrating how capital exchange occurs in soccer leagues. For instance, most parents in this study viewed the expenses associated with soccer clubs as an investment in their child's future education. Therefore, parents see soccer participation costs as potentially paying off when their child secures an athletic scholarship or ends up playing professionally. I also discuss how the pursuit of "competitive" soccer clubs can undermine the legitimacy of local Latinx leagues, by overlooking their significance and the types of cultural capital that are available in these spaces.

When I decided to do research with youth who played soccer, I reached out to one of my former colleagues, Andres, and asked if he knew anyone in Las Vegas who coached youth soccer. Andres gave me Giovanni's information and I reached out to set up a meeting with him. Giovanni coached youth soccer at a popular club in Las Vegas and coached the men's soccer team at the local university. After a few text message exchanges with him, we arranged a meeting. I arrived at the soccer club's office headquarters and asked for him. An older White man replied, "You're here to see Gio?" Realizing that that was short for Giovanni, I replied, "Yes." I waited a little longer until Gio was finished with a phone call and he let me in their board room.

I told Gio about my research interests, that I was a student at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and that I was interested in studying the educational pathways of youth soccer players—my initial purpose for this study. I inquired about the club's College Pathway Program, which Gio told me that he led. I expressed my interest in studying Latinx youths' college pathways. Gio responded by saying that only White youth view soccer as a pathway to college, Latinos do not. "They [Latinx people] don't really use it [soccer] for that." I wanted to follow up and clarify what he meant by that. but I realized that I was looking for a field site at the moment and had not established any rapport to question him on this comment.

I redirected the conversation to ask him the age group that he coached and when they typically held their practices. He let me know that he needed to speak to the director of the soccer club to get his permission for me to conduct research. "We [the club] could definitely use this [research]," he said pointing to a stack of articles I had on youth soccer. I shook his hand and thanked him for his time and reminded him that I also had to get approval from my university's Institutional Review Board before I could begin my research. We both said we would be in touch and keep each other informed on the status of the approval. After both Gio and I received our necessary approvals, I started my fieldwork. These observations began in the spring of 2019 and briefly stopped a year later after Gio quit coaching this team.

My observations began in April, a few weeks after I obtained IRB approval. I followed up with Gio and he let me know the director was ok with me conducting observations. Gio gave me the details of his next practice and on that day, I drove out to the park where Gio said he'd be holding practice. As I walked over to the field where Gio was, I quickly realized that I recognized this park. My younger brother used to play club soccer back in California and had a tournament in Las Vegas played at this field. I thought back to how much time and money my

parents put into my brother's soccer experience. This often strained our household and I do not know how my dad managed to keep up with all the club-related expenses and travel, I imagine he believed it would pay off someday. Although my brother wanted to play professionally from a very young age, my dad wanted him to get a scholarship to attend college. Neither of these things happened.

Opportunity and Social Mobility

At the outset of the twentieth century, educators and wealthy industrialists established a winner-takes-all model to manage children's sports that changed the landscape of youth sports in the U.S. (Farrey 2008). Later in the 1980s, the Reagan administration defunded urban parks and recreational centers offering affordable sports participation for youth which prompted the privatization of youth sports (Farrey 2008; Coakley 2021). These changes laid the groundwork for a transition from a sports-for-all model, emphasizing publicly funded sports access for children, to a privatized, winner-takes-all model prioritizing competition, victory, and elite athletics for those with financial means. This new youth sports model established an adult-organized system resembling professional sports, where rules, competition, and winning take precedence over fun and play. Consequently, the shift to a neoliberal youth sports model has resulted in various issues, including a narrowed and expensive sports participation pipeline with increased specialization, a commercialized approach to youth sports, and an excessive focus on winning (Farrey 2008; Coakley 2021).

Consistent with previous research, many participants, whether parents or youth, stated that they played club soccer because they wanted to either attain an athletic scholarship or play professionally—both of which can lead to upward social mobility (Thompson 2018, Farrey 2008; Coakley 2021;). Ramón Spaaij (2011) describes social mobility as “changes in an

individual's social position which involves significant alterations in his or her social environment and life chances" (p.19). As a result, parents and youth seek to play in elite club teams because they perceive them as offering specific opportunities that recreational teams do not. The dimensions of "opportunities" offered through these clubs are perceived as: having access to higher status teams/leagues that can lead to access to better coaching, which can lead to the development of skills and excellence necessary to have more competitive experiences that can lead to having the necessary exposure for educational and/or professional opportunities that can result in upward social mobility. Coakley (2021) notes that sports programs have adopted a marketing approach in response to this privatized youth model where they assert that their method of cultivating skilled athletes is successful, making the high costs worth it (89).

However, this model has implications that create a narrowed and selective pipeline that is only available to those who can afford it and can reproduce already existing inequities, ultimately maintaining a stratified society. This pipeline does not guarantee "success" in terms of attaining an athletic scholarship or the opportunity to play professionally. This is because the system is flawed as capitalism has created conditions where only a few will be able to attain mobility. Upward social mobility is lower in the U.S. because of overall economic inequality (Smith et. al 2022). What this pipeline does do is to fuel the big business that is youth sports leading to growing costs for participation that strain families of children who play soccer and eliminate any semblance of a meritocratic society.

In the U.S., it is widely believed that upward social mobility is easily attainable if one works hard and media-driven sports culture pushes that perception in many ways (Eitzen 2016). Certainly, it is true that hard work can be an important determinant of one's level of success. But access to critical resources like money, family support, and social networks also play critical

roles (Spaaij 2011). “The annual survey by the Sports & Fitness Industry Association (SFIA) in 2021 found that 24% of kids ages 6 to 12 from homes with $25,000 or less played sports regularly, compared to 40% of kids from $100,000+ homes” (The Aspen Institute). One of the consequences of the high costs of club soccer is that it can limit access to youth from lower socioeconomic strata while privileging those who could already afford to play. Johnny recalled seeing a talented boy play at the Spanish Soccer League and was saddened to find out he did not play club because his family couldn’t afford it:

> There was a boy one day [at Spanish Soccer League], he was really good. He juked my daughter one day, he juked her so bad that she fell and he scored the goal and so I asked his mom, you know, “What club does he play for? He's really good.” And he she said, “We can't afford club.” And to me, that was sad. I mean, for me, when I was a kid, I played every sport when I was young, and like, it was never ever really about the money. You know, we would just fundraise for our trips, but to play in the league it was [free]. And now it's all about the money, which is completely sad.

Johnny is describing a talented boy whose family could not afford for him to play club and talks about youth sports as a business industry and being “all about the money.” Spanish Soccer League is described as inexpensive but “less competitive” than club soccer teams. The youth pay-to-play sports model has made sports selective, and expensive, restricting equal participation for all youth. Matt also talked about youth from a lower socioeconomic status only playing in the Spanish Soccer League because it was much more affordable than other soccer clubs:

> There's a good percentage of them that don't play club. They only play in the Spanish League. It's economic because Spanish Soccer League is basically free, pay like 20 bucks, or whatever. Some people don't pay at all. You know, they just go play. So for that part of the community, Spanish Soccer League is great, because it gives those kids a chance to play that can't afford to play in the other leagues. Because now they’re like 1,200 1,300, 1,400 dollars.

Matt points out that affordability is one of the benefits of the Spanish Soccer League, which allows youth to play soccer who would not be able to play soccer otherwise. Matt states, “You'll

see the same content from AYSO but it's not, it's not the same competitive level. It's not the same investment and time and money." Affordable leagues like AYSO and Spanish Soccer League offer youth the space and opportunity to play but are perceived as not "competitive" enough, meaning they lack the opportunities that can lead to upward social mobility that are associated with clubs. Javier, a goalkeeper trainer from Guadalajara described an encounter he had with a competitor who claimed he did not offer the same opportunity and exposure as other more elite clubs:

> Antes la gente me juzgaba y me decía o "es que tú nomas sirves para mandarlos a México y les quitas la oportunidad de la escuela, yo si les doy escuela, yo sí les yo tengo conexiones en el colegio." Es válido yo al no ser de aquí, al no dominar el idioma, pues las conexiones de colegio, pues no existen. Existen las conexiones en el fútbol profesional? Sí, ahí sí las tengo, porque también tengo ex compañeros que también entrenan y me conocieron, entonces eso me abre la puerta.
>
> Before, people judged me and said to me, "You're good enough to send them to [play in] Mexico and you take away their opportunity for an education, I have connections at schools." That's valid. Me not being from here, not mastering the language, well, the school connections, well, they don't exist. Are there connections in professional football? Yes, I do have them there, because I also have former colleagues who also trained and knew me, so those are the doors that are open for me.

Javier is describing his experience as an immigrant coach who is perceived as lacking the necessary social capital to transmit to his players so they can play at the college level. He agrees that not being from the U.S. and not speaking English fluently affects his ability to help youth on that path. He does, however, have connections to professional soccer teams in Mexico having played semi-professionally in the past and he has been successful in sending players to Mexico and recently to the MLS. Centering competition can privilege those who can afford to play in competitive teams or have the "right" types of capital and can marginalize those who cannot afford to do so or whose skills are not deemed valuable (Coakley 2021; Spaaij 2011).

Social mobility and opportunity are so tied to sports in the U.S. because of the lack of opportunities and subsequent mobility in other areas. Unlike other countries with a more egalitarian society, the U.S. does not offer free college, and given the exorbitant and continuous growing costs associated with higher education, many people feel that sports are one of the limited ways to obtain an education that can provide social mobility (Thompson 2018). "The average cost of attendance for a student living on campus at a public 4-year in-state institution is $26,027 per year or $104,108 over 4 years" (Hanson 2023). Meanwhile, the average household income in the U.S. is about $74,580 and it is estimated that 37.9 million people live below the poverty line (United States Census Bureau 2023). Given these bleak circumstances, it is no wonder many people perceive sports to be a vehicle for social mobility and why so many parents view sport-related costs as "investments."

Competition and Mobility: The Exchange of Capital

Parents and youth I spoke to during this study would often use the word "competition" or "competitive" to describe the differences between certain clubs or leagues and talked about the importance of being part of the most "competitive" teams. I initially did not understand what they meant by this. Although the term competitive is defined as "having a strong desire to win or be the best at something" (The Britannica Dictionary), I knew that they were not just referring to being a part of winning teams for winning's sake. The youth I spoke to did allude to playing in "competitive" clubs that would allow them to play against other winning clubs. Instead of viewing competition in America as something that is natural, Kohn (1986) argues that Americans value competition and thus view it as innate. While competition can be a good thing by functioning as a motivating factor for excellence (Martens 1976), competition can also reduce motivation and harm self-esteem (Kohn 1986). Once I started to make sense of these

conversations, I realized that besides playing on teams that provided players with a challenge, what participants really meant by competitive was the opportunity for mobility by playing against opponents who would both challenge and highlight their skills and force the players to develop (or fail). Parents typically meant that "competitive" clubs would allow their children to learn how to develop the skills that would help them better position themselves to be successful in soccer so that they can have a better opportunity to access education and athletic funding opportunities. In this sense, competition was more about shaping their child's opportunities for upward social mobility.

Parents felt that exposure to certain teams/leagues would increase the likelihood of their child attaining an athletic scholarship or playing professionally. Participants talked about being a part of the most "competitive" teams that could provide them with the challenge, opportunity, and exposure needed to attain their lofty goals. The perception that competitive teams can be a way to attain a scholarship or play professionally stems from the myth that sports are one of the only ways to attain social mobility—especially for youth from disadvantaged backgrounds. As Eitzen (2016) explains, the following myths about social mobility through sport fuel sport participation: 1.) sport provides free college education; 2.) sport leads to a college degree; 3.) a professional sports career is possible; 4.) sports is a way out of poverty, especially for racial minorities; 5.) Title IX has created many opportunities for upward mobility through sports for women; 6.) a professional sports career provides security for life. Participants who expressed interest in playing club soccer described it as "high-level" and "competitive" and how this would help them move on to either playing professionally or at the college level.

In order to attain access to these clubs and their perceived exposure to opportunities, parents will use particular forms of capital, particularly economic capital in exchange for cultural and social capital that could lead to upward social mobility. Bourdieu classified four different

forms of capital: economic capital, cultural capital, social capital, and symbolic capital (Appelrouth and Edles 2011). Economic capital includes material resources like money. Cultural capital includes non-material things like knowledge, expertise, and skills (McGovern 2018). Social capital refers to social networks and group memberships (McGovern 2018). Lastly, symbolic capital refers to prestige, honor, reputation, or charisma (figure 1). While economic capital is significantly more important, economic capital in combination with cultural capital and social capital influences participation in organized youth sports (Andersen and Bakken 2018; Ferry and Lund 2018; McGovern 2018).

Figure 1

Participants who wanted their children to play in expensive club teams perceived clubs as offering them 1.) a specific set of skills, training, and development, 2.) the networks of contacts, and 3.) the necessary exposure to scouts and recruiters. They believed clubs offered them the opportunity to increase their social capital through contacts with "experts" (such as coaches) as well as institutionalized cultural capital through their affiliation with clubs they deemed credible (Portes 1998). These forms of capital, although intangible, justified the costs associated with club teams due to the "ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks" (Portes 1998:6). The majority of parents that I interviewed claimed that they were investing in

their child's club soccer participation with the hope that this would turn into an opportunity for an athletic scholarship. In short, they made sense of the expensive club fees as a sacrifice or investment that will pay off in the future in the form of athletic scholarships.

Sonia talks about how an athletic scholarship is her main motive behind having her son, William, play in a club soccer team in Las Vegas: "El motivo principal es la beca. La beca. Bueno, segundo, pues ya es ganancia, me lo has sacado de problemas. Nunca se ha metido en problemas ni nada." "The main reason is the scholarship. A scholarship. And well, secondly this is already a win, it's kept him out of trouble. He's never been in trouble or anything." Here, Sonia states that although a scholarship is her main motive, William's soccer participation has also kept him focused on school, family, and other "positive" influences, and "out of trouble." To her, that's enough. Lorena also makes sense of her son's soccer participation by seeing it as an "investment" that will eventually pay for college:

> Well, I already have to pay for college, so that's expensive. So in my mind, if I invest now, I am hoping to save in the long run with him because I won't be have to be paying up front. You know, all these small little fees that at the end, they add up. So I'm hoping that you know, it pays off at the end because the career that he wants is pricey.

Lorena's statement is consistent with the literature on sport participation that states that most parents believe that sport offers the potential for a financial payoff, so they view their sport-related expenses as a financial investment in their child's educational future (Post, Rosenthal, and Rauh 2019). Parents tend to view athletic scholarships as the only opportunity they have to pay for the rising costs of higher education. However, parents also tend to vastly overestimate the availability of athletic scholarships and their value, despite there being more funding available for academic scholarships than for sports scholarships (Farrey 2008; Post, Rosenthal, and Rauh 2019; Post, Rosenthal, Root, and Rauh 2021). As mentioned in the previous section, education expenses have increased and as a result, so has the intensity of seeking scholarships.

“There may be no single factor driving the professionalization of youth sports more than the dream of free college. With the cost of higher education skyrocketing–and athletic-department budgets swelling–NCAA schools now hand out $3 billion in scholarships a year” (Gregory 2017). Yet the chances of obtaining a scholarship are incredibly low since only 2% of high school athletes go on to play Division I college sports (Gregory 2017; National Collegiate Athletic Association 2023).

Leonardo was a 67-year-old man that had coached in Las Vegas for over 43 years at various levels. He was a former player at UNLV prior to it being recognized as an interscholastic sport, and he coached in the Olympic Development Program as well. Leonardo mentioned all of these things in his message to me after he read a Facebook post where I was seeking participants. We met at a coffee shop and he was eager to share the details of his experiences with me. During our interview, I asked him “Based on your experience with parents, what would you say is their motivation for having their kids play soccer?”

> At younger ages, it's just to have fun. As they get older… every parent thinks their son's got a pathway to college. In D-I (NCAA Division I), sports, it's so much easier if I coach a women's team to get a girl a college scholarship than it is to get a young man a scholarship. It’s just because of Title IX. So, I think a lot of parents think this is a good way for them to get into college. You know, and it'd be better if they played the tuba and went to a marching band and got in that way because on the boy's side, it's difficult. . . I have a friend that her son was just in a tournament down in Arizona, and he's a pitcher, and he just got offered a D-I scholarship, but the expectations are really high for parents, and especially if you're doling out $50, $100 a month, you know, and probably more, because you go to three or four tournaments. That’s a lot of money you're paying, you know, you're basically helping pay for their college already, just put that [money] in the bank and say, “Go play video games and do your homework.”

Leonardo described parents’ motivations for their child to play soccer, initially as “having fun.” However, he believed that as children got older, parents would view sports as a pathway to college by using sports as a way to obtain an athletic scholarship. He mentions that due to the high costs of sports participation and the low odds of attaining a scholarship, parents are likely

better off saving the money they are using to pay for sports for their children's college education. I was curious about this, so I asked Gio who also coached at the college level what was the likelihood of players being on scholarships:

> Well, it depends like at our level Division I, there's only 9.9 scholarships. So, if you think about it, the starting lineup is 11 players so it's not enough for the starting lineup. So its' not common, it's pretty much impossible to have a full ride from just athletics. You could be with athletics and academics and financial aid, but from athletics only, it's almost impossible. But what most coaches or programs try to do is to divide over 9.9 among as many players as they can. So it depends on program to program and each division is different because in Division II, they have a different amount of scholarship [inaudible] like athletic scholarship. Junior College has more scholarships, so it all depends.

Youth participants also bought into the idea of playing college soccer. Johnny's daughter, like many of the other youth I interviewed, had the goal of playing at the college level and Johnny supported this as he describes himself as not rich enough to afford her future education:

> I mean, her goal is school. She wants to play in college. That's her goal. You know, I mean, there's a lot of rich people in Vegas. We're not one of them, you know, I'm a carpenter, my wife, you know, she works. She's a buyer for some store. But we just, you know, we're not broke, but we're not rich.

Johnny and these other parents are using their current economic capital (money) to invest in their children's soccer participation at "competitive" clubs with the intent that this experience will provide them with the cultural, social, and symbolic capital needed for upward mobility in the form of a professional career in soccer or an athletic scholarship and ultimately more economic capital. Johnny described a situation where a parent was able to secure his daughter's spot on the club team by paying the coach (using economic capital) even though she was not as good as other girls who were trying out for the team. The "status" he is referring to is the types of capital that these clubs can offer, like exposure to scouts, that is not available to everyone. He spoke of an instance where he claims to have witnessed a parent paying a coach for their child's spot on the team:

> During the trial season, I went to a practice. And I saw someone cheering for his daughter who was questionable of making the team again. And he gave the coach an envelope of money. I seen it. He didn't do it discreetly. He just went up, "Here, for this year. Thank you." It's a status, right? To play on these, these elite teams, even if their kid isn't good enough. They're playing on these elite teams because they pay money or because they do favors for people. We don't know nobody, my daughter has to show up and do her quota work, you know, I think the biggest challenge is that it's all about, you know, how much money you have and things like that in Vegas. I think there are girls who shouldn't be playing in these leagues. That is the challenge of trying to get noticed by college coaches, but not having the money to do that.

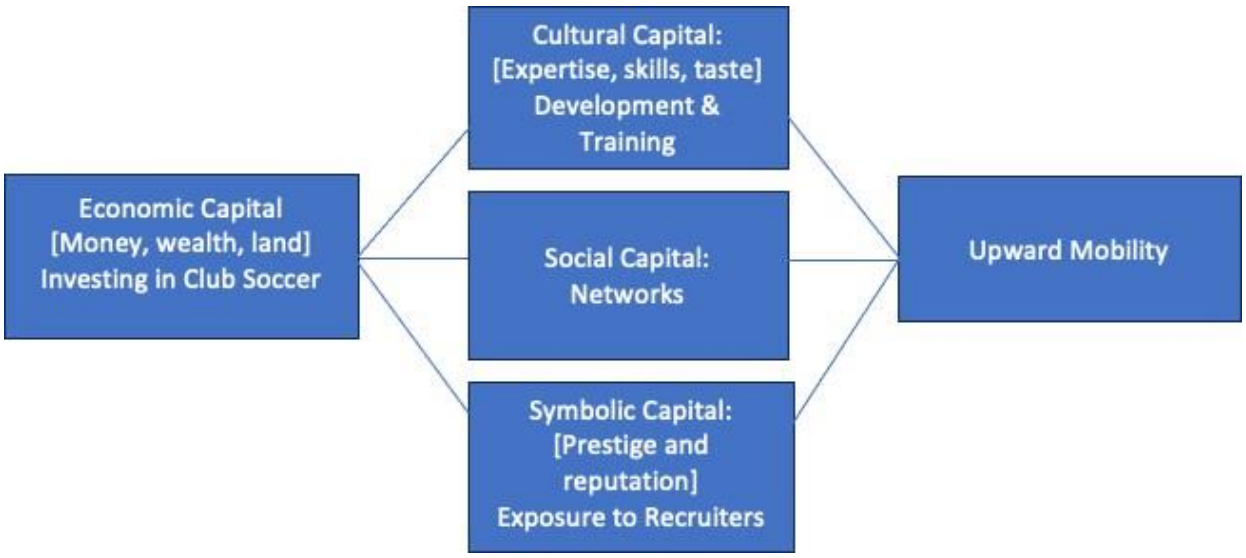
For Johnny, it seemed unfair that someone would get access to the "status" (capital) of the team without merit while kids like his daughter had to earn their spot. According to Bourdieu, "Economic capital is at the root of all the other types of capital" (Bourdieu 1990:252). However, earning their spot is only the first barrier to playing on these teams as the cost of participation (registration, coaching fees, uniform fees, traveling, and tournament fees) can limit access to kids who demonstrate talent but do not have the resources to continue playing. Johnny only recognized economic capital as an unfair advantage, but not other forms of capital. At one point during our interview, he mentioned how one of his daughter's coaches claimed she could help her play college soccer and that she would work with her to attain that goal:

> Alyssa Miller. Her sister plays in the US national team. She played for George Washington and she helped coach Stanford. So she has you know, she has her pedigree with all that. She really liked my daughter, and she said, "I can help her," and asked what our goals were. So I said, "Well she wants to go to college." She said, "I can get her in, guaranteed." And then we get a call from her saying that she just got offered a job as the assistant coach at Miami University. So she left and now we're stuck. Her and the head coach at the university here kind of butt heads. But she talked to us about how to write to coaches and those kinds of steps on how to get noticed by coaches and things like that. So, you know, the knowledge that, yeah, not everybody has.

The "knowledge" about how to talk to coaches and the necessary steps to play collegiate soccer are forms of cultural capital that not every parent or youth who wishes to play soccer at the college level has [and there's symbolic capital at work with the reputations for certain clubs, or

contacts like Alyssa Miller]. Cultural capital "refers to forms of formal and informal knowledge, educational qualifications, linguistic aptitude, competencies, and skills which a social agent possesses" (Spaaji 2011, 25). By acquiring cultural capital, Johnny and his daughter will be able to exchange it for economic capital when she attains some sort of upward social mobility by playing college soccer. The capital exchange takes place in "fields," which are "autonomous arenas within which actors and institutions mobilize their capital in an effort to capture the stakes — the distribution of capital — that are specific to it" (figure 2) (Appelrouth and Edles 2011: 455). Even though playing club soccer, learning the cultural capital that is necessary to play at the college level, and actually playing college soccer does not guarantee social mobility, Eitzen (2016) states that the skills that these players learn by playing sports make them more "well-rounded" and allows them to develop attitudes and behaviors that will benefit them in the occupational world.

Figure 2



Although most parents did want their child to either play professionally or play collegiate soccer, other parents were content enough with their child playing for fun or to stay healthy. like Sonia who said soccer has kept her son out of trouble. When I asked Ben what role he would like soccer to play in his son's life, he replied by saying:

> To stay healthy, if he could. If it could help them to go to college I would be happy. That's it. I know that a lot of people in my life think that I have this hidden secret fantasy of him going pro. And honestly, that's just not true. I just want him to have all the opportunities in the world he can have. If it turns into college, I would be thrilled. If it doesn't, I'm also fine with that.

Ben states that he would be happy if his child was able to play soccer at the college level, but that this was not his primary goal. His goal for his son was to be healthy and to have all the opportunities that he desired. After our interview, I asked Ben if he would be willing to allow his son to participate in an interview. His son was 13 and fit the criteria for the study so I asked if he could talk to his son to see if he would be willing to participate and he agreed. I followed up with Ben a few days later and he told me that after thinking about it, he didn't want to ask his son to participate. Ben didn't have any concerns about the study itself, he just felt that his son was juggling a lot with school, soccer, and private training sessions and that he didn't want to put more on his plate. "He's kinda needing to grow up fast in so many ways. We're not sure we want to do this now. I'm sorry." I completely understood and thanked him anyway for considering it.

Matt also deferred the purpose of playing soccer to his granddaughter, whom he wanted to make the decision over playing soccer: "Doesn't matter what role I want it to be. It's like, if she told me tomorrow, 'I don't want to play soccer anymore.' I would probably be hurt. It's like, now what the hell am I gonna do with my time? Right? Maybe I can start reading again. Maybe I can write my book." Matt felt that if his granddaughter no longer wanted to play soccer, he would find other ways to spend his time and even if it was a different choice than he wanted, he

wanted Lauren to do what she would like to whether that is playing soccer or not. Like Matt, a lot of the parents enjoyed actively participating in their children's soccer participation and even if they wanted a specific outcome for them — like playing in college or professionally, they understood the autonomy of their children. Regardless of ethnic background, many of the youth that I interviewed expressed a desire to play at the college level or to play professionally. Kenny (16-year-old boy), Lauren (13-year-old girl), and Brandon (13-year-old boy) all shared that their dreams were to play at the college level or to play professionally.

> Kenny: I have a plan. I'm getting a trial at an Academy. That's one step, and the next step is to just go from there, try to get the starting spot and try to move up to go play with the pros.
>
> Lauren: My ultimate goal with soccer is to play professionally for the US Women's National Team. So I want to get to that high level.
>
> Brandon: Getting scouted for a professional team. If I don't, I would like to be a veterinarian. I don't like English class because I don't like learning English but my favorite class would probably be health or science. If I were to get injured and I can't play pro, I would like to coach. I want to inspire people to make their dreams big.

These youth had a vision for themselves that included using soccer as a source of upward mobility. They spoke about the dedication and discipline they put into soccer so that they could achieve their dreams. Some had backup plans, like Brandon who would like to become a veterinarian if his dream of playing soccer does not work out. Others could not imagine doing anything else but playing professionally. And others, like Lupe, just enjoyed the game.

Lupe, a 13-year-old Mexican-American girl spoke about how playing soccer is a source of joy, "this just brings joy to us and helps relieve stress." Alán shared a similar sentiment:

> It's part of life, like, honestly, like, if I wasn't playing soccer right now, I wouldn't be doing anything on a Friday night. And you know, most people, especially people my age, like on a Friday night, are at a club or a concert, or go to a rave or something like that. I mean, I don't like any of those things. My thing is soccer.

Whether it's youth playing soccer for fun or dreaming about being the next big soccer star, soccer undoubtedly plays a big role in their lives. In a sense, playing soccer meant different things to different people. Some saw it as an opportunity for upward social mobility while others did not.

Cultural Capital and Perceptions of Competition in a Latinx Community League

Symbolic violence is an intangible form of violence that misrepresents underlying power relations (Appelrouth and Edles 2011). These power relations are perceived as normal and natural and work to reproduce a stratified social order (Appelrouth and Edles 2011). These acts of symbolic violence can cause a misrecognition of the social world (Appelrouth and Edles 2011) where "individuals accept the dominant values and the behavioral schema currently utilized in the field" (Cushion and Jones 2006: 144). Furthermore, the words used to describe or give meaning are "instruments of power." Those with power, have the power to name things.

According to its website, the Desert Valley Soccer League was established in 2005 and is located in the East side of Las Vegas. It currently has 15 youth teams and 40 adult teams and holds games all throughout the week. The league is commonly known in Las Vegas and referred to as the "Spanish Soccer League" because of the high number of Latinx participants and because of its association with Latinx spaces in Las Vegas. When I asked the president of the league why the league is known as the "Spanish Soccer League," Diego replied with this:

> Ahí te va, mira, nosotros le llamamos la Liga Mexicana porque así le pusieron los Americanos para distinguir entre la Liga Americana y la Liga Mexicana, pero la liga se llama Desert Valley Soccer League pero muchos le llaman la Liga Mexicana porque la verdad es donde juega la mayor gente hispana. . . Y por qué le llaman la Liga Mexicana? Precisamente por eso, porque primero jugamos acá, donde está la comunidad hispana, wn la Eastern y la Bonanza y Washington aquí es el área que le llaman donde estamos todos los Hispanos [en Las Vegas]. La liga Americana se maneja, pues allá arriba, en Summerlin, en Durango. Por aquel lado. Pero llega un momento, a mí me lo han dicho los clubes, es que nos enfadamos de jugar siempre con los mismos equipos. Queremos esa picardía de que de que le reclaman al árbitro y que sea pasión a la gente y que brinca y celebran por todo. Y el americano es más frío. Gol es, gol. Bravo, y ya. Le meten un gol, hasta a veces hasta lo aplauden . Y el hispa no. El Hispano es passion, el Hispano es

> de fanatismo y al árbitro se lo quieren comer y al niño le gritan, los motivan, meten un. Eso es lo que le gusta al americano y le llaman La Spanish Soccer League porque el ochenta por siento noventa por siento son equipos de hispanos y ellos vienen a jugar porque dicen que acá hay competencia.
>
> Look, we call it the Spanish Soccer League because that's what the Americans called it to distinguish between the American League and the Spanish Soccer League, but the league is called the Desert Valley Soccer League but many people call it the Spanish Soccer League because the truth is this is where most Hispanic people play. . . And why do they call it the Spanish Soccer League? Precisely for this reason, because we first played here, where the Hispanic community is. Eastern and Bonanza and Washington here is the area where all of us Hispanics are [in Las Vegas]. The American League is managed, well, up there, in Summerlin, in Durango. That way. But there comes a time, the clubs have told me, that "We get tired of always playing with the same teams. We want that mischief where they challenge the referee and the passion of the people where they jump and celebrate for everything." And the American is colder. A goal is a goal. Bravo. And that's it. They score a goal, sometimes they'll applaud it. But not the Hispanic. The Hispanic has passion. The Hispanic has fanaticism and they want to chew up the referee and they yell at the child, they motivate them. That is what the Americans likes and they call it the Spanish Soccer League because eighty percent and ninety percent are Hispanic teams and they come to play because they say there is competition here.

The league is well known throughout Las Vegas and most of my participants ranging from coaches, parents, and youth were familiar with the league. I attended various Spanish Soccer League games at a park in East Las Vegas. The site was the liveliest experience I had after three years of ethnographic work throughout various leagues and parks in Las Vegas. I first attended in August 2022 when I inquired about the space during my interviews. There were large speakers with cumbia (a Latin genre of music) playing, food like tortas (Mexican sandwiches) and aguas frescas (sweet, water-based fruit or seed drinks), and an overwhelming sense of family and community. The imagery was distinct from other field sites I observed. Although it was not uncommon to see vendors and small pockets of community in the other leagues, this was the first time I witnessed it at this scale. The participants I interviewed for this study described the space in various ways, depending on their perceptions and experiences. Johnny described the Spanish Soccer League in the following way:

> Spanish Soccer League is [long pause] Spanish Soccer League is more for people who have less money. And I hate to use this word but like really ghetto-ish. They bring that type of like energy, they bring bells [are loud]. Like, if it's a lot bigger than it is — it's only Spanish Soccer League, it's no big deal you know what I mean. To me, it's less than a regular club league.

Johnny refers to the Spanish Soccer League as "ghetto" and associates it with people who are poor and loud—all terms that have been used to racialize marginalized groups. He perceives it as "less than" more elite club because of these characteristics. A brawl broke out during one of my observations at the Spanish Soccer leaguer which may "affirm" Johnny's comment about fighting behavior being seen as "ghetto" and could reaffirm the negative perception that exists of Latinx people as violent. However, this experience is not unique to Latinx spaces, violence is as much an inherent component of White American culture as is evident in the inception of this country. This experience offered me a more holistic view of this social space – that aside from its unique sense of community there also exists moments of tension, disagreement, and power struggles. Lorena described it as lacking structure, something that elite clubs offered: "Oh, there's no structure in the Spanish Soccer League! Yeah, they mix the children's ages in the Spanish Soccer League, they call whatever they feel like calling. And then when you play in the American League, you know, it's more organized. Everybody has to look like a team." Lorena speaks to a concern I heard from various parents, youth, and coaches that some teams allow players of any age to play, which can sometimes be an unfair advantage. Despite comments like Johnny's, a lot of parents and players deliberately looked to participate in the Spanish Soccer League to "toughen up" or attain a certain level of ruggedness that they felt was missing from club teams. Kenny, a 16-year-old boy said he liked to play in the Spanish Soccer League because playing with adults helped him be a better, faster player with kids his age:

> Spanish Soccer League is with grown-up adults, that's how I really improved. It's different playing for that team. His guys are very fast and they're very strong. Everything

> is fast paced, from the touches to the passes to everything. And then when I go back to my club, with people my age, I feel like they're slow in a sense, they're not as fast.

When I asked Kenny how his parents felt about him playing in the Spanish Soccer League with grown-ups, he said his father was supportive of him developing his skills there. Other parents like Johnny and Matt also wanted their children to play in the Spanish Soccer League during the off-season to stay in shape. These parents paint a picture of an affordable, yet unstructured organization that is associated with negative Latinx stereotypes of being "ghetto" and essentially less-than. Most participants did speak to the unstructured disposition of the league, especially when it came to the league's failure to enforce strict age guidelines. Some youth team coaches would deliberately use players who were older than the team age group to have an unfair advantage over other teams. This is in large part why it is viewed as unstructured or unorganized. Matt, the grandfather of one of the youths I also interviewed described it in a different light, speaking to its more unique, positive qualities:

> They've got the best snack bar in town! Oh, they got the taco trucks, the elotes, the elotero comes by you know? Actually, honestly, it's more fun. It may be not be as competitive. But it's a fun [environment], just let kids go play. And you feel that sense of community with the Mexican community or the Latino community — Mexican is just a blanket statement. That's false for Las Vegas and anywhere else, but you just feel that sense of community out there that people are out there to, you know, have fun. Let's play some soccer, you know?

Matt's description reflected my observations during my time there. The great food and overall sense of joy and community was palpable. There were teens and older adults of all ages, genders, and nationalities playing. The latter spoke to Matt's point that "Spanish Soccer League" is a blanket statement since I heard different Central American and Latin American accents during my time there. I observed firsthand the Latinx banter that I was privy to when I would attend my brothers' games in Los Angeles. Diego, the director of the league also spoke to individuals participating in the league because of its uniqueness:

> Ellos siempre me lo han dicho "Diego, nosotros venimos a jugar a la Liga Mexicna porque aquí está el talento. Aquí está la Picardía del Hispano, Aquí te puedes encontrar mexicanos, Brasileños, Argentinos [inaudible] aquí andan los niños y hay niños que realmente los papás no los apoyan, verdad? No hay apoyo. Los papás trabajan casi todo el día, los niños llegan al campo en bicicletas, llegan al campo en bus, llegan al campo de raite, caminando y tú los ves . Y entonces vienen los clubes y traen al anglosajón este que es bueno físicamente, pero técnicamente no es bueno. Y acá la raza, pues se la pasan jugando, termina el juego y siguen jugando. Encuentran pedazo de calle, ellos juegan. Eso es lo que buscan.
>
> And they have always told me, "Diego, we come to play in the Spanish Soccer League because the talent is here. The ***cunningness*** of the Hispanic is here. Here you can find Mexicans, Brazilians, Argentines [inaudible]. Children hang out here and there are children whose parents don't really support them. There is no support. The parents work almost all day, the children arrive at the field on bicycles, they arrive at the field by bus, they arrive at by finding rides to the field, by walking. And then the clubs come and bring the Anglo-Saxon player who is physically good, but skillfully not good. And here the raza, because they spend all their time playing, the game ends and they continue playing. They find a piece of street, and they play. That is what they are looking for.

Spanish Soccer League offers a specific type of capital – the "cunningness" that participants use to describe it is a form of cultural capital as well, though one that is not recognized as one. The Spanish Soccer League was described as a competitive place to play by club participants but not in the same sense that they described the competitiveness of clubs (as spaces that provide capital and opportunities for social mobility)—this type of competition is based on a perceived, innate, physical skill born out of "grit." Brazilian soccer players have been known to play a specific style of *footbal*l known as Ginga which means to sway with artistic, and joyous flair (Uehara et al 2020). Like the Spanish Soccer League, Ginga is an unorthodox style of play that was associated with people like Pelé who were often viewed in a negative (and often racialized) light. Once Ginga was seen as a form of embodied cultural capital that could help teams win games, it was acknowledged as a legitimate style of play.

As I will discuss in the next chapter, leagues like the Spanish Soccer League are not recognized by most participants who seek club teams as leagues that are valid, structured, or

even worthy and participants make the distinction between other club leagues and leagues like the Spanish Soccer League. However, these leagues are spaces that are used by club participants to shape club players so that they pick up on the "street" flair, increase competitiveness, and become better than their club counterparts. I argue that the Spanish Soccer League is rich in what Tara Yosso (2005) refers to as *community cultural wealth*, "the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged" (p. 69). While it is true that communities of color lack some forms of cultural capital, it is typically due to the histories of social, political, and economic exclusion that they have faced. As a result, the structural arrangements that would otherwise provide a leveled playing field for all fail to provide these marginalized communities with the opportunities and exposure to said capital and fail to recognize the contributions and specific forms of cultural capital that these communities do hold.

Luna and Martinez (2013) argue that "community cultural wealth shifts the view from a deficit perspective to the assets that communities of color acquire" (3). As I previously discussed in chapter five some participants spoke to some of the assets of the Spanish Soccer league, while other participants held deficit and even negative views about the Spanish Soccer League. The participants that viewed the league as an unstructured league that does not offer the same level of exposure as other club teams still had their children participate in the Spanish Soccer League to refine their skills or "toughen up." This raises questions about what the Spanish Soccer Leagues has to offer that is not found in other club teams. The Spanish Soccer League was described by other participants as a culturally rich, communal space where people come together to share their love for soccer in a space that has great food and community, qualities they said they did not often find in other clubs. The league held community events for families with gifts, food, and

music like their “Por Amor a la Humanidad” Christmas event (“For the Love of Humanity) in December 2023. This league also had people like Diego who have a certain cultural capital about using soccer as a means for social mobility since his son plays professional soccer. But because of the way the Spanish Soccer League is racialized (as a place that is “less than” others) and seen through a deficit lens, it is difficult for some to imagine this league as a place that is rich in cultural capital.

Another form of capital that is available in the Spanish Soccer League is aspirational capital. Aspirational capital refers to “the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers” and makes up part of Yosso’s community cultural wealth model (Yosso 2005:77). Participants like Diego and his son continued to aspire that soccer participation could potentially materialize into opportunities for social mobility. While not all participants saw soccer as a vehicle for social mobility, others did regardless of the low likelihood of this happening. More generally, spaces like the Spanish Soccer League also offer Latinx people with the opportunity to reimagine what their life could look like, like having cultural spaces where folks can build community and reinforce their ethnic identity.

Bourdieu defines a “field” as a relatively autonomous social space where individuals and organizations can use their capital (Appelrouth and Edles 2011). In this case, the field happens to be an actual soccer field where parents, players, and coaches interact to exchange their capital while working to acquire more capital. In this field, individuals accept dominant values that conceal existing power relations (Kim 2004). These hidden power relations and the internalization of dominant values lead individuals to consent to the symbolic violence that they experience. Although Diego spoke fervidly about his frustration of not having his league or credentials recognized by the other clubs, he also fell into the trap of thinking of the leagues’

participants in a deficit manner. When I asked Diego if there were any barriers that were stopping his league from growing, he said:

> Como liga, seguimos creciendo. Ajá, no hay ningún impedimento nobelio. . . pero a qué horas crees que lleguen al campo? El Americano, si el juego es a las ocho de la mañana, a qué horas crees que llegan? 7:20-7:30. Y el hispano llega a las 8:00-8:05 barriendose, va poneindose los zapatos apenas cambiándose y el otro ya está listo para jugar y este apenas ni calienta nomas se mete pero con la capacidad y calidad que tiene y la calidad les alcanza para eso y más. Entonces el impedimento que te puedo decir es disciplina. Digo, he mirado tanto jugador que llega a la liga y dicen, 'este niño es un crack que está haciendo aquí? Si puede para dar más, pero no tiene una disciplina.
>
> As a league, we continue to grow. Aha, there is no barrier there. . . but what time do you think players arrive at the field? The American, if the game is at eight in the morning, what time do you think they arrive? 7:20-7:30. And the Hispanic arrives at 8:00-8:05 dragging himself, putting on his shoes and changing while the other one is ready to play. This one hardly even warms up, he just gets in with the capacity and quality he has. So the only barrier that I can tell you is discipline. I mean, I've had people come to the league and say, "This kid is a beast. What is he doing here?" He can do better, but he lacks discipline.

Diego's comments about the lack of disciplined within the Latinx community may be valid, but could also overlook how people from this community have to navigate things like work, school, and soccer. Kids like Ivan have the desire to play soccer and could develop the "discipline" to play soccer, but they are doing this while working and attending school with less resources and capital than youth from families with higher incomes. Mario, a youth soccer coach also claimed that Latinx people lacked vision and did not see the potential that soccer could offer them in terms of social mobility. "Muchos de los Hispanos, nomas lo toman como un deporte, no, no ven la no tienen la visión de que pueden ayudarse por medio del deporte, adquirir una beca escolar." ("Many of the Hispanics, they just take it as a sport, no, they don't see it, they don't have the vision that they can help themselves through sports, to acquire a scholarship"). Suddenly, Gio's comment about Latinos not using soccer for social mobility made sense to me. I observed this tension during the time I conducted this research and it was a strain within the

Latinx community that was the result of differing opinions about the role that soccer should play in the community. Some participants felt that the sport should be used as a site of social mobility to advance their economic and social status, either by acquiring a scholarship to play soccer at the college level or to play professionally. Others did not share the same sentiment and instead focused on the joy they got to experience by playing soccer or being a part of the social space at the parks during the games. And some shared a bit both. The next chapter will discuss how Latinx people rely on soccer participation to establish a sense of ethnic identity and community after migrating to the U.S.

CHAPTER 6: THE ROLE OF SOCCER IN THE LATINX COMMUNITY

In this chapter, I examine the role that *fútbol* — soccer —plays in the Latinx community in Las Vegas. Many Latinx immigrants leave behind their families and communities when they leave their native countries. As a result, they seek to maintain a sense of their ethnic identity, seek community, and create counter-spaces and they often do these things by playing soccer in spaces like parks (Price and Whitworth 2004; Trouille 2021). According to Scott Waalkes (2017), "soccer is a global culture, a global language and a global community of play . . . It creates participation in a transnational community" (p. 174). For the Latinx community in the U.S., soccer is not just a source of entertainment, it also provides a site for creating social ties, especially for Latinx immigrants who have limited access to social spaces and networks (Trouille 2021). Soccer's role in the Latinx community has been explored in previous studies, such as Figueroa's (2003) on Mexican farmworkers in Salinas, California, Price and Whitworth's (2004) on Latinx immigrants of mostly Central American heritage in Washington D.C., Messeri's (2008) on Latinx immigrants in Richmond California, and Trouille's (2021) on Latino men in Los Angeles, California. Yet soccer's place in Latinx life in the US remains understudied and the communal spaces where people play and connect have not been fully-documented.

I seek to center the experiences of Latinx people to understand the role that soccer plays in their community. I do this by using the first tenet of LatCrit (that draws from the original Critical Race Theory tenets) which focuses on "the centrality of race and racism and intersectionality with other forms of subordination" (Solorzano and Delgado Bernal 2001: 312). Latinx Critical Legal Theory is an analytical framework developed around 1995 by scholar-activists. Its goal is to center the diverse experiences of Latinx people while seeking to create social change (Gonzalez, Matambandazo, and Martinez 2021). LatCrit aims to fill any gaps

around Latinx issues that are absent in Critical Race Theory. CRT recognizes that racism is endemic by acknowledging how racism exists ordinarily across all facets of society—including sports—and seeks justice, liberation, and economic empowerment for those living at the margin (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). LatCrit includes experiences of xenophobia, nativism, and language discrimination that are not dimensions covered in CRT. LatCrit not only continues to see race and racism as an endemic part of society that needs to be acknowledged in order to work towards dismantling it, but it extends the focus of the CRT tenets to include how race intersects with other forms of oppression (Solorzano and Delgado Bernal 2001). This includes but is not limited to, xenophobia (prejudice towards immigrants), nativism (policies that protect and emphasize "native-born" interests), language discrimination, and exclusion (Pérez-Huber 2010). I argue that soccer as a counter-space is a critical component that demonstrates that racism exists ordinarily throughout society. If racism did not exist, there would be no need for soccer to play a role as a counter-space for Latinx people like those in this study.

The Role of Soccer in Identity-Making for Latinx Immigrants

Latinx migration to the U.S. has increased substantially since the 1960's due in part to the economic and political climate in Mexico and Central America (Hamilton & Stotlz Chinchilla 1991). Between the 1980's and 1990's, the U.S. promoted both domestic and international neoliberal policies that affected Latin America (Zepeda-Millán 2017). Facing an economic crisis from the devaluation of the peso, Mexico entered into the North American Free Trade Agreement with Canada and the U.S. thinking it would be able to create new jobs and prompt a stimulated economy. Instead, Mexico found itself unable to compete with transnational U.S. corporations that dominated Mexico's agricultural industry, pushing Mexican farmworkers out of the competition. Having lost their livelihoods, Mexican farmworkers were "forced to migrate"

to the U.S. (Frazier and Reisinger 2006: 266). Unlike prior migration, which was often seasonal and temporary, (such as with the Bracero Program where Mexicans migrated to the U.S. as temporary agricultural workers before returning to their homes in Mexico) Mexican migrants settled in the U.S. because of tighter immigration policies and heavier border militarization (Andreas 2008).

In addition to this, the U.S. was also interfering in diplomatic matters that caused economic conflict and war throughout Central America (Hamilton and Stotlz Chinchilla 1991). Countries like El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras battled with U.S. backed dictatorships that fueled conflict and war along with economic destabilization (Hamilton and Stotlz Chinchilla 1991). People from these countries responded to the danger and instability in Latin American countries, partly influenced by U.S. policy, by attempting to move to U.S. for physical safety and economic stability. However, Latinx immigrants' experiences migrating to the U.S. differ from that of other immigrants – specifically European immigrants. Latinx people are an ethnic group that has experienced racialization along with discrimination, shaping their experience in the U.S. (Jimenez 2008; Saenz and Douglas 2015; Flores-Gonzalez 2017). Consequently, Latinx people from Mexico and Central America have sought to maintain a sense of their ethnic identity and cultural ties, seek community, and create counter-spaces in the U.S. One of the ways Latinx people carve out cultural spaces is through their participation in Latinx soccer leagues (Price and Whitworth 2004).

I first encountered this cultural space in Las Vegas in August of 2022 after various mentions of the "Spanish Soccer League" from participants I was interviewing. Alán, a 24-year-old youth I interviewed for this study played in the Spanish Soccer League and offered to invite me to one of his games near downtown Las Vegas. The league met Wednesdays, Thursdays, and

Fridays in the evenings and the parks they played at varied depending on the day. Alán had messaged me the details about a game later than evening at a park off of East St. Louis Avenue and Maryland Parkway. I agreed to show up and asked him for the rest of the details. Later that evening, I pulled up to the park but because so many people were there, I struggled to find parking. I ended up parking in the additional parking spaces between the park and a church. As I pulled into a space behind the church, Alán messaged me again asking if I was able to find parking and let me know he would meet me by the entrance, "I'll meet ya by the entrance of the field. I have a pink shirt on. And a husky lol."

I made my way over to the entrance looking for a man in a pink shirt. As I entered the fields, I immediately felt a sense of home when I heard the music blasting through the powered speakers. There were giant speakers next to the entrance that was playing "Cumbia Sampuesana" by Aniceto Molina — a Colombian artist. I recognized the trills of the accordion and the drumming of the beat because it was a song my mom often played while I was growing up. The smell of delicious food danced around the air, and I immediately looked around trying to locate the food area to see what they were selling. I saw a lady off the right of the entrance with a table set up who was preparing food. Curious to see what she was making, I made my way over to the table. I read the handmade sign on a whiteboard that read "Tortas (Mexican Sandwiches), Fruta (fruit), Aguas Frescas (drinks made of sweet fruits/seeds)."

I stood by for a moment, taking in the scenery and scanning through the park. I saw families standing or sitting on the sidelines of the fields, people playing soccer, and little kids running around with their own ball or other toys. Some people seemed invested in the games going on, either watching or yelling at the players or referee. Others were socializing and having their own conversations. Having spent a lot of time in soccer games in Los Angeles, the space

and community felt like I never left home. I wanted to buy a torta but wanted to wait until I found Alán when I suddenly saw him enter the park with his dog. I quickly caught up to him and said “Hi.” We walked a little further down the sideline until he found his team and began to change into his uniform but before that, he set up a folding chair he brought for me to sit on. I was used to sitting on the ground on the sidelines when making my observations at other parks for other teams, so I was grateful for his offering. I sat and waited for Alan’s game to start. Even though it was 9 pm, it was still a warm August summer night in the Las Vegas Valley though the hot wind gave off a nice breeze that was a break from the usual dry, desert heat.

From where I was sitting, I could make out three or four small soccer fields that divided the larger fields with small orange cones. There were kids of various ages playing all around the sidelines and on any unoccupied field space they could find. They took turns playing the goalkeeper as the other kids kicked the ball towards the goal. I heard a woman from a distance say, “No pelen” “don’t fight” to two young kids who were fighting over a ball. People seemed very happy, engaging in banter and jokes as they either waited on the sidelines or took breaks from the game. A man close to me started to sing while he changed into his jersey and prepared to start his game. “Aqui estamos. Porque acá fue donde nos puso la vida. Dejé todo. Mis amigos, mi familia, y mi ilusión.” The song translates to “Here we are. Because this is where life put us. I left everything. My friends, my family, and my dreams.” I quickly recognized the song as “La Casita” “Little home” by Banda MS. “Little home” is a melancholic song about an immigrant who misses his native country and his mother’s cooking.

After the first half, I made my way over to the snack bar to buy a torta. Two younger girls helped the woman who was cooking by taking orders and charging customers. I ordered a torta de jamon (ham sandwich) and a water. “Con chile?” the woman asked, too focused on the bread

on the grill to look up at me. “Si,” I said to her question asking if I wanted chili in my sandwich. Once my food was ready, I thanked them, paid them, and made my way back to my seat.

I could not get over how much this space reminded me of the soccer leagues in Los Angeles. When I used to go to my siblings or uncle’s games in Los Angeles, I could always find a food or fruit vendor. I could usually spot them by the big, colorful, rainbow umbrellas they would attach to their carts or stands. The parks in Los Angeles were usually also riddled with Latin music and were always packed with families and friends that made these games into a family event and who often stayed to socialize way after the games were over. Like the leagues there, it seemed like this league was a space with a lot of cultural significance that extended beyond soccer. “These leagues do more than create a social outlet; they actively assemble a shared memory of place” (Price and Whitworth 2004:183). After conducting research for three years in other parts of Las Vegas, this was the first time I found a place like this.

Soccer is described as “a cultural necessity” for Latinx people. It is not just a game, but a way of life where people find the time and space to interact with family, friends, and their community (Figueroa 2003; Price and Whitworth 2004). As Figueroa (2003) notes, Mexican immigrants who worked as part of the 1943 Bracero Program (a program created by Congress to provide the U.S. with agricultural labor), eventually settled into California, bringing their families, their pastimes, and a sense of community (Figueroa 2003). He notes that “Mexican immigrants in Salinas created the Salinas Soccer League as a way to promote or negotiate their culture and identity” (Figueroa 2003: 20). Angela, the mother of two boys that played soccer said, “I think it's just it's in our, in our blood, it's in our culture, the kids love it. My husband has always played even after he graduated and everything.” Angela describes soccer as being part of her culture and something her husband and children enjoy participating in. Other participants

would also allude to their cultural background or say, “it’s in our blood.” I asked Jenny, a 14-year-old Mexican-American girl, what soccer meant to her community and she replied with, “Honestly, I don’t even know. It’s just something we have in our blood.” My sense is that participants like Jenny and Angela meant that soccer simultaneously links past to present, ancestors to today’s communities, and a person’s sense of self to the broader Latinx identity.

Lorena, a parent of a teen boy who plays soccer in Las Vegas described it as a connection to their home country, “I mean, soccer is huge. And for the Hispanic community, I just, I think that's the sport that they grew up with whatever state they come from [in] Mexico, and it's probably a connection that they have with their roots back home.” This connection to soccer she talks about is a connection to one’s personal identity, something someone “grew up” playing in their home country. Thus, soccer plays an important role in maintaining that sense of identity in a new country. Soccer is also a connection to the Latinx community as a whole, not just to ones’ sense of self. Isela says that soccer is a way for parts of the Latinx community to come together. “For the Hispanic community in general, I've seen how much the Hispanic culture comes together when the World Cup is active, you see more people out in the [soccer] fields. So, I don't know, I can't explain it. I just feel like it brings the culture together.” Isela mentions how the Latinx community comes together to play soccer when the World Cup is happening. In a sense, watching soccer during that time and following their home team may not be enough to satisfy a cultural need, so people come together to play together. Given the important role soccer seems to play in many Latinx people’s lives, I needed to investigate what prompted soccer participation in Las Vegas. Javier, a former professional soccer player from Guadalajara, Jalisco who now lives in Las Vegas and specializes in training players who play the goalkeeper position offered his perspective on why Latinx people seek to participate in soccer after migrating to the U.S.:

> Por salud mental. Para mí es importante a donde vayamos. Es difícil dejar nuestro país y siempre que lo dejamos buscamos traernos la mayor cantidad de cosas posibles de allá, buscamos que haya comida que consumimos allá, buscamos la señal para ver a nuestro equipo [de fútbol] en México. Buscamos jugar fútbol. Te repito todo eso para mí, es por salud mental. Porque si no, no pudiéramos vivir. O sea, sería muy complicado llegar grandes a este país y adaptarnos nada más cien por siento a la vida de aquí. Sí nos adaptamos, pero buscamos comer Chile, buscamos comer tortillas, buscamos ver a nuestro equipo en la tele, pagamos por verlo en la television.
>
> For mental health. Wherever we go, its important. It is difficult to leave our country and whenever we leave it, we try to bring as many things as possible from there, we look for food that we eat there, we look for the [television] signal to watch our [soccer] team in Mexico, we seek to play soccer. I'll repeat it, it is for our mental health. Because if not, we would be unable to live. In other words, it would be very difficult to get to this country and just adapt one hundred percent to life here. We do adapt, but we seek to eat chili, we seek to eat tortillas, we seek to see our team on television and we pay to see it on television.

Javier touched on the challenges most Latinx immigrants face when they leave their native countries and some of the ways they combat those difficulties, which include bringing their cultural practices to the U.S., seeking to eat cultural foods, and searching for soccer games to watch their home teams play. Having never left my hometown of Los Angeles before moving to Las Vegas for graduate school, I related a little bit to what Javier said. Although I am only four hours away from what I have always called home, I often felt homesick and missed my family and community. Doing this research was almost healing in a way for me since it allowed me to connect to my community. This was especially the case when I discovered the Spanish Soccer League as not all leagues in Las Vegas provide the same sense of community — at least for Latinx people like me.

Javier went on to explain how these factors are an effort to combat mental health issues immigrants can experience like feelings of loss, uncertainty, and insecurity associated with migration. "The soccer leagues offer a much-needed space where recent immigrants can gather to spend time with co-ethnics, speak their native language, and enjoy cuisine from their native

countries (Price and Whitworth 2004:179). Javier also alludes to this connection to one's sense of home and identity as an effort to resist or negotiate complete assimilation. He states that "it would be very difficult to get to this country and just adapt one hundred percent to life here." Thus, soccer is one-way Latinx immigrants can maintain connection to their culture. Diego (the president of the Spanish Soccer League in Las Vegas, a league played primarily by Latinx people) shared a similar sentiment as Javier. Diego speaks to why soccer has a huge following by the Latinx community in the U.S.

> Porque que es la manera como de identificarse de la gente con nuestro México, con decir 'Ay, es que extraño mi tierra y yo nunca tuve la posibilidad de ir a ver a la selección allá, aquí si puedo ir' y jueguen hasta con el equipo, Pa ir con la gente . . . Entonces, eso también esa es otra, de que pues la gente busca esa situación [segiuir el fútbol].
>
> Because it's the way people identify with our Mexico, by saying "Oh, I miss my land and I never had the chance to go see the national team there, but here I can go" and even play with the team, go with the people. . . So, that's also another reason that well, people look for that situation [to follow soccer].

These two Mexican immigrant men shed light on what fútbol means to their community and the role it comes to play in their lives. Leagues like the Spanish Soccer League offer them the social and communal space to reaffirm their sense of identity and can guard from mental health issues. It is also a space where they can maintain a connection to their culture and/or hometown. "The organization of the leagues . . . suggests that this cultural practice is also about memory of home, or at least some idealized perception of home" (Porter and Whitworth 2004:179). Soccer allows people like Javier and Diego have a transnational connection to the passion they share for the soccer and their homelands.

Colonialism offers another piece of the picture of why soccer is such a significant sport for a lot of Latinx people. Soccer originated in Britain in the 19th Century and by the early 20th century had spread throughout Europe (Rollin, Bernard and Giulianotti 2024). The British

introduced soccer to Spain at the end of the 19th century (Rollin, Bernard and Giulianotti 2024), the country that colonized Mexico and other parts of Latin America. Soccer has its origins in Mexico around this same time (Navarro 2023). The sport was widely accepted in Mexico, likely due to the resemblance to *Tlachtli,* a game the Aztecs played over 3,000 years ago where players used their elbows, knees, and hips to knock a rock ball into their opponent's ring or goal at the opposite end of the court (Brittanica 2019). When I asked Alán, a 24-year-old youth soccer player why soccer was predominant among Latinx people, he responded by saying,

> Well, it's interesting, you mentioned that because my major is in history. So of course, Latin America was mainly colonized by the Spanish and Soccer in Spain is a huge thing. But when it comes to Latin America, specifically, we were colonized, mainly by the British. So sports like you know, baseball and stuff like that [are big]. . . as compared to you know, this, the countries that gained their independence until like the 1800s, or 1900s. For some of them, Mexico, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, all like soccer predominance. So if you were to ask me, I would think that's why soccer is so predominant over there, as compared to here, where it's about one of the smallest sports as compared to you know, American football, baseball, basketball, stuff like that.

Here, Alán discusses how soccer came to be a significant sport for those in Latin America because of colonization and why at a broader scale, was not initially as popular among Americans in the U.S. Historically, sport has been used as a form of colonial control — basketball was in part a colonial project that was used by America to "mold and restructure" the Philippines under the guise of modernism (Antolihao 2015). Similarly, soccer was brought to Latin American countries by Europeans in the early 1900's (Figueroa 2003). This can help us understand another reason why soccer may play a role in the Latinx community since it is an ethnic community that has experienced colonization. Even the name used in the U.S. to refer to the sport varies from most of the rest of the world.

Arthur is an English coach who played professionally in England and now coaches a girls academy team in Las Vegas and states, "I suppose the irony of things — it's called 'football.'

You know, and the word 'soccer' came from the Football Association." Although the term "soccer" originated in Britain, the British opted for the term "football" once Americans adopted the term "soccer." Despite this, it continues to be referred to as *fútbol* throughout Latin America. Arthur states that Europeans have a wider worldview than Americans today, which to him contributes to how soccer is experienced:

> So here's your problem, in a massive country, you've got everything here [in the U.S.] that you need. Right? So, so there's not so much of a worldview of anything. So I know people who've never been out of the state of Nevada, right? But if you live in England, you go more than 60 miles, you're gonna fall in the sea. And if you drove for six hours, you could be halfway through France, you know, so people have a more a worldview.

Arthur argues that ethnocentrism — the inability to understand or accept cultural practices different from one's own — also plays a role in what sports are played in the U.S. and how they are viewed. Soccer was framed as an effeminate sport in the U.S., which was seen as antithetical to American values (Allison 2018). Soccer was also perceived as less American because it was associated with immigrants and foreigners (Allison 2018). It was not until the 1990's that soccer began to grow in the U.S. among suburban, White youths — specifically among girls (Allison 2008). In a way, it is almost as if soccer has been a significant sport in much of the rest of the world *except* in the U.S. as is evident by the largest sporting event in the world — the World Cup. Despite its popularity throughout the world, for Latinx people, specifically immigrants, soccer is more than just a sport.

Sonia, a mother of three who was originally from Guatemala and appeared to be in her early fifties, shared how she felt that going to the parks was a need for the Latinx community: "Para la comunidad de nosotros. Bueno, nosotros ahorita cuando mi hijo no tiene partidos, como que nos hace falta. Ya bueno, no sé si es rutina o es pasion, pero, no se nos hace falta ir al campo, nos hace falta ver a la gente" ("For our community. Well, right now that my son doesn't

have games we kind of need it. Well, I don't know if it's routine or if it's passion, but we need to go to the field, we need to see the people"). Sonia became involved in these soccer spaces because of her son's soccer participation. However, Sonia talks about "needing" to go to the games in the parks while being unable to make the distinction between routine or passion. She speaks of the importance of these soccer spaces to the Latinx community — demonstrating that for some Latinx people, soccer is a cultural need where community and kinship ties can be developed. Christine was a 32-year-old mother of two who also described her involvement in her son's soccer participation as a routine that is necessary.

> I think I've just gotten used to it. Cuz I said, like I said, we've been on the field for about 12 years now. It's just normal to us. So I don't know. There's really no managing. It's just the routine. When we're not out there. It's like, we feel like something's missing. It's almost like a family, like you just know, everyone that's on the team. I don't know how to explain it. It just feels like it's small. Even throughout the years, like, parents of kids that they started playing with, like 10 years ago, I still keep in touch, even if it's just through Facebook.

Christine went on to describe the soccer connections she made with some of the other parents as a "family." She talked about keeping in touch even if their children were no longer playing on the same teams. Both Sonia and Christine talk about their involvement in soccer as a routine, passion, and a need. Christine described feeling as if something was missing when they did not attend games, confirming that soccer spaces can fill a void or satisfy a cultural need. This need extends beyond what soccer as a sport can offer and speaks to the ties and connections formed off the field.

Compadrazgo: Kinship Ties in Latinx Spaces

Compadrazgo is an essential cultural value among Latinx people that stresses the importance to provide mutual support, networks, and promote a sense of belonging and community (Thornton 1994; Gill-Hopple and Brage-Hudson 2012). Compadrazgo (roughly

translated as “coparenthood” or “godparenting”) refers to the fictive kinship ties that exist among Mexican and Mexican-American people (Thornton 1994; Gill-Hopple and Brage-Hudson 2012). In the larger Latinx community, fictive kinship ties stem from symbolic commitments and traditional practices among people who may not be related by blood, but specifically for people who are linked together through godparenting (Thornton 1994; Ebaugh and Curry 2000; Gill-Hopple and Brage-Hudson 2012). These fictive kinship ties functions as extended family networks that are critical to conserve cultural practices and social ties among the Mexican community (Thornton 1994). According to Gill-Hopple and Brage-Hudson (2012), there is a gap in the literature that examines the current practice of *compadrazgo* in the U.S. While compadrazgo has been used to mostly describe ties between parents and godparents (who refer to each other as comadre or compadre), here I will be using it as it extends to larger communal ties among Latinx people.

Participants spoke about the overall sense of community and *compadrazgo* — the familial interconnectedness that exists in the Latinx community. Diego addressed this concept of compadrazgo as *compadrismo,* “Compadrismo le llamamos nosotros. La carne asada, la fiesta. El Americano va por cumplir compromiso.” “We call it compadrismo. The *carne asada* (barbeque), the parties. The [White] American is going to just to fulfill a commitment.” Here, Diego is using the term “American” to describe the white racial group and distinguish it from the Latinx ethnic group while also making the distinction between Latinx people and White peoples’ involvement or participation in soccer spaces. Diego argues that White Americans show up, play, and then leave once the game is over. Latinx people, on the other hand, may show up because of their or their child’s soccer game, but will stay to socialize, barbeque, and have a good time. For some Latinx people, soccer provides them the opportunity to fill a cultural/relational void here in the

U.S., which they seek to fill with the connections they make in these spaces. Like Christine, Alán spoke about the relationships with his soccer team outside of playing soccer and described what that looked like:

> We're all kind of like a soccer family. So they'll bring like drinks, you know, they'll drink there and stuff like that, or like some invite me over to their house and party and stuff like that, we'll have like secret Santa – it's like a second family. So the culture there and that connection and the relationship that they have is way beyond yourself.

Other participants spoke to the lack of *compadrazgo* they encountered when playing for more elite soccer clubs in Las Vegas. Ben was one of the parents I interviewed who was an architect and adjunct professor at a university. He appeared to be in his 40's and had one son who played in a more elite club at the time of our interview but had previously played in a smaller, "Hispanic" league. Having this experience made him privy to some of the distinctions between these teams. When I asked Ben what his relationship with other parents looked like, he replied:

> You know, it varies. It varies, based on the club. I've noticed, the higher the level of the club, the more serious the parents are and the less interaction I have with them. These independent clubs, you know, they would talk about getting together outside of, you know, doing things with the kids and stuff like that. But like right now I'm up here in Salt Lake for this Olympic Development Program and regional competitions and stuff like that and these kids get out of practice and they eat and go to sleep. There's no, there's no going to the movies or anything like that. So I don't have much interaction with any of the parents at all. We update each other, if it's going to be late, or if something changes, but that's kind of kind of the extent of it.

Ben expressed how prior to his son playing in more elite clubs, he played in teams with majority Latinx families and how their interactions were different as they did spend time together outside of just soccer. Johnny also spoke about the lack of compadrazgo in these elite clubs. Johnny had recently moved to Las Vegas from Hawaii with his wife and kids to pursue his daughter's soccer career. He shared his overall discontent with soccer in Las Vegas, specifically how money and politics influence sports. When talking about some of the differences he's noticed between Hawaii and Las Vegas, he said:

> In Hawaii, everybody knows each other, right? And it's just a different culture in Hawaii, we call everybody — there is no way my daughter would call any person by their first name, any adult by their first name. It's all auntie or uncle everybody. That doesn't happen here.

Johnny is referring to the *compadrazgo* (familial/kinship ties) that also exists in Hawaii, another place with high levels of familial interconnectedness. Las Vegas is often referred to as the "ninth island," due to its significant Hawaiian population (Freemont Street Experience 2023). It is estimated that Las Vegas has the largest Hawaiian population in the city outside of Hawaii. Hawaiian tourists are also drawn to Las Vegas because of its cultural pockets, such as The Cal, a restaurant specializing in Hawaiian cuisine. These little pockets of Hawaiian culture offer Las Vegas residents from Hawaii a semblance of home and a space where they too can cultivate community. Similarly, Las Vegas also has a large Latinx population, as it is the second-largest racial/ethnic group (Data USA 2024).

Matt also talked about how more elite clubs differed from the local "Spanish Soccer League" in Las Vegas, "There's no sense of community. I don't feel that sense of community with them." The Spanish Soccer League is called the Desert Valley Soccer League but is most commonly referred to as the Spanish Soccer League even though Latinx people from various Latin American nationalities play in it. According to its website, the Las Desert Valley Soccer League was established in 2005 and is located in the East side of Las Vegas. The league has 15 youth teams and 40 adult teams. The teams are smaller than the typical 11 player teams. The Spanish Soccer League structure differs from other more elite clubs that play in standard-sized fields with teams consisting of 11 players. Teams play with either seven or nine players in smaller fields. According to Matt, the league is more "fun" and not as competitive as other leagues, "Actually, honestly. It's more fun. It's, it may not be as competitive. But it's a fun, just

let kids go play. And you feel that sense of community with the Mexican community or the Latino community."

During a conversation with Oscar where we were talking about soccer in Las Vegas he said that the more elite clubs lacked a sense of community for them as Latinx people. "It's bad. It's real bad. We [Latinx] crave that [community]." These parents see soccer as more than just a sport their child participates in, they see it as a potential space to develop *compadrazgo* that they feel is essential to their identity so that they can socialize and form community in a way they may not be able to in other facets of social life. Although parents do not explicitly state whether they participate in the Spanish Soccer League specifically for the familial connections, it seems as if it is a bonus they quickly learn to appreciate. During my observations, I was able to see that older adults who played in this league did so because of their passion for the game but went on to form connections with other players or people in the parks.

These kinship ties also influenced how families cared for children that were not theirs. During my observations, I commonly noticed that parents would offer to drive other children to and from practices and games if their parents were unable to do so. For instance, during one game, Sonia, a parent I had previously interviewed, was introducing me to Oscar to explain my study and possibly interview him. I sat by Sonia, Oscar and his wife and his mother-in-law. Sonia and Oscar would engage in small banter throughout the game even though their sons were playing on the same team. Oscar would also yell out what moves the players should make, coaching them from the sideline which can also speak to the familial-like support networks that established in some of these teams. Oscar mentioned that he felt comfortable coaching other children on the team and vice versa because of the relationships they have established.

Sonia was a bit conflicted during the game because she had to go pick up her daughter and was worried she would not make it back to the park in time to pick her son up after the game. Oscar told her not to worry, that he would drop Omar off after the game. Once the game ended, the coach and Oscar, and some of the players were discussing an upcoming tournament in California — specifically who did not have a ride. During that conversation, Oscar told Omar not to worry, and that if he needed a ride to the tournament he could take him as well. Coaches also expressed familial inclinations about the kids they coached. For instance, when I interviewed Arthur, he talked about his responsibility as a coach when it comes to looking out for the children he coaches.

> I've got kids, I've got two boys and a girl. You know, I expect somebody who's looking after my kid to look after them. In England it's called in loco parentis, you know, so you've got to take the care of the child the way a caring parent would take care of them. So if you send me your daughter, to train with me and play for my team, the first thing I've got to do is protect that kid.

Loco parentis is a Latin term that means, "in place of the parent" and is referring to a common law doctrine where an individual or organization assumes the responsibilities of a parent (lawcornell.edu). This same sentiment exists in other countries throughout the world whether mandated by law or not. Arthur expressed that along with other distinctions between England and Las Vegas regarding soccer, this personal responsibility was something he did not see too often in Las Vegas. Angela confirmed this as she recalled a time when a coach had players run continuous laps during an extremely hot day and one of the players passed out. If this quality is rare in the larger Las Vegas community, then leagues like the Spanish Soccer League are one of the few places where people can find these ties, sociability, and support, which makes these spaces a bit of an island of humanity in a turbulent, impersonal sea. While it may be the case that

spaces of community can exist in other parts of Las Vegas, it seems that soccer spaces are a significant space nonetheless.

I experienced this level of care for others and their children during one of the games at the Spanish Soccer League when a large fight broke out and people rushed to help other people who were injured or to try and break the fight up. Although it was unclear why exactly the fight broke out, it seemed as if people's passion boiled into extreme tension because of the competition. Players in the Spanish Soccer League were just as passionate and competitive about winning, but this competition and emphasis on winning is different from the competition of more elite clubs because it is associated with social mobility. It was clear to people that the Spanish Soccer League does not offer the same opportunities or path to mobility as more elite clubs (for one, scouts do not recruit from this league). However, people were still competitive and wanted to win because of their passion for the game. This can lead to them becoming upset when the wrong calls are made, which can escalate into verbal or physical fights. This experience is not something that is exclusive to the Spanish Soccer League, I often saw this happen during my brothers' games and even at other club games in Las Vegas — though not to this extent.

I was by the snack bar when the fight broke out and as it grew bigger, I made my way back to find Alán and his wife. His wife was trying to comfort a crying child she did not know whose mother had rushed to help someone that was unconscious even as the fight continued. Alan's wife was pregnant and could not carry the toddler, so I offered to help. The toddler calmed down as I held him and tried to distract him by playing with his shirt. As I looked around, there were others who were also trying to shield and protect other children whose parents were involved, or trying to aide those who were hurt during the fight.

For these coaches, parents, and myself, this social support expands beyond the immediate family to include those in their close communities — especially children. While this tendency to help is not exclusive to the Latinx community as altruism is generally a value shared by most people regardless of race or ethnicity, there was a more significant need to protect one another here, even amidst conflict. The Latinx community experiences policing in ways that White communities do not, therefore the Latinx community has more to lose and can face police scrutiny or deportation because of the actions of a few. I remembered a story Diego shared with me about a time when police showed up to the park. Diego was overseeing the games going on when a police officer pulled up to the park. Some of the people there quickly let Diego know that the police officer was walking around asking for him:

> Entonces me dicen, pues "la policía viene detrás de ti," y yo volteé. Tenia lentes y traía todavía el casco. Se quitó el casco, se quito los lentes y me dice, "Puedo hablar con usted?" Yo volteé a ver a todos los campos y me pregunte, "Pues nadie está peleando, para que venga la policía?" La gente ya estaba yéndose. Estaban las cinco canchas llenas, puros niños jugando y de repente llegan carros de policía. Dije en la torre, y la gente se empezó a asustar por que rodearon el parque, y ya se estaban bajando los policías. Y dice, "Quién es el encargado?" No, pues todos me señalaron a mí y yo comiendo una torta con una señora que vende. "Quiero que pares todos los juegos." Le digo, "Hay algún problema?" Me dice, no, no hay ningún problema, dice, puedes tú parar todos los juegos?" Dice, "Esque traemos algo para ellos." Terminó el tiempo y le hable a los papás que con temor decian, "Oye, pero no tengo papeles." Entonces los otros policías empezaron a bajar bolsas. Bolsas negras. Eran como unas cuarenta bolsas y empezaron a sacar pelotas de fútbol con unos uniformes y redes para la portería todolo que ocupan los entrenadores. Uno de los policias me dijo, "Este queremos darle las gracias por lo que hace. Por poner a los niños a jugar aquí a los jóvenes, porque nos quita mucho trabajo a nosotros." Entonces ahí estuvieron rato y dijo, "Bueno, pues miren, no quiero que vean siempre mal a la policia nsotros estamos para protegerlos, cuidarlos, y que sigan aquí en el deporte."
>
> They told me, well, "the police are looking for you," and I turned around. He had glasses and was still wearing his helmet. He took off his helmet, took off his glasses, and said "Can I talk to you?" I turned to look at all the fields and asked myself, "Well, no one is fighting, so why is the police here?" People were already leaving. The five fields were full, just children playing and suddenly police cars arrived. I said, "Oh geez!" and people started to get scared because they surrounded the park, and the police were already getting out of their cars. He says, "Who is in charge?" No, well everyone pointed to me

> as I was eating a *torta* with a lady who sells them. He said, “I want you to stop all the games.” I said, “Is there a problem?” He tells me, “No, there is no problem,” he says, “Can you stop all the games? We just brought something for them.” Game time ended and I spoke to the parents who fearfully said, “Hey, but I don't have papers.” Then the other police officers began to take out bags out of the cars. Black bags. There were about forty bags and they began to take out soccer balls with uniforms and goal nets, everything that the coaches use. One of the police officers told me, “We want to thank you for what you do. "For letting the children and young people play here, because it takes a lot of work off of us." So they were there for a while and he said, “Well, look, I don't want you to always see the police in a bad light, we are here to protect you, take care of you, and keep you here in sports.”

The police officer who was looking for Diego was a former player of his who was there to see his younger brother play. Although the officers had the intention to show up with resources the community could use to play, their approach scared most of the people in the park, some who were undocumented, and did not know why the police were there. This experience speaks to the fear and distrust this community may have due to previous police interactions and the palpable police presence and violence experienced by this community and other communities of color. Although Diego appreciated the police officer’s actions, I could not help but try and deconstruct the last thing he said to Diego that spoke to a risk narrative and perspective the police had of Latinx youth. Based on the popularity of the sport among the Latinx community, soccer has been used in schools and community programs to target risk narratives about this population (Cryan & Martinek, 2017; Schober, Zarate, & Fawcett, 2014) and this attempt by police to give the Latinx community resources to play seemed no different as it was done with the intention of keeping youth of color out of the streets.

The Visibility and Hyper-Invisibility of Latinx Soccer Counter-spaces

In 2015, Donald Trump referred to Latinx people as “rapists” and “criminals” when he announced his candidacy for presidency (Reilly 2016). Since then, the spew of xenophobic and anti-immigrant rhetoric that demonized Latinx people has been increasingly normalized. Though

this was a more recent example, xenophobic rhetoric aimed at Latinx immigrants has had a long-standing tradition in the U.S. and has likely influenced Latinx immigrants' decisions to create and maintain counter-spaces, like soccer leagues in the U.S. I see the Spanish Soccer League as a counterspace built by the Latinx community to connect with one another and maintain a sense of community that they may not always be able to find in mainstream society as well as an affordable league to play soccer and maintain a connection to the game and one's culture. This is because despite Latinx people making up almost 20 percent of the U.S. population, with 62.5 million Latinx people living in the U.S. as of 2021 (Moslimani and Noe-Bustamante 2023), Latinx people continue to face discrimination and limited counter-spaces despite their large population size. Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) define *counter-spaces* as "sites where notions of people of color can be challenged" (p. 70). Counter-spaces were initially described by Solorzano and Villalpando (1998) to describe sites where African American students could create spaces where they could engage with each other to nurture and validate their experiences, these counter-spaces can be both invisible and hypervisible.

The structural discrimination of Latinx people leads to various forms of incorporation that include marginalized belonging and the invisibility and hypervisibility of Latinx people (Vaquera et al. 2014). Vaquera et al. (2014) claim that "Latino invisibility must be understood in light of their hypervisibility . . . to understand the nuances of Latino integration across the main societal institutions of the country" (p.1831). As I began to investigate, I found limited archival data that documented the development of soccer in Las Vegas other than a couple of oral histories from UNLV Special Collections & Archives, which did not fully include the experiences of the Latinx community. One of the interviewees, Vince Hart, described a time where there was "no soccer" during the 1960's in Las Vegas. He detailed some of the growth of

soccer in Las Vegas, claiming that in the 1980's there were around 4,000 youth soccer players but said he never imagined the growth of soccer in Las Vegas, let alone the rising costs associated with the sport.

Similarly, Jose Alvarez's interview also touches on the commercialization of youth soccer in Las Vegas. He also speaks on some of the barriers Latinx people (specifically Mexicans who are undocumented and face a language barrier) faced in accessing the same opportunities as White Americans in this space. Jose mentioned that he faced resistance for trying to include undocumented people who did not speak English as part of that development so the referee federation withheld referees for their league's games. He also mentioned that he was unaware that programs like the Olympic development program charged for participation until Latinx parents from lower incomes brought it to his attention. These interviews shed a little bit of light on the development of soccer in Las Vegas as a popular and commercialized sport, but does not include the role that Latinx people have played in its growth.

According to Gordon, visibility is linked to power and *culturally-imposed invisibility* is the "lack of inclusive vision by those in central or dominant positions, intentional or not; neglecting to see and acknowledge people outside of a familiar perspective or conscious awareness, rendering them invisible" (Lollar 2015: 301). This culturally-imposed invisibility is evident not just in the ways that Latinx people find themselves relegated to marginalized social spaces like the Spanish Soccer League but also in the failure to account for, to recognize, and to preserve these spaces. Despite culturally-imposed invisibility, the social spaces occupied by marginalized individuals can also be hyper-visible. Visibility means appearing to others and is a main element of the human experience, "it is in appearing to others that emotions, thoughts, and passions are expressed" (Lollar 2015.) The Spanish Soccer League is a visible space in Las

Vegas, both literally and figuratively, where Latinx people can express their passion for soccer. You can see the various games being held by the league along with the camaraderie that accompanies it by driving around the East part of Las Vegas. The fact that most people who have some type of connection to soccer in Las Vegas knew about the league also speaks to its visibility.

In my efforts to find more information through archival records on how the Spanish Soccer League has developed, I quickly realized there is not much documented on Latinx soccer leagues in Las Vegas. Victor was a retired man in his 60s from Tepatitlan, Mexico whose son played professional soccer before becoming an ESPN commentator. During a conversation with Victor who claimed to be one of the first people in Las Vegas who advocated for soccer fields and demanded access to parks and fields to play on, I expressed the difficulty I had trying to find more information about the history of Latinx soccer leagues in Las Vegas. He gazed straight ahead as he thought about what I just said and with a disappointing smile replied with regretful certainty, "y no la vas a encontrar" (and you're not going to find any). This was something Diego also mentioned, however, he also spoke of the nature of the Spanish Soccer League and how this affected the ability to document much about this league:

> Mira, te lo voy a decir así, ni no creo que vayas a encontrar mucho porque son ligas con los equipos independientes. Son ligas que se manejan juegos por semana, a cómo la gente pueda, no hay una programación establecida por seis meses y no hay un récord. La liga se fundó en el 2005 con la participación de tantos equipos. Porque no se documenta nada? Porque aveces las ligas aparecen y de repente desaparecen
>
> Look, I'm going to tell you this way, I don't think you're going to find much because they are leagues with independent teams. They are leagues that play weekly games, however people can, so there is no established schedule for six months and there are no records. The league was founded in 2005 with the participation of so many teams. Why is nothing documented? Because sometimes leagues appear and suddenly disappear.

Inadvertently Victor and Diego were referring to the way that culturally imposed invisibility operates by failing to formally document the social spaces Latinx and other marginalized people occupy. Price and Whitworth (2004) claim that "soccer leagues do not create formal structures, as a church, an ethnic restaurant, or a neighborhood does, their imprint and legacy are easily ignored" (p. 168-169). They also call for more attention to be paid to Latinx soccer leagues as they are "highly visible forms of place-making for Latino immigrants" (169). The invisibility of Latinx people is also reinforced by their deliberate exclusion. Sonia had expressed that she had taken her son, Omar, to the Olympic Development Program commonly referred to as ODP. Sonia felt that the trainers had their eye out for youth players they already knew from the more well-known clubs. The U.S. Youth Soccer Olympic Development Program is a national identification and development program for high-performing players (US Youth Soccer). Omar expressed his feeling of invisibility while at ODP during our interview:

> Omar: It made me realize like [pauses] wow, I don't want to come back. I just thought it was like a waste of money. Because I didn't really play. If I did it again, they probably weren't gonna play me. So it's probably just better to leave.
>
> Me: What did you notice while you were there?
>
> Omar: Like favorites. Favoritism.
>
> Me: Why do you think that is?
>
> Omar: Because probably they already knew them.

Omar was rendered invisible during his experience at ODP because he had no previous exposure that connected him with any of the trainers, whereas other youth who knew the trainers had more visibility and playing time. The exclusion was something Latinx coaches also talked about. Diego shared his frustration with some of the more elite leagues who constantly overlooked his Spanish Soccer League credentials:

> Aveces me dicen, ‘Oye, Luis, porque no utiliza las credenciales de la liga Americana y nos vamos alla?’ Le digo muy buena pregunta. Te voy a hacer una pregunta antes que te responda. Preguntale a los de la Liga Americana porque no aceptan mis tarjetas, mis credecniales,? Me dice ‘Oh no. Porque pues es que ellos tienen las leyes y pues no van a aceptar.’ Ah si, la misma respuesta te doy yo. Y entonces ya se quedan así, ellos tienen sus reglas, nosotros tenemos las de nosotros, si tú quieres jugar acá, acá jugamos con nuestras credenciales. Entonces dile a tus equipos que tienen que sacar las credenciales de la de la Liga Mexicana. O sea, yo siempre busco esa como esa igualdad, no que haya una diferencia, no, porque al final de cuentas Janet vienen y se andan llevando niños de acá.
>
> Sometimes they say to me, 'Hey, Luis, why don't you get your American League credentials and we'll go [play] there?' I tell them, ‘That’s a very good question. I'm going to ask you a question before I answer you. Ask those from the American League why they don't accept my cards, my credentials?’ He tells me 'Oh no. Because they have their own laws and they are not going to accept it.' ‘Ah yes, I give you the same answer. So then let’s keep it that way. They have their rules, and we have ours. If you want to play here, we play here with our credentials. So, tell your teams that they have to get their credentials from the Spanish Soccer League.’ I mean, I always look for that kind of equality, that there are no differences because in the end, Janet they come and end up taking children from here.

Diego felt like his experience was overlooked because of his association with the Spanish Soccer League, which was viewed by others as “less than” as Johnny previously stated. Diego challenged any attempts that invalidated and diminished his experience by not wavering to any requests that required that he get credentials from the “American League” so that the leagues’ teams could play one another by putting the ball in their court and asking why they would not consider getting credentials from the Spanish Soccer League if they wanted to play against them. He also felt that these attempts to play against one another was so that these other teams can scout talent from the Spanish Soccer League and recruit the kids to play for their teams, which they have done before and contributes to the breakdown of these local community teams.

For Javier, the Las Vegas goalkeeper trainer from Guadalajara, Mexico who was in his 40’s, self-imposed invisibility was a form of protection. Javier disclosed his undocumented status and shared with me that part of the reason that he did not work to grow his business of training youth goal keepers, despite being very successful in connecting the goal keepers with

professional teams in the U.S. and Mexico, was out of fear that the increased visibility could expose his status and that he would consequently face deportation.

> Entre más bajo sea el nivel, siento que hay más racismo. Tuve la oportunidad de trabajar entrenando a los porteros la temporada pasada y ahí me di cuenta de que si el racismo está en las partes de abajo, no dudo que también existan las partes de arriba, pero he sentido que tengo mucho cuidado donde la gente sepa o una mala persona sepa que no tengo papeles porque se van a encargar de desprestigiarte, o sea. Y eso es constantemente, sí, o sea, entre los latinos. Pues ya lo sabes, o sea, nos ponemos el pie para que no avances y eso pues es lamentable, pues sí, entonces el latino se encarga de desprestigiarte, se lo dice al güero que tiene dinero para pagar y el güero, pues simplemente se aleja, entonces pues sí, es racismo porque no te dan la oportunidad, solamente porque escucharon un mal comentario de alguien.
>
> I feel that there is more racism at the lower the level, I had the opportunity to work coaching the goalkeepers last season and that's when I realized that racism is in the lower parts, I don't doubt that it exists in the higher parts, but I have felt that I am very careful that people won't know or a bad person won't know that I don't have papers because they are going to try to discredit you, that is. And that is constantly, yes, that is, among Latinos. Well, you already know, that we can put our foot down so that you don't advance and that's unfortunate. The Latino is in charge of discrediting you, he tells the güero (white person) that has money to pay and the güero, well, he simply steps away, so yes, it's racism because they don't give you the opportunity only because they heard a bad comment from someone.

Javier is concerned that another person, especially a Latinx person, would expose him to White people who have money and would otherwise contract him to train their child. Ultimately, his fear lies in the legitimate threat of deportation. Javier lamented that someone from his own community, out of jealousy or anger, would expose him. Although Latinx people may share a sense of identity, community and kinship ties, Latinx people are not a homogenous group entirely. Differences and tension exist within this ethnic group that could otherwise be viewed as a uniform group. Nevertheless, Latinx people continue to face similar challenges and barriers to social mobility which I discuss in the final chapter.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

This dissertation examines how youth sports privatization, family dynamics, coaching, and team organization affect youth, especially Latinx youth, opportunities, and their interests in playing competitive soccer. I also address how the Latinx community uses soccer as a counterspace to establish kinship ties and maintain a sense of their ethnic identity. Drawing on my three-year ethnography of Latinx youth who play soccer in Las Vegas, Nevada, along with 36 in-depth interviews with coaches, parents, and youth, I explain how they navigate the rising costs of sports participation and how they view soccer as a vehicle for upward social mobility. I examine how parents and youth make sense of participating in certain teams they deem "competitive." This dynamic raises questions about how privatized youth sports are affecting low-income families, families with multiple children, and youth of color. I also discuss how intersecting oppressions related to race, class, and gender are expressed and experienced among youth who play soccer in Las Vegas by sharing their experiences.

My purpose was to examine how youth sports privatization, family dynamics, coaching, and team organization affect youth's opportunities and interests in playing competitive soccer — specifically for Latinx and other youth of color. I explored how families navigate the costs of soccer participation as well as how youth make sense of their soccer participation as it relates to the kinds of teams they play in and why. This final chapter offers a summary of this study's main findings and how they relate to the current literature and conceptual framework. I also review the study's methodological limitations and implications for policy and future research.

The current research literature focuses on elite amateur and professional athletics and overlooks the experiences of youth (Messner and Musto 2014). I offer some key, conceptual contributions about youth's sport experiences, particularly as they relate to race, class, and

gender dynamics. This is important because focusing only on elite amateur and professional athletics is typically associated as the end goal for youth athletes. My work helps us understand the challenges and barriers that certain youth can face and how this influences their *trajectories* through sport. Although some studies have examined the recruitment experiences of Latinx college athletes to examine their recruitment experiences, (McGovern 2018; Ortega and Grafnetterova 2023), Hextrum (2019) argues that the pathway to playing college sports still favors white, middle- and upper-class families. This raises issues around equity not just at the college level but at the local sports level, which is where these pathways are first established. If certain families and youth (specifically low-income, and families of color) are unable to afford the costs of soccer participation, then they are being cut off from accessing the opportunities and resources that come with soccer participation. This is especially the case for youth from families who cannot afford club soccer expenses but have dreams of playing college soccer and I detail these experiences in the study's findings.

Main Findings

In chapter four, "'Selling a Dream': Privatization, Youth Sports, and the Costs of Participation," I discussed how organized youth sports went from a publicly funded model to a privatized model and created a pay-to-play system for youth that emphasizes sport-specific skills and competition. I discussed how the youth sports economy has grown and what that means in terms of the growing costs of youth soccer participation and its effect on families in Las Vegas. The commodification of soccer participation means that youth sports is really only available to those who can afford the price of sport participation, thus this model is not a meritocratic one. As Oscar (parent of three youth soccer players in Las Vegas) explains it, soccer clubs are "selling a dream," and while parents like him can see the youth sports landscape for what it is — a

business— others will see these clubs as spaces for opportunities for social mobility and continue to participate in them. Thus, these parents justify the high costs of participation by thinking of them as "investments" though the rate of return is significantly low as only 2% of youth athletes go on to play collegiate sports (Gregory2017; National Collegiate Athletic Association 2020). I also found that the raced and gendered experiences of youth in Las Vegas as they intersect with this youth sports model are shaped by their experiences in different teams and leagues in Las Vegas, how they make sense of these different teams, and their soccer dreams and motivations. Youth from marginalized communities can face a more difficult time accessing equitable sport participation and the opportunities associated through it because of families who may perceive their participation as a threat to the opportunities of their children, leading to what Massey calls "opportunity hoarding" (2006:6).

In chapter five, "Leveling the Playing Field: Competition, Opportunity, and Mobility in Las Vegas Soccer Leagues," I explore themes of opportunity and social mobility in more depth. I examine how parents and youth see soccer clubs as spaces that could provide opportunities to learn and develop the skills necessary to secure an athletic scholarship with the goal of upward social mobility. I talk about the ways that soccer clubs can provide access to networks that can shape opportunities for youth. I employ Bourdieu's concept of capital and demonstrate how capital exchange occurs in these soccer leagues. To attain access to these clubs (and their perceived exposure to opportunities), parents will use particular forms of capital, particularly economic capital to exchange it for cultural and social capital that could potentially lead to more economic capital and ultimately, upward social mobility. Participants who wanted their children to play in expensive club teams perceived clubs as offering them 1.) a specific set of skills, training, and development, 2.) the networks of contacts, and 3.) the necessary exposure to scouts

and recruiters. I discuss how the pursuit of "competitive" soccer clubs can undermine the legitimacy of the Spanish Soccer League, a local Latinx league in Las Vegas, and how some participants minimize and overlook the types of cultural capital that are available in leagues like this because of how spaces like these are racialized.

The last findings chapter, "The Role of Soccer in the Latinx Community" examines the roles that soccer plays in the Latinx community in Las Vegas. I discuss how some Latinx people in Las Vegas play soccer as a way to maintain a sense of their ethnic identity, seek community, and create counter-spaces and they often do these things by playing soccer in spaces like parks (Price and Whitworth 2004; Trouille 2021). I also discuss how soccer spaces like the Spanish Soccer League offer people from the Latinx community the opportunities to build kinship ties, something they described as a cultural need. This finding is consistent with previous work, like Price and Whitworth's work (2004) on Mexican and Central American immigrants in Washington. Another significant finding is what I refer to as the visibility and hyper-invisibility of Latinx soccer counter-spaces, which I also consider an important conceptual contribution. I argue that Latinx people in the U.S. (more specifically Latinx people who play soccer in Las Vegas) share a unique experience where they are both visible and invisible.

When I began this study, I looked for archival work that focused on the development and growth of Las Vegas Latinx soccer leagues but did not find much. While the Spanish Soccer League is a visible space in Las Vegas, both literally and figuratively, where Latinx people can express their passion for soccer, Latinx people in these spaces experience a culturally imposed invisibility where they find themselves relegated to marginalized social spaces and are not recognized as valid by those is more dominant positions in society, this is partially why archival data that reflects their experiences does not exist. Latinx people, specifically Latinx immigrants,

face a unique form of discrimination that include, but is not limited to, xenophobia (prejudice towards immigrants), nativism (policies that protect and emphasize "native-born" interests), language discrimination, and exclusion. In these experiences, Latinx people are rendered visible due to the "threat" they pose to society. Yet Latinx people continue to push through these harmful narratives and create spaces where they can maintain a sense of identity, community, and culture.

While some participants did mention the difficulty of documenting the development of the Spanish Soccer League because it tends to ebb and flow due to participants' needs and time constraints, this can also be due to external factors. Participants who want to maintain the space as "hidden" may do so to not draw unwanted attention in order to maintain a safe and controlled space. Several participants described multiple incidents where outside clubs would poach players and coaches from the Spanish Soccer League for their own interests (which included building winning teams) and would discard them when they no longer needed them. This trend of outsiders (specifically outsiders who have more power and status) coming into communities of color to take resources can make people of color suspicious and cautious. These findings can help us understand why and how kinship ties are developed and sustained through avenues other than sports while also shedding light on dynamics around identity-making and the need for counter-spaces among other marginalized populations throughout the U.S. My hope is that this study offers some account of spaces like the Spanish Soccer League and what they mean to the Latinx community in other places outside of Las Vegas.

Limitations

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of youth, parents, and coaches as they relate to soccer in Las Vegas. My findings are not broadly generalizable to the larger

population, but my guess is that there are other leagues or social spaces like the Las Vegas Spanish Soccer League that are organized in other cities like this across the U.S.. This case study can offer some alignment with its findings to explore similar themes of counter-spaces, visibility, invisibility, community, youth experiences. My purpose was to understand how families navigate the costs of soccer participation, and how youth make sense of their soccer participation as it relates to the kinds of teams they play in and why. The sample size in this study is not a representative sample of the entire Las Vegas or Latinx population. This study focuses on the experiences of youth, parents, and coaches and their interpretations may be considered to be subjective. Some may view my positionality as a Latina researcher with an orientation to social justice as a limitation as well. However, I believe that this experience allows me to better make sense of the experiences of those who are involved in youth sports in Las Vegas.

Policy Implications and Sociological Merit

Latinx people still experience significant barriers in areas like housing, immigration, labor, investment, and leisure, despite being the largest population demographic. When it comes to housing, Latinx people are less likely to be homeowners and to live in suburbs, are more likely to be renters who face housing instability and are more likely to face eviction (Ramirez 2019). According to the Pew Research Center (2020), there were 62.1 million Latinx people living in the U.S. as of 2020. In 2017, Latinx folks made up over half of the workforce in the U.S. (bls.gov) but Latinx folks are more likely to be targets of xenophobia and discrimination and are more likely to face detention and deportation than European immigrants.

Adding to these challenges, both the public and private sectors are less likely to invest in Latinx communities and schools with a large Latinx population, and Latinx people are less likely to be in positions of power and leadership. Because of this, I believe that future research should

focus on making some of the findings in this study generalizable so that we can find ways to support marginalized people who have limited access to power and resources in other facets of society. It is also important to continue to add to the experiences of marginalized youth to the already existing literature which can help us identify other barriers they may face in accessing youth sports. Other studies should further investigate the experiences of Latinx people in soccer spaces, specifically the role that women play in creating and maintaining these spaces as there is currently not a lot of research that focuses on their experiences and contributions. This study can help us more fully understand the experiences of soccer participation among youth and families in Las Vegas so that we may have a fuller understanding of how the current youth sports model limits not just access to soccer participation, but for opportunities for social mobility. By using analyses that center on race and gender we can understand how these identities shape their life course as well as how youth also enact their agency through their own meaning-making processes. My hope is that this understanding can help us reimagine youth sports and alter the current model of youth sports so that it can center youth needs and benefit all youth.

Additionally, this case study is one focused example of bigger issues that relate to inequalities and can highlight the importance of creating a more just and inclusive society. The very need for counter-spaces indicates how challenging it is for Latinx communities to experience and enjoy recognition and inclusion in other areas in society. Seeing how leagues like the Spanish Soccer League operate as a counterspace that provides cultural grounding and support for the Latinx community tells us how this type of full integration is lacking in other spaces of social life. If we were a truly inclusive society, there would be no need for counter-spaces because all communities would feel accepted and reflected in society. This study provides

insights into some of the factors, challenges, and outcomes Latinx people face in seeking recognition and inclusion in a society where they still do not feel they are truly a part of.

Final Thoughts

Sport mythology is rooted in the ideology that sports bring people from many different backgrounds together on an "equal" playing field and can fuel true competition. Today's youth sports model is based on this mythology and perpetuates the idea that the dynamics of merit and competition exist in sports and is reflected in the wider society. This means that the idea that success (both specifically in sports, and more generally success in society) is the result of hard work. However, this study demonstrates that this is not true, and sports mythology is a myth in practice. We may be able to truly achieve this idea of merit and equal fields in the future by working to ensure that all youth—regardless of class, race, and gender— have equitable access to sports and opportunities. Most importantly, working towards a more equitable society in general can make this so. If things like education and mobility become more accessible in general, there will be no need to push youth to take a sports-to-education pathway because that will not be one of the only options for getting access to an education and social mobility.

This work requires us to fully confront and engage with the wider levels of inequality that we currently grapple with and that are the direct result of decades of privatized practices that have stripped away economic safety nets while privatizing social services and public spaces. At the wider societal level, there needs to be more support for policies that address the effects of neoliberalism and privatization and their disproportionate effect on communities of color as well as having access to free education and universal healthcare. One example of this is Norway, which centers youth voices and places an emphasis on play over competition. In Norway, 93 percent of children grow up playing organized sports and the costs to participation are relatively

low. Additionally, sport participation is not fueled by the need to chase athletic scholarships because college and healthcare are free.

Like Norway, the U.S. is a wealthy nation and has the resources to implement a fairer distribution of wealth and opportunity. Doing so is one way we can reduce inequality and hopefully contribute to a more equitable and inclusive society where marginalized folks do not feel the need to create counter-spaces where they feel safe enough to exist. Youth sports is one of the places where we can begin to make the shift towards a more equitable society. This means going beyond just giving a few youths from marginalized backgrounds the opportunity to play in elite clubs through scholarships or by waiving their fees. It means restructuring youth sports through what Farrey (2008) refers to as a "sports for all" approach that prioritizes health and inclusion. We can do this by encouraging broad-based sport participation regardless of skill and income background, supporting and increasing the amount of recreational and local leagues while limiting "elite" leagues that focus on profit over play, tackling the high costs of sports participation, and increasing the options available of different types of sport so that all youth have the option to explore them. Doing these things can put sport back on the forefront as a socializing agent that fosters inclusion, connection, and community among all youth regardless of race, gender, or class backgrounds.

APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Name	Age	Race/Ethnic Background	Gender	Participant Status	Occupation
Brandon	14	Latinx	Male	Youth	—
Alan	24	Latinx	Male	Youth	Student
Omar	15	Latinx	Male	Youth	—
Lauren	14	Black	Female	Youth	—
Kenny	16	Pacific Islander	Male	Youth	—
Ivan	19	Latinx	Male	Youth	Arcade Operator
Itzel	14	Latinx	Female	Youth	—
Jenny	14	Latinx	Female	Youth	—
Maria	14	Latinx	Female	Youth	—
Carlos	27	Latinx	Male	Coach	Coach and Business Owner
Pablo	25	Latinx	Male	Coach	Financial advisor and coach
Mario	40's	Latinx	Male	Coach	Coach, Plumber, and Electrician
Gio	34	Latinx	Male	Coach	Club Coach and Coach at University
Leonardo	67	Latinx	Male	Coach	Former Coach and Real Estate Agent
Alyssa	30's	White	Female	Coach	University Coach
Victor	60's	Latinx	Male	Coach	Retired
Ricardo	25	Latinx	Male	Coach	Coach
Jose	Late 30's	Latinx	Male	Coach	Coach
Javier	Early 40's	Latinx	Male	Coach	Coach and Business Owner
Arthur	60's	White	Male	Coach	Coach
Diego	45	Latinx	Male	Coach	Optometry and League Director
Sonia	40's	Latinx	Female	Parent	Domestic worker
Matt	50's	White	Male	Parent	Uber Driver
Ben	40's	White	Male	Parent	Architect
Lorena	39	Latinx	Female	Parent	Utilization review
Johnny	43	Pacific Islander	Male	Parent	Marketing
Oscar	40's	Latinx	Male	Parent	Insurance
Isela	32	Latinx	Female	Parent	Self-employed
Angela	40's	White	Female	Parent	Teacher
Christine	32	Latinx	Female	Parent	IT administrator

Lydia	30's	Latinx	Female	Parent	—
Aurora	32	Latinx	Female	Parent	Stay at home mom
Elsa	40's	Latinx	Female	Parent	—
Carmen	40's	Latinx	Female	Parent	—
Lupe	40's	Latinx	Female	Parent	McDonald's
Erica	40's	Latinx	Female	Parent	—

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDES

Parent Interview Guide

1. How would you describe your racial or ethnic background?
2. How would you describe your gender identity?
3. How old are you?
4. What do you do for a living?
5. How many children do you have?
    a. What are their ages?
    b. Do they all play soccer?
    c. Do they do any type of specialized training? If so, how often and how much is that?
6. How long ago did your child start playing soccer?
7. What changes, if any, did you notice in your child since they've started/stopped playing?
8. Why soccer? Why not another sport?
9. What do you hope your child gets out of playing soccer?
    a. What role do you want soccer to play in their lives?
    b. What career path do you envision for your child?
10. What role do you think soccer plays in your community?
11. (If they also coach) would you still consider coaching if your child didn't play on the team?
12. What does transportation to and from practice and soccer tournaments look like for you and your family?
    a. How far do you/have you traveled?
13. What types of challenges have you encountered during your child's soccer participation?
14. On average, how much do you spend a month on your child's or children's soccer participation? (include registration, coach fees, supplemental training, tournament/games, uniform, transportation)?
15. What barriers do you perceive exist for families who have children who play soccer in Las Vegas?
16. Based on your experience, what is the soccer community in Las Vegas like?
17. What relationships do you have with other coaches, parents/families, players?

Youth Interview Guide

1. How old are you?
2. How would you describe your racial/ethnic background?
    a. Where were you born?
3. [Do you work?]
    a. [What do you do for a living?]
4. Can you tell me a little about how you got into playing soccer?
    a. How long have you played?
    b. Where do you/have you played?
    c. Is there a different team you would like to play in?
    d. What position do you play?
5. When are your practices?
6. Do you attend any type of specialized training?
    a. How many times a week? Do you know how much it costs?
7. What do you like about playing soccer?
    a. Why not another sport?
8. Do you have siblings?
    a. How many?
    b. Do they play?
9. How do you feel you are supported by your family when playing soccer?
    a. What about coaches or teammates?
10. What does playing soccer mean to you? What do you think soccer means to your community?
11. How would you describe your relationship with your coach(es)?
    a. Teammates?
12. Do you feel like you had any challenges (barriers) that affect your ability to participate?
    a. (money, time, mentorship, resources..)
13. Have you ever stopped playing soccer? If so, for how long and why?
14. Do you see yourself still participating in any way in the soccer community as you grow older? Why or why not?
15. What do you hope to get out of playing soccer?
16. What are your goals? (educational, career)
17. Are you currently enrolled in college or do you plan on attending college?

Coach Interview Guide

Demographic Questions:

1. What is your race or ethnic background?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your highest level of education attained?
4. What do you currently do for work?

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1. How did you get into coaching soccer?
   [Did you play soccer growing up?]
   a. Was it easy playing soccer as a kid?
   b. Do you remember a time when things got chaotic?
   c. What was your reasoning for playing?
2. How did your reasoning align with or differ from that of your parents/guardians?
3. [Probe] Did you or your parents/guardians hope that you would get an athletic scholarship?
4. Did you or your parents/guardians hope that you would play soccer professionally?
5. Did your perception of any of those things (scholarships/pro-sports) change over time? If so, how?
6. Did any of your other siblings play any other sports?
   a. What were some of the things you or your family did to manage this?
7. How did your family manage resources to ensure you continued to play?
   a. What was this like?
8. How did your family manage their time to ensure you (and your siblings) played soccer?
9. Did you ever stop playing at some point? If so, why?
10. How long have you been coaching soccer?
    a. (club, league, school)
11. What teams do you currently coach? What teams have you coached in the past?
    a. Boys/girls:
    b. Age group
    c. What is it like coaching a boys/girls team?
12. What does a day in your life as a coach look like?
    a. What are your practices like?
13. Do you remember when a student couldn't attend practices, games, or tournaments because of some struggle?
14. If haven't coached both boys and girls: Would you be willing to coach boys/girls team? Why or why not?
15. What is it like coaching that age group?
16. What do you like about coaching soccer?
17. What do you dislike about coaching soccer?
18. What would you describe the average socioeconomic status of your players is?
19. What is the racial/ethnic composition of the players you coach?
20. How do you think the youth you coach make sense of their soccer participation?

    a. What is their reason for playing? Does it align with parent's reason?
    b. What motivates them? (intrinsic or external)
    c. Do they enjoy playing soccer?
21. Based on your perceptions and interactions with the youth you coach, do these youth view soccer as a pathway to college or not? Why or why not?
22. Do some of the students you coach think soccer would get them to college?
    a. Do they tell you that?
    b. Can you tell me about some of the things students have said to you about this?
23. Is there anything I have not asked that you believe would be useful to know?
24. Are there any questions that I have not asked that you think would be beneficial to ask other participants?
25. Would you be willing to recommend people I can interview (parents, players, other coaches/staff)? Their participation would be voluntary I just need help recruiting participants.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

JEANNETTE HERNÁNDEZ
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Department of Sociology • University of Nevada, Las Vegas

EDUCATION

Doctor of Philosophy, Sociology
Expected Summer 2024
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
Dissertation: "Leveling the Playing Field: A Las Vegas Ethnography of Latinx Youth Soccer Players"
Field Exams/Areas of Specialization: Race and Ethnic Studies; Gender and Sexuality (with honors)

Graduate Certificate in Social Justice Studies
Graduate Teaching Certification
Graduate Mentorship Certification

Master of Arts, Sociology
August 2017
California State University, Fullerton
Master's Thesis: "Disciplinary Action of Latino Students in Secondary Education"

Bachelor of Arts, Sociology
December 2013
California State University, Long Beach

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Principal Researcher
March 2019 – Present
Sociology Department at University of Nevada, Las Vegas
Conducted an ethnography on Latinx youth soccer players and their families in Las Vegas.

Graduate Assistant
January 2020 – December 2020
Sociology Department, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Dr. Cassaundra Rodriguez
Assisted in research on mixed-status families and voting, specifically the civic engagement of Latinos who are U.S. citizens but have undocumented family members.

Research Analyst
May 2019 – August 2019
The Nevada Institute for Children's Research and Policy, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Assisted in scheduling and conducting focus groups and interviews with families and stakeholders throughout Nevada for a research project partnered with the Nevada Department of Education related to access to early childhood education, health care, and childcare in all 17 counties of Nevada.

Graduate Assistant
August 2018-May 2019
Sociology Department, University of Nevada, Las Vegas
Assisted on research, oral history project of education, race, and immigration in Nevada.

Graduate Assistant \
January 2016-June 2017
Sociology Department, California State University, Fullerton
Conducted online research to compile annotated bibliographies on Black-Latino/a relations, coalition building and identity formation among students of color, and fandoms and media culture.
Conducted online research to compile an annotated bibliography on theories of resistance, critical race, and Latino critical theories.

Principal Researcher
October 2016-June 2017
Sociology Department at California State University, Fullerton
Conducted semi-structured, qualitative interviews with 10 Latinx students in the Los Angeles area, focusing on their experiences with suspension and/or expulsion from secondary schools.

PUBLICATIONS

Hernández, Jeannette. 2017. Disciplinary Action of Latino Students in Secondary Education. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

Sociologists for Women in Society Summer Meeting, 2019
Consequences of Disciplinary Action: A Case Study of Latino/a Students in Secondary Education
Association of Black Sociologists 49th Annual Conference: Blackness and the City, 2019
For Us By Us: Strategies for Creating and Maintaining POC Spaces in Academia and Why it is Important
The Pacific Sociological Association's 90th Annual Meeting/Conference, 2019
Student Engagement as a Seed for Radical Potential
The Pacific Sociological Association's 88th Annual Meeting/Conference, 2017
Disciplinary Action of Latino Students in Secondary Education

ACADEMIC AND RELATED SERVICE

Scheduling Liaison, Latinx Graduate Student Association
Spring 2024

Scheduled organization meetings and booked rooms for the organization's events.

Undergraduate Committee Representative, UNLV
Fall 2021 – Spring 2023
Collaborated with the sociology department and sociology club to host the College of Liberal Arts Op introduce undergraduate students to the department and showcase faculty and student work.

FELLOWSHIPS & HONORS

Teaching Award, UNLV Sociology, 2023
The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi, 2023
James Frey Scholarship, 2021 & 2022
American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education 2021
Summer Doctoral Research Fellowship, 2021 & 2022
Patricia Sastaunik Scholarship, 2019, 2021 & 2022
Student Researcher Award: Honorable Mention, 2021
COLA PhD Student Summer Faculty Research Award,2019
Outstanding Graduate Student, 2017
Giles T. Travel Grant, 2017
Graduate Equity Fellowship, 2015 & 2016
Elevar Scholars Scholarship, 2015
Quality Program Award, THINK Together, 2014
President's List, CSULB, 2013
Dean's List, CSULB, 2012

TEACHING INTERESTS/ QUALIFIED TO TEACH

Race/Ethnic Studies, Critical Race Theory, Latinx Studies, Social Problems, Chicano Studies, Social Inequalities,
Gender/Sexuality, Research Methods, Sport and Society, Introduction to Sociology.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

UNDERGRADUATE TEACHING: ASYNCHRONOUS COURSES

Instructor, Soc 441: Social Inequalities, UNLV
Fall 2023
Designed online curricula (course materials, syllabus, and discussion questions)
Graded and provided extensive feedback for weekly online discussions, and essay questions for 40 students and held weekly office hours.

Instructor, Soc 413: Sport & Society, UNLV
Fall 2021, Spring 2022, Spring 2024
Helped design online curricula.
Graded and provided extensive feedback for weekly online discussions, and essay exam questions for 40 students.

Instructor, Soc 101: Principles of Sociology, UNLV
Fall 2020 - Spring 2024
Designed online curricula.
Graded and provided extensive feedback for weekly online discussions.

UNDERGRADUATE TEACHING: IN-PERSON COURSES
Instructor, Soc 101: Principles of Sociology, UNLV
Fall 2022 - Spring 2024
Developed curricula and delivered instruction to a class of 40 students.

Soc 403: Techniques of Social Inquiry Lab, UNLV
Fall 2019 – Spring 2020
Delivered instruction to a class of 31 undergraduate students.
Created weekly lab assignments and lab experiments.

Teaching Intern, Soc 1: Introduction to Sociology, Mt. San Antonio Community College
Fall 2017, Winter 2018, Spring 2018
This internship partnered me with a tenured professor who mentored me on teaching practices. She observed my lectures and we met on a bi-weekly basis to discuss teaching and grading styles, teaching strategies, and classroom management.
Developed curricula and delivered instruction to 50 students.

TEACHING DEVELOPMENT & TRAINING

Graduate Teaching Certification
Fall 2022
Participated in the Graduate Teaching Certification program which is a year-long program that trains graduate students to develop the skills and knowledge necessary for post-secondary teaching.
Developed intellectual discussion of teaching strategies while learning best teaching practices.

Graduate Certificate in Social Justice Studies
Fall 2022
Acquired 18 credits in courses related to race and ethnic relations, social stratification, social movements/social change, political sociology, gender, and sexual politics and designed to teach transformative standards for social justice education.
Participated in interdisciplinary theoretical, methodological, and practical knowledge training in social justice.

Graduate Mentorship Certification
Fall 2022
Participated in a yearlong professional development program that trains graduate students on constructive mentorship practices in higher education.

Research and Mentorship Program

Fall 2022
Collaborated with undergraduate students on a research project designed to increase their knowledge on research practices.
Mentored undergraduate students on graduate school opportunities and professional development.

Graduate and Professional Student Association, Mentorship Cooperative
Fall 2020 - Spring 2021
Partnered with an undergraduate student to provide mentorship opportunities related to graduate school and professional development.

Online Teaching Essentials Course
Fall 2020
This course was designed to help support faculty teach in an online environment and offered a series of training and workshops related to teaching and designing online courses.

Learning to Teach Sociology
Fall 2019
Graduate seminar on learning to teach and teacher development that emphasizes theoretical issues surrounding teaching and managing a college classroom.
We discussed reflexivity and awareness in our pedagogical and andragogical practices, teaching style, teaching philosophies, teaching theory, multidisciplinary practices, and techniques.

COMMUNITY WORK & OTHER RELEVANT EXPERIENCE

Behavioral Instructor
June 2017 - August 2018
Worked with children that required Adaptive Skills Training to enhance their functional and communication skills to meet their Individual Program Plan goals.
Also worked with children that required Applied Behavioral Analysis training and implemented procedures that were formulated by the program coordinator to reduce maladaptive behaviors and increase functional communication skills.

Union Representative and Organizer
July 2016 - July 2017
UAW 4123, California State University, Fullerton
Organized meetings with other Graduate Assistants and union members to increase union membership and successfully voted on a 3% salary increase for Graduate Student Workers for the following 2 academic years.
Spoke at the California State University Board of Trustees meeting at the California State University, Office of the Chancellor on solving student and academic student employee poverty and homelessness.

AVID Tutor, Richard L. Graves Middle School
August 2014 - May 2018

Whittier, CA
Organized training and review sessions for our students and the facilitation of our AVID Program during the 2016-2017 school year which allowed our school to be recognized as a national AVID demonstration site, placing our school at the top 2.7% of all AVID nations across the country.
Partnered with the principal to expand Avid students' skillset to the larger population, helping Graves Middle School earn the Title 1 Academic Achievement Award by the California Department of Education
Tutored 25 students in 7^{th}-8^{th} grade Math, English, Science, and History

Intern
September 2013 - December 2013
Assemblymember Cristina Garcia, California State Assembly, 58th District Office, Downey, CA
Assisted parents and students who wished to apply for Assemblymembers' Young Legislators Program which aims to educate constituents that are in high school on the legislative process.
Managed legislative and policy research while handling constituent correspondence.

Lead Program Leader, THINK Together at Richard L. Graves Middle School
May 2012 - September 2015
Whittier, CA
Worked with the students, school staff, and parents to help underperforming students and successfully helped remediate close to 90% of our students.

Intern
March 2012 - May 2012
Woman-to-Woman Recovery Center, Long Beach, CA
Assisted facilitator with group discussions with women who were recovering from domestic abuse and/or substance abuse.

AFFILIATIONS/MEMBERSHIPS

American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education Fellow, 2021
Association of Black Sociologists, 2019
Sociologists for Women in Society, 2019
Pacific Sociological Association, 2017 & 2019
Alpha Kappa Delta, 2019
Graduate Equity Fellow, California State University, Fullerton, 2016-2017
Elevar Scholar, California State University, Fullerton, 2015
Sociology Student Association, California State University, Long Beach

SKILLS

Bilingual (Spanish)