

CONNECTING FIRST GENERATION AMERICANS TO THEIR CULTURE(S)

Understanding the relationship first generation
Americans have with their culture(s) and identifying
opportunities for more meaningful connections

Executive Summary

First-generation Americans are bicultural, in that their cultural identity spans two, or sometimes more, cultures: American culture, which they experience through their lived environment, and their ethnic culture, which they inherit from their parents. Culture can be a source of personal meaning and social fulfillment, and many first-generation Americans celebrate their cultural identity as a cherished part of who they are and where they come from.

However, the misalignment between these two elements of the first-generation cultural identity can pose challenges. Specifically, the nature of connecting to culture varies from what is inherited and what is experienced directly. This can result in many stressors that negatively impact first-generation Americans and act as a barrier to connecting with their culture. Often, these challenges have a significant impact on their understanding of their identity.

Through secondary and primary research methods, this project aims to investigate the cultural experiences of first-generation Americans and understand the challenges they face in connecting with their culture. Findings from this research will be used to identify opportunities for design interventions.

01. Introduction

02. Methodology

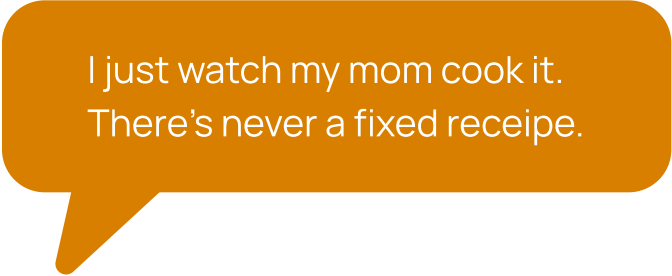
03. Insights

04. Design Implications


05. Next Steps

INTRODUCTION

Introduction



I just watch my mom cook it.
There's never a fixed receipe.

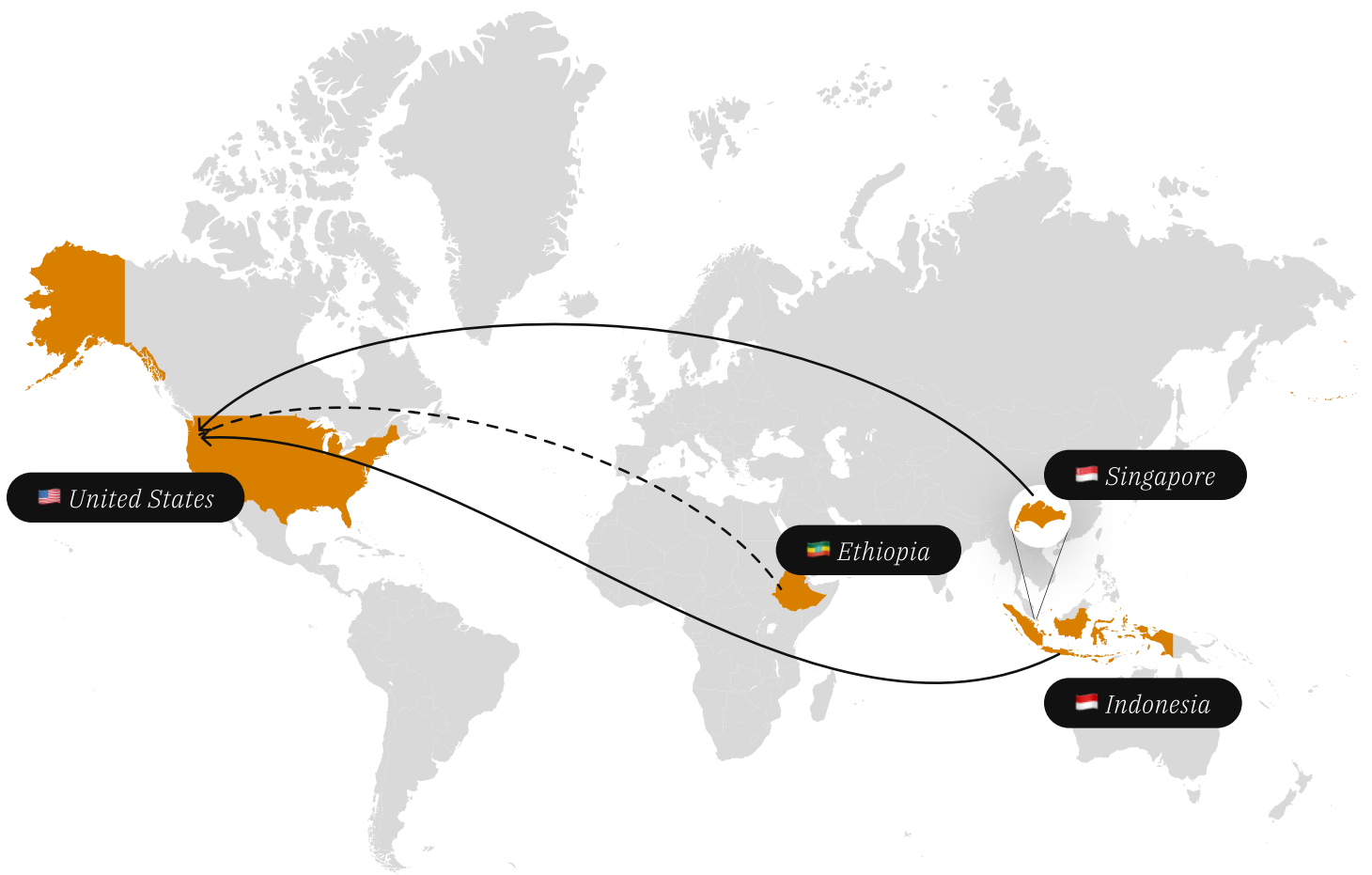


I've no idea. It's just a little bit of this and a little bit of that. No fixed measurements and the recipe changes based on her mood.

Example of our conversation on food

As a team, we all identify with a culture outside of the United States. In a discussion about this shared experience, we came across the topic of foods from each of our respective cultures and how important they were to us. However, none of us actually knew how to cook these dishes. We had been eating these dishes watching our parents and other family members prepare them our whole lives, but we still felt like we were missing this piece of cultural knowledge. We realized that many of our family's culinary traditions didn't exist as fixed recipes on paper. They were traditions that had been passed down, but never documented.

Introduction



World map to show either where we were before coming to the United states or where our parents were from.

Each of us had our own unique lived experiences and perspectives based on our cultural backgrounds and where we grew up, yet we all faced similar struggles with the transfer of cultural knowledge. **Learning about our own culture was difficult and we all resonated with this challenge.**

Introduction

As we talked, we realized that many aspects of each of our own culture felt foreign to us. This sparked a broader discussion about the nature of culture and how it's preserved across time and physical locations.

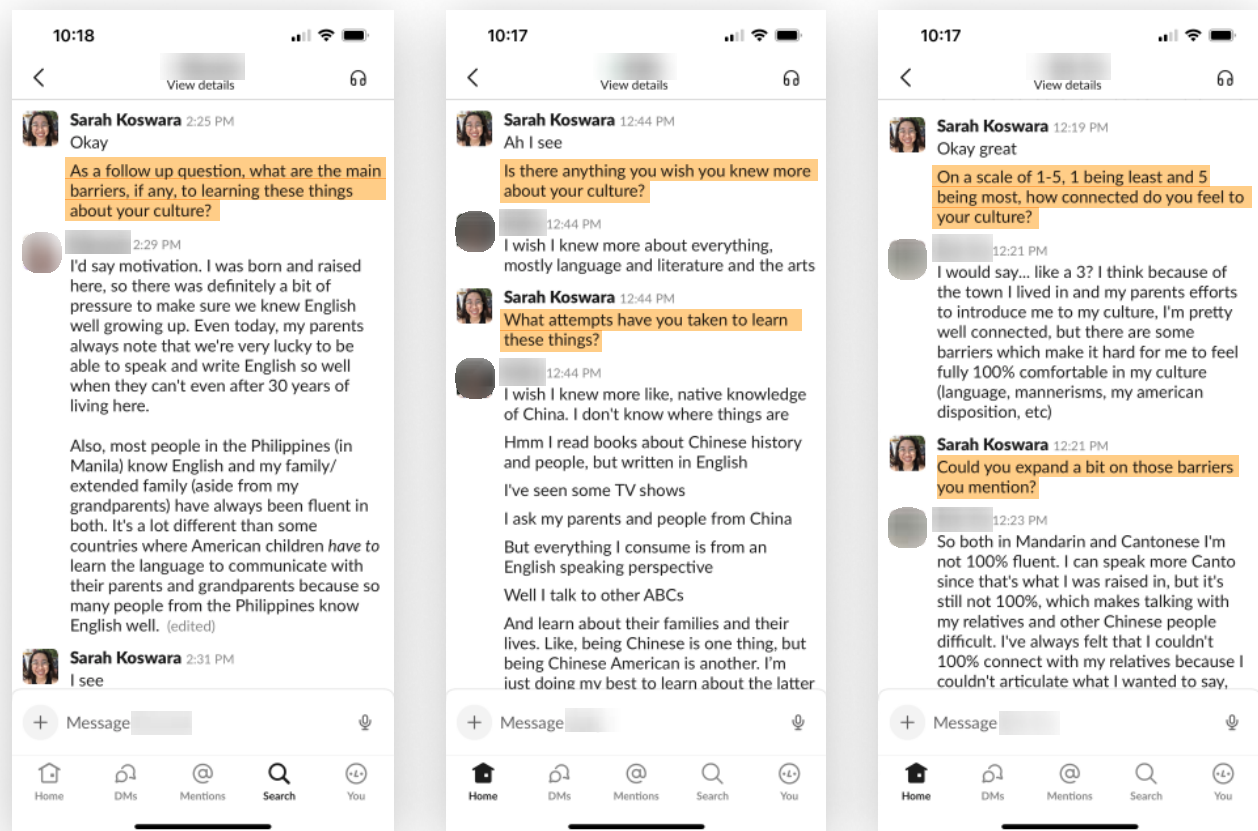
We hypothesized that first-generation Americans might face even more challenges in growing up being between two cultures.

We hypothesize that first-generation Americans might have a difficult time balancing the culture they inherit from their parents while living in America, which is has a culture in itself. To test our assumptions, we ran a round of preliminary research through informal conversations with 5 students from our master's program* who identified as first-generation American.

** Master of Human Computer Interaction + Design at the University of Washington*

Introduction

Through these informal conversations, we confirmed our assumptions and identified several challenges that first-generation Americans face in balancing two cultural identities.



*Screenshots of the informal conversations
that shared our research direction*

Futhermore, as we shared the topic of this project with friends, the problem space resonated with many people—even beyond those who identify as first-generation American. We set out to understand this problem further and craft a research plan.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES



Research methodologies

Biculturalism and Context: What Is Biculturalism, and When Is It Adaptive?

Commentary on Mistry and Wu

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Key Words

Acculturation · Biculturalism · Context · Culture

Mistry and Wu [this issue] introduce the concept of navigating across worlds, and this construct appears to represent a rough approximation of biculturalism. They also discuss conditions that may facilitate biculturalism and under which it might be more versus less adaptive. The most integral aspects of Mistry and Wu's argument, then, center around biculturalism, what it is, how it comes into being, and when it is most adaptive. The present commentary focuses on these three issues.

Biculturalism has been defined in a number of ways [e.g., Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005; Berry, 1997; Schwartz & Zamboanga, 2008]. Most generally, biculturalism represents comfort and proficiency with both one's heritage culture and the culture of the country or region in which one has settled. It is applicable not only to immigrants who have come from other countries, but also to children of immigrants who – although they are born and raised in the receiving society – are likely deeply embedded in the heritage culture at home with their families [Portes & Rumbaut, 2001, 2006]. It may also apply to individuals living in ethnic enclaves, where the heritage culture is likely to be maintained across generations, as well as to individuals from visible minority groups, who may be identified as different from the majority ethnic group even if their families have been in the receiving society for multiple generations [Huynh, Nguyen, & Benet-Martínez, in press; Umaña-Taylor, in press].

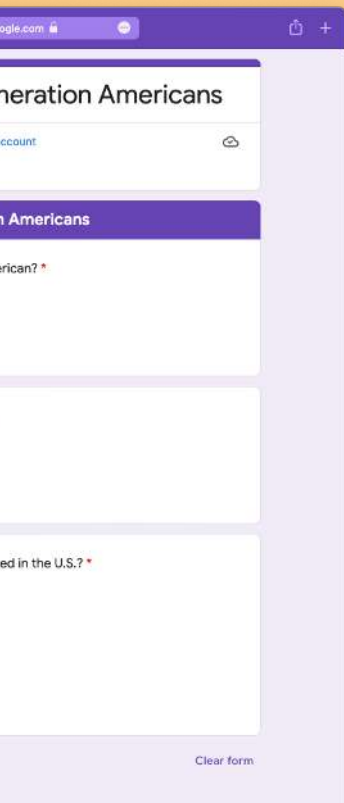
Literature Review

First step to gain a strong holistic foundational understanding of the space and draw on existing (academic) research, in conjunction with our own personal experiences.

The screenshot shows a Google Form titled "Culture and First Generation". At the top, there is a header with the title and a link to "aspentng@uiw.edu (not shared)". Below the header, there is a section titled "Culture and First Generation" with a red asterisk indicating a required question. The question is "Do you identify as a first generation American?". There are two radio button options: "Yes" and "No". Below this, there is another question: "Were you born in the United States?". There are two radio button options: "Yes" and "No". Below this, there is a question: "For how much of your life have you resided in the United States?". There are four radio button options: "I have never resided in the U.S. at all.", "Some of my life", "Most of my life", and "All of my life". At the bottom of the form, there are "Back" and "Next" buttons. A footer note says "Never submit passwords through Google Forms."

Survey

Used as a preliminary quantitative knowledge before narrowing in-depth research through from a diverse group of first



Qualitative study to gain
 going down and conducting
 qualitative interviews,
 1st-generation Americans.



Semi-structured interviews with artifact show-and-tell

Used interviews to hear first accounts of people's stories and subjective experiences. Used artifacts as (1) a starting point to anchor conversations in concrete details and (2) build rapport with participants on a personal and sensitive topic.

Literature review

Overview

We approached our literature review with the goal of better understanding of the overall experience and challenges faced by first-generation Americans and surface relevant terminology and concepts from the existing literature.

Defining first-generation American

**First Generation American (1GA) —
An individual who has lived most of their life
in the United States and has at least one
non-U.S. born parent.**

We looked to existing research to gain a clear understanding of the term “first-generation American”. We quickly realized 1GA is not universally defined. Some definitions only considered immigrants to the United States who were the first generation in their families to live in the United States as 1GA, while others considered children of immigrants that have the majority of their life in the United States to be 1GA¹.

However, we found the latter definition to be most reflective of how participants in our preliminary interviews identified themselves. Throughout the research we define 1GA as an individual who has lived most of their life in the United States and has at least one non-U.S. born parent.

Defining biculturalism

Bicultural person —

An individual who has two distinct cultures. In this case, the individual has American culture and the culture of their parents.

One dimension of being 1GA is having a bicultural identity. Biculturalism entails having an identity that consists of aspects from two different cultures and cannot be reduced to a singular cultural identity⁹. Our research centers 1GAs whose identities can be described as bicultural in that their identities consist of one culture that reflects their experience where they live, which in this case is the United States, and one (or in some cases more) cultures reflecting their heritage that are passed down to them from their parents. In this sense, biculturalism provides context to the 1GA identity in that both cultural identities work together to make up who they are.

Heritage versus Culture

Heritage —

Cultural traits and traditions that are passed down and inherited through lineage.

Initially we conflated heritage and culture into one understanding, but after some more research we made the intentional decision to focus on culture, rather than heritage, in our research. While recognizing heritage is an integral part of this research, heritage is a static trait that focuses on what is inherited passively. Unlike culture, heritage is determined at birth and does not shift beyond that.

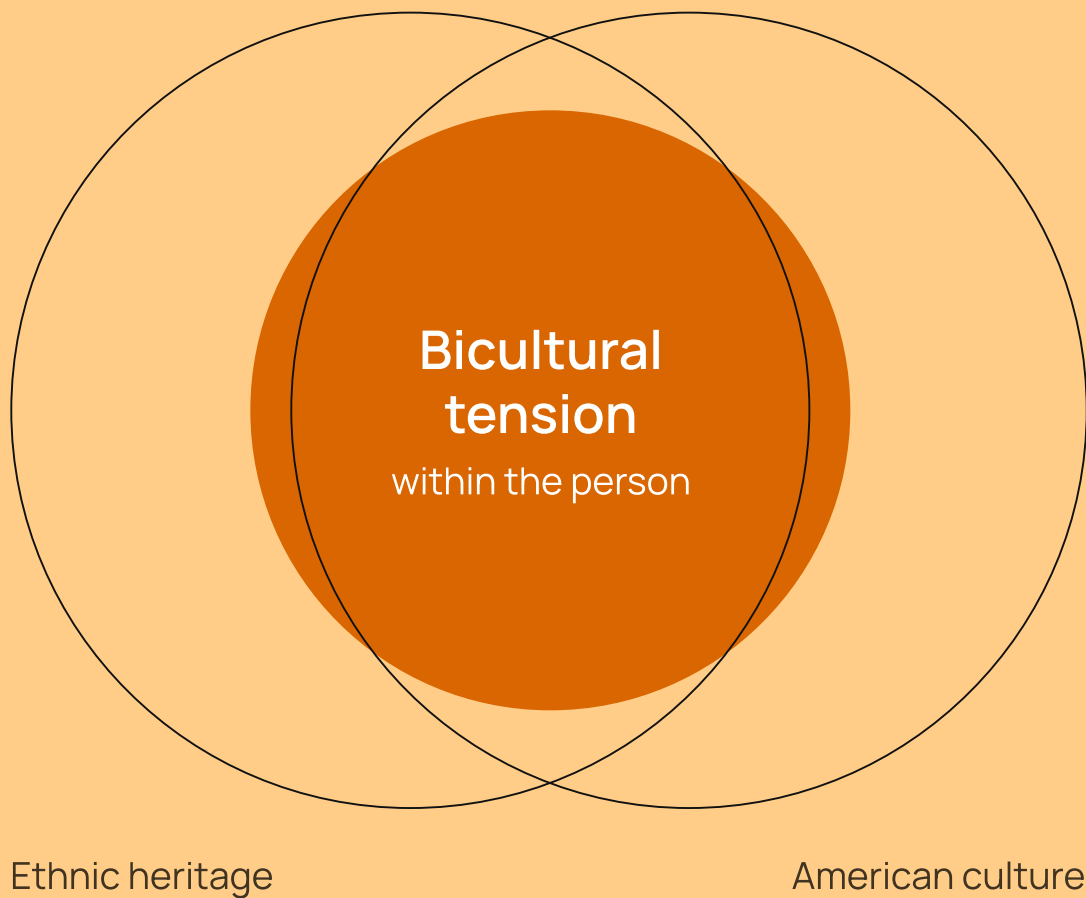
Culture, however, reflects the continuous shaping and reshaping of experience based on “belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”^{6,10}. By making this distinction clear, we were able to more clearly hone in on the lived experience of having two cultures and what this means in the context of 1GAs.

Problem spaces

By focusing on these concepts within existing research, we were able to uncover potential problems that 1GAs face.

As is often experienced in bicultural individuals, the convergence of multiple cultures can be a source of tension⁸. In many cases cultural integration with identity exists within a spectrum, rather than a binary understanding of being culturally connected or not, resulting in a unique experience of being a part of these two different cultural groups for each individual^{7,8}. This informed our process as we aimed to explore this spectrum to gain a wider understanding of the experiences of 1GAs, both with low and high degrees of integration.

Additionally, one culture, American, is gained through lived experience and the other, heritage, is gained through what is passed down from parents. These two distinctly different ways of experiencing a culture can give rise to challenges, where bicultural individuals must negotiate their inherited identity with their lived environment that may not promote this other cultural identity². Things like parental and social relationships can mediate this relationship to identity, which may in turn lead to added stressors⁶.



Visualization of the tension that arises through integrating American culture and ethnic heritage within bicultural individuals and more specifically, 1GAs.

Research questions

These identity focused and societal tensions sparked curiosity and prompted questions for us to investigate. Where do these tensions come from and what happens as a result of this tension? Why and how do 1GAs experience a clash or imbalance of cultures?

As we considered how heritage influences cultural identity, we wondered about the role of connection in the 1GA experience. We started asking questions about what it means to have a cultural identity that is inherited. How do people engage with this part of their identity? Who is involved in that interaction? What does connection look like if they are solely tied to this culture through heritage?

So this led us to our main research question: what are the challenges that 1GAs face in connecting with their culture?

We wanted to hear from 1GAs themselves to better understand what culture even looked like to them, what their current experience is, and what they aim for in terms of level of connection to their culture.

Research question

What **challenges** do 1GA face in connecting with their culture?

What **specific aspects of their culture** are FGAs trying to connect with?

How do 1GAs experience their culture in their **day-to-day lives**?

What **reasons do 1GAs want to, or not want to**, connect with their heritage?

How do **personal relationships** influence connection to their culture?

Screener & survey

Overview

The goal from our survey was to receive high level insights that would give us more personal information beyond our learnings from our literature review, inform the design of our interview structure and questions, and act as a screener and recruitment tool for qualifying participants from our user group for interviews.

Survey criteria

Our criteria for the survey was simply being a 1GA which we operationalized as living in the United States for most of their lives and having at least 1 parent's country of origin being outside of the United States.

Interview participant screening criteria

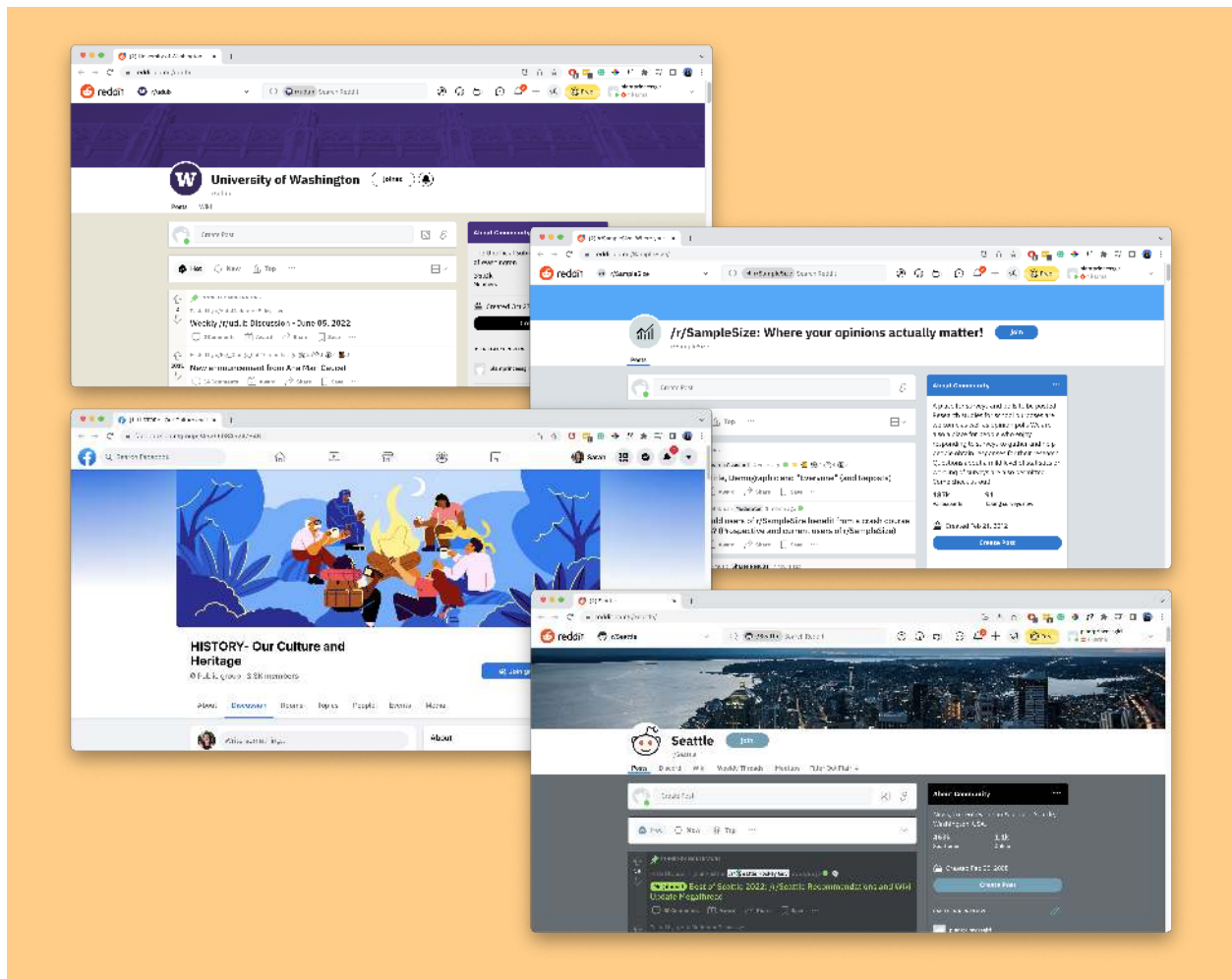
As we screened participants for qualitative interviews, we prioritized gathering data from a variety of cultures in participants to learn more about the experience of being 1GA as a whole, not specifically within one cultural or ethnic group.

Additionally, we aimed to speak to participants who identified across the spectrum of connectedness to culture. We gauged this through language proficiency, whether they had ever visited their parent's birth country, and a 7 point likert scale measuring their self-reported level of connection to their culture.

We saw a breadth of responses in our survey and were able to use those insights in guiding our interview script.

Survey recruitment

To recruit for the survey we posted the link for our Google Form which contained our survey and requests for participants from our personal networks as well as Facebook and Reddit groups that were not affiliated with individual cultural groups in order to collect a diverse data set of different cultural backgrounds and ethnicities.



Example of social media groups that we posted our surveys on

Survey results

From our survey we received a total of 58 responses from participants 18 years or older.

58

responses of at least 18
years of age

41

born in the US

54

identify as 1GA

35

unique ethnicities

52

spent most of their lives
in the US

57

with at least one parent
born outside the US

52

visited the country their
parents were born in

52

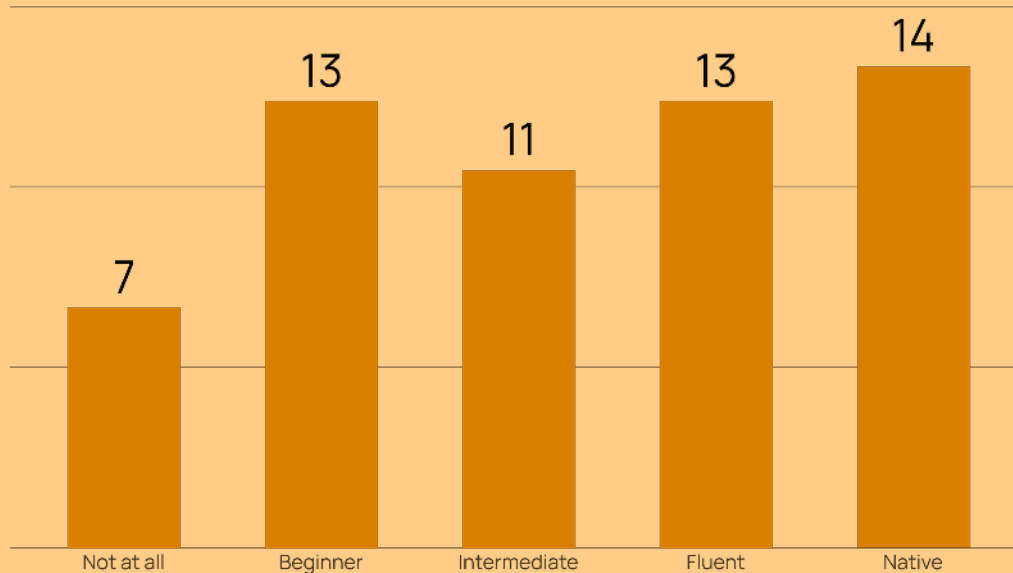
tried to connect with
one parent's culture

33

unique countries of
parent(s)

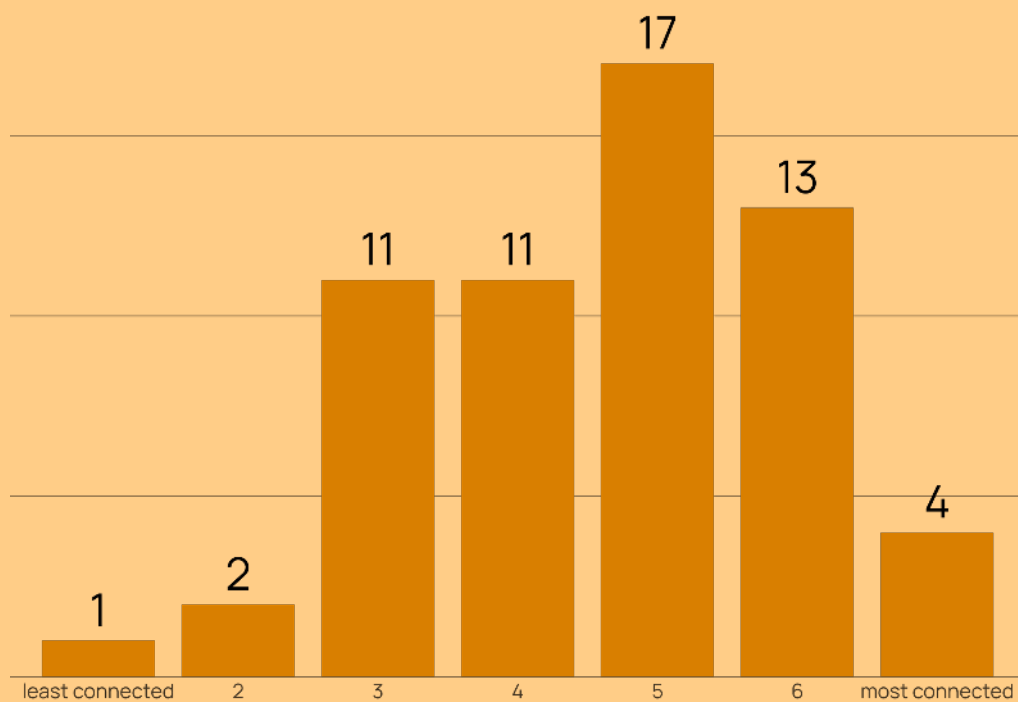
We received a large variety of responses in language proficiency of survey participants as well as the participants rating of their level of connection to their parent's culture which we used later on to select interview participants.

self-rating of language proficiency (in at least one parent's language)



Visualization of how participants rate their own language proficiency in one of their parent's language

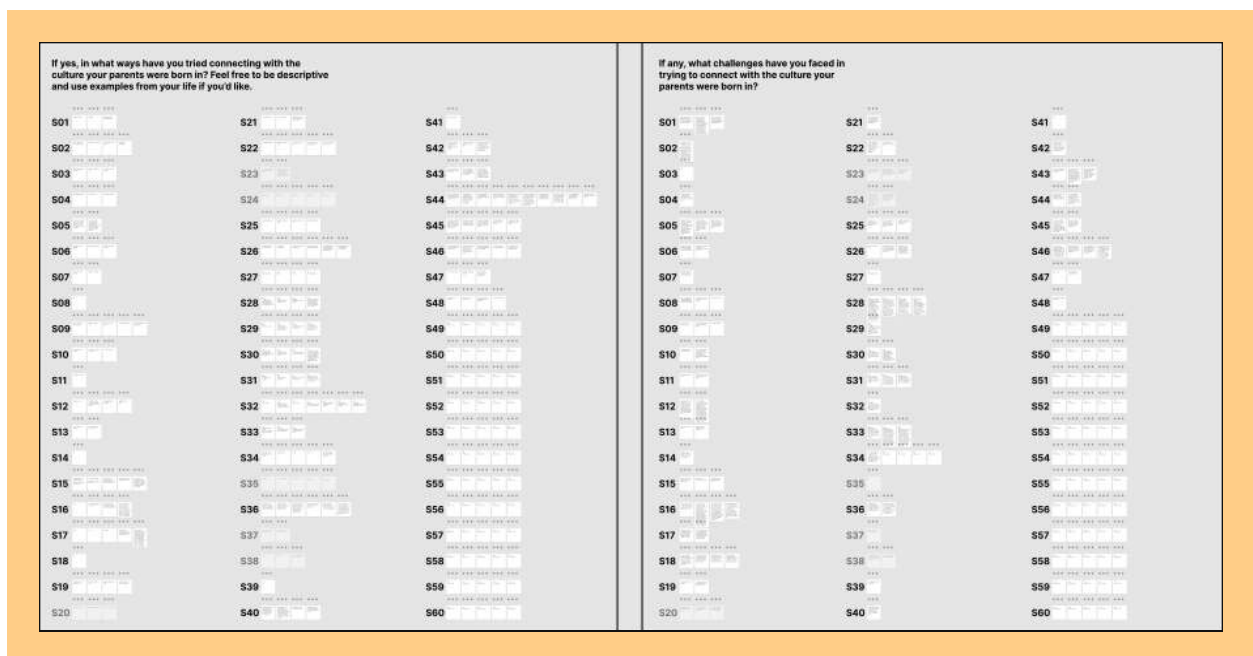
self-rating of level of connection felt to one parent's culture



Visualization of how participants rate their own level of connection to one of their parent's non-American culture

Synthesis of survey results

We moved all of the data from our Google Form into a Figjam board. Breaking up each participant response to each question as an individual sticky note.

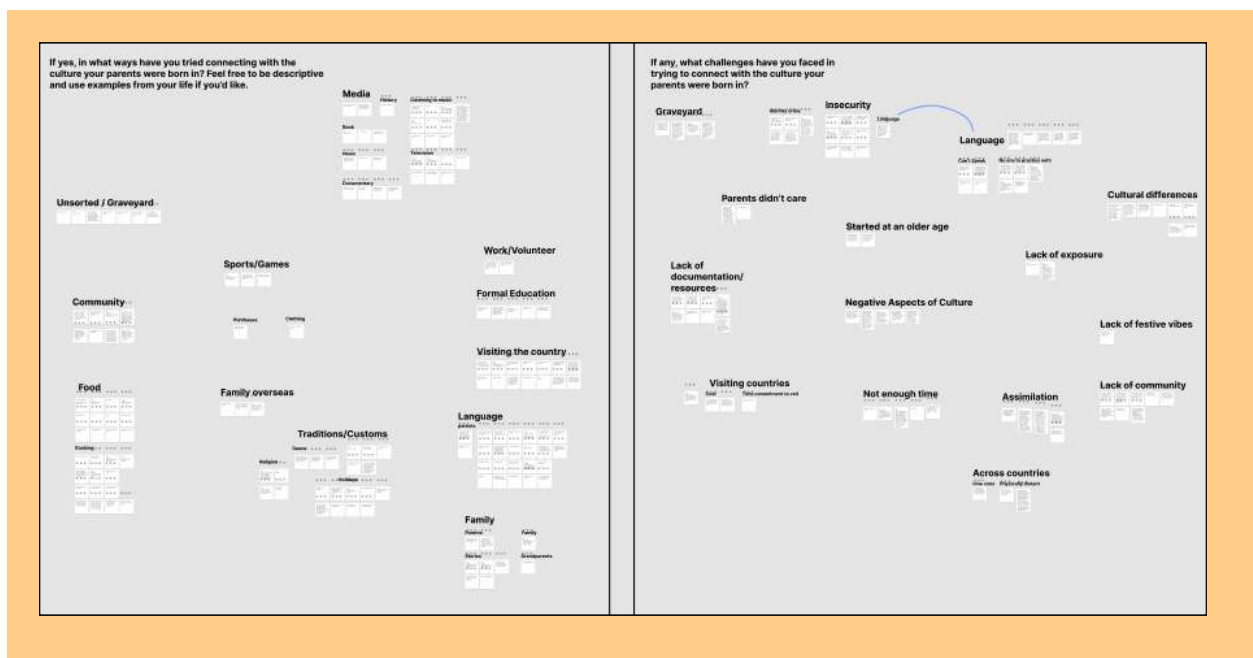


Sticky notes of survey responses

Research methodologies / Screener & survey

We grouped these datapoints into different affinity groups. Themes that were most common were language, food, traditions, insecurities and assimilation.

Getting an early understanding of responses allowed us to understand the challenges 1GAs face and helped us to create more detailed questions to probe participants within our interviews.



Affinity diagrams of survey responses

Interview

Overview

We formulated our interview questions with the objective of collecting information about people's perceptions and attitudes toward connecting to their cultures.

We decided on a design activity where participants were told to bring two artifacts to show-and-tell in order to start the interview and prompt richer discussion. Participants were asked to bring two artifacts (or photos of artifacts) that come to mind when they think about their culture.

We designed the remainder of the interview focused on allowing participants to share their personal experience with their culture and elaborate on their relationship with connecting to that culture.

Participant profiles

57

with at least one parent
born outside the US

52

spent most of their lives
in the US

54

identify as 1GA

Interview recruitment

From our survey we qualified potential interview participants that identified as 1GA, spent most of their lives in the US, and had at least one parent born outside of the United States.

From the participant pool that qualified we then narrowed by how detailed their responses were, their ethnicity, their response on their level of connectedness, and their language proficiency. We wanted a broad sample of participants of different ethnicities and levels of connection to culture.

At the end of our survey we asked if respondents were willing to participate in an interview and after deciding from that pool who fit our participant profile we reached out and scheduled 60 minute remote interviews with 8 people.

Pilots

Before beginning interviewing to ensure our questions and overall sessions ran smoothly we piloted our study. We first piloted our interview with our very own teammate Makeda. This was to test the study but also because she herself is a 1GA. So to mitigate bias running through the study with her allowed her to get out any of her own experiences so that she could better understand her own experience and its boundaries as we learned about other 1GA experiences.

We ran a second pilot session with another 1GA and continued to make iterations and revisions based on what we learned before beginning our interviews.



Our pilot interview with Makeda

Participant backgrounds

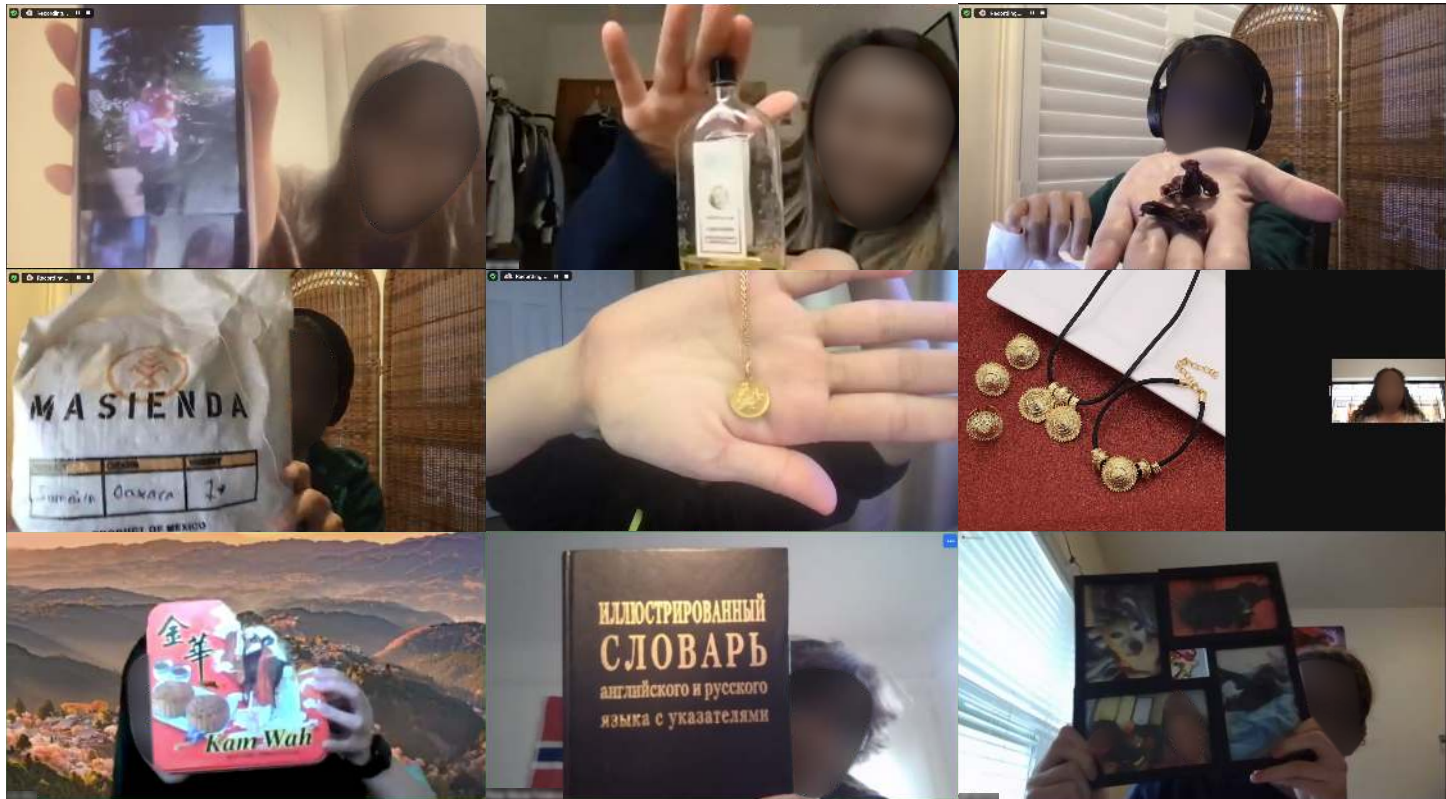
We interviewed 8 participants with backgrounds from 10 different countries visualized from the map above.



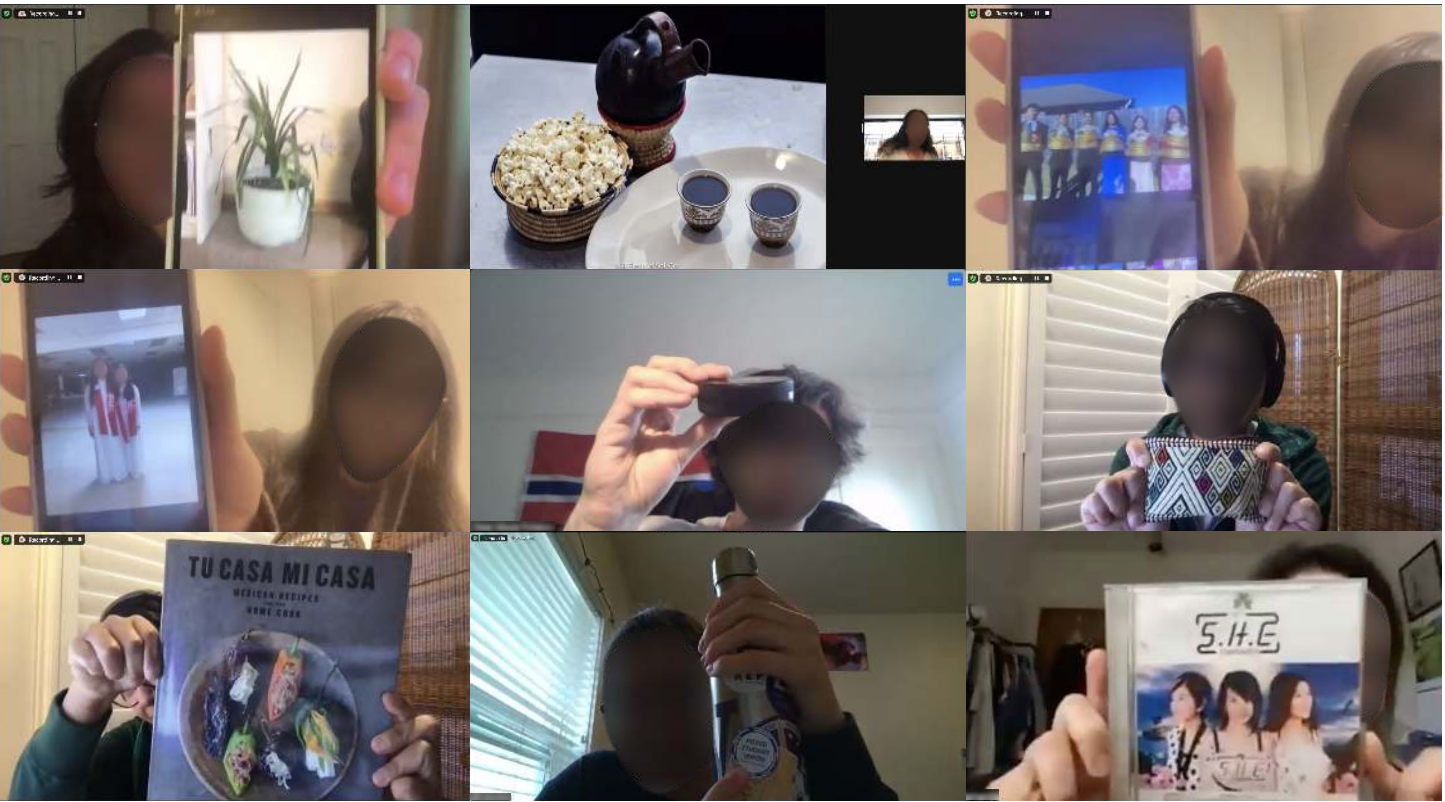
Map of our 8 participants' parents' countries of origin

Artifact show-and-tell

We kicked off the interview with the artifact activity that allowed participants to warm up, for us to build rapport, gave them a way to relate their experiences to something tangible, and gave us a look into items that were important to them.

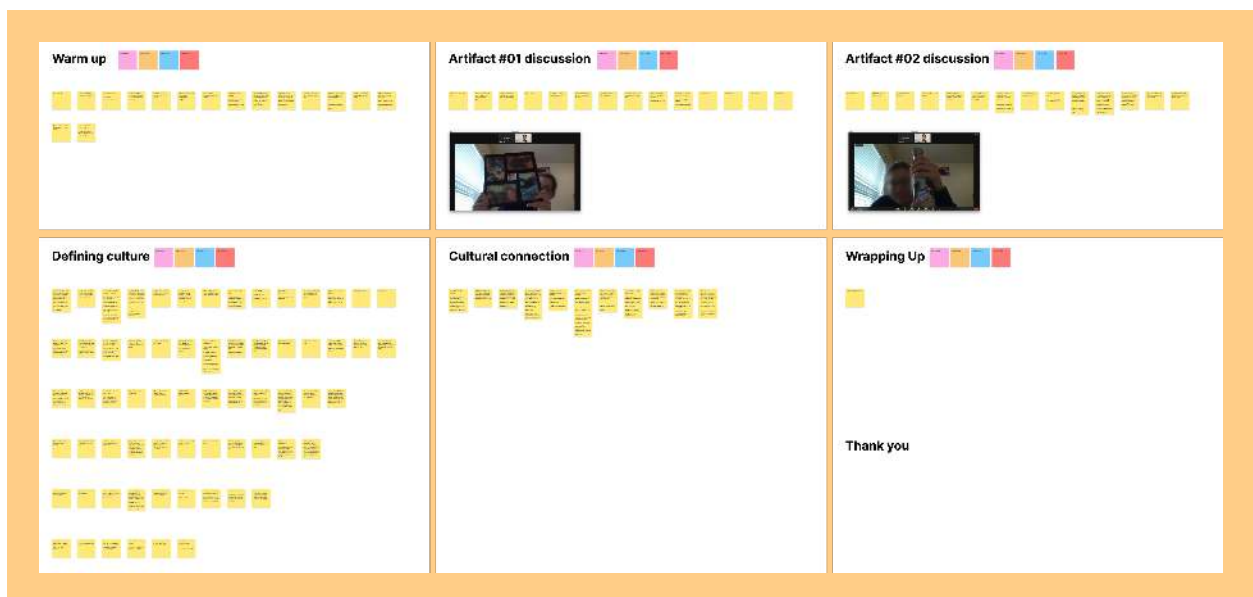


Collage of artifacts that were shown to us during our semi-structured user interview done remotely over Zoom.



Notetaking & early sensemaking

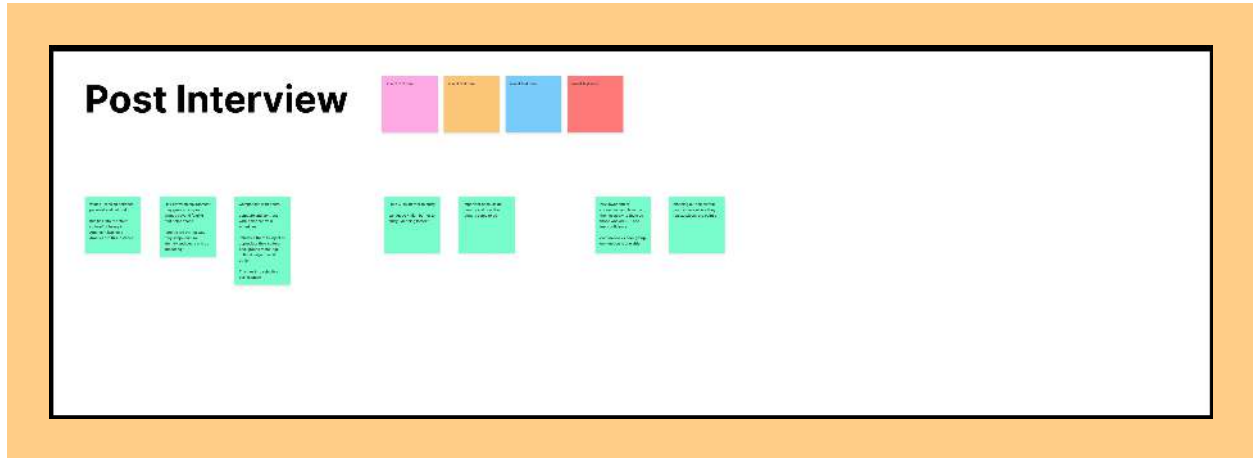
We took notes directly into a Figjam board breaking up sticky notes into five main sections: warm up, artifact 1, artifact 2, defining culture, cultural connection, and wrapping up.



Screenshot of our Figma file of how we took interview notes for P07

Research methodologies

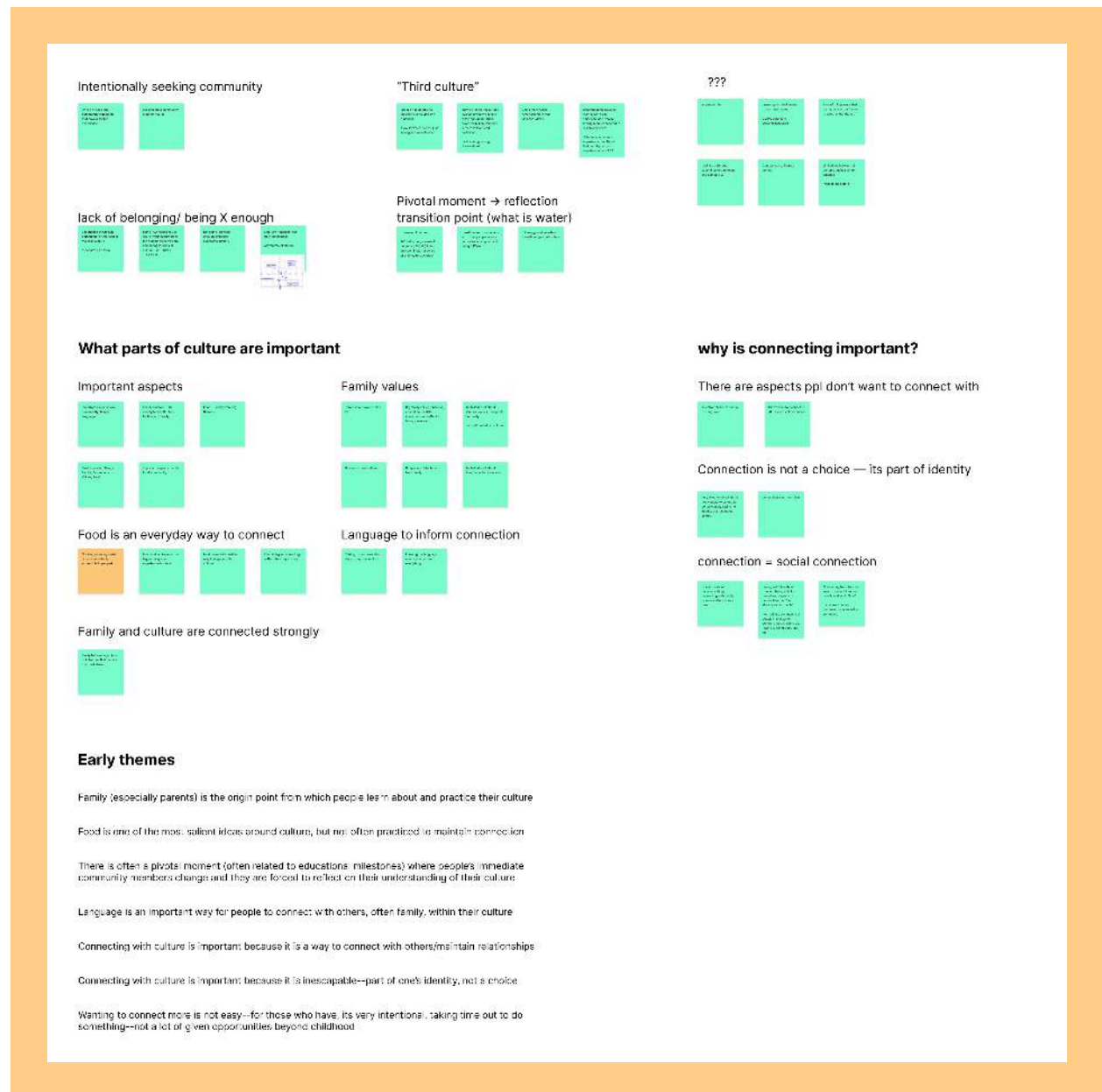
We had a section called “Post Interview” where we would write any highlights from the interview directly after we finished.



Screenshot of our Figma file of the post interview debrief for one of our participants

Research methodologies

After finishing all 8 interviews we took the highlights from each interview and combined them to form early themes.

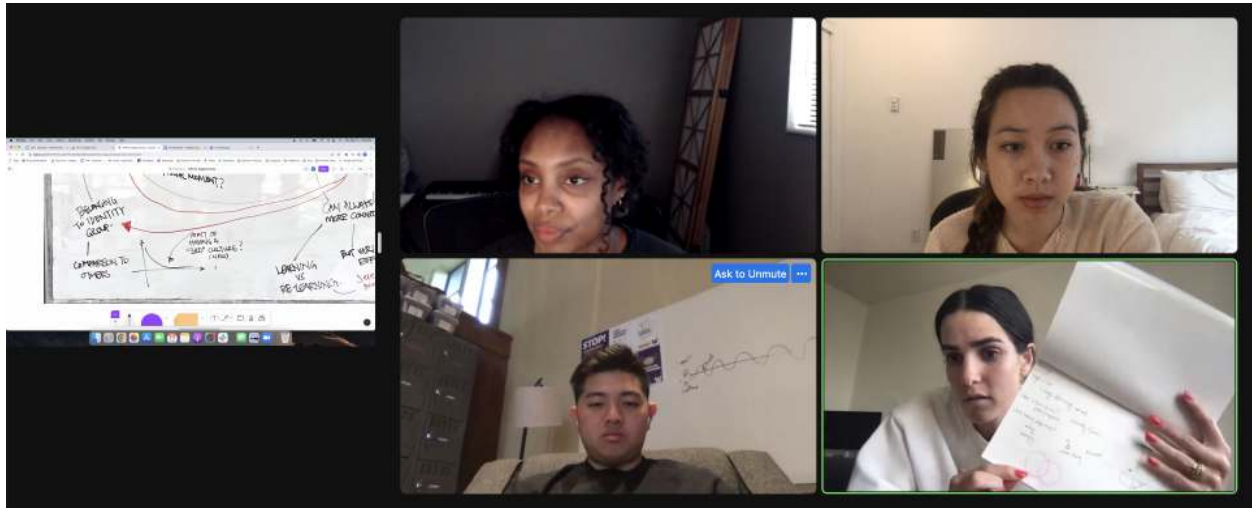


Screenshot of our Figma file of our early sensemaking

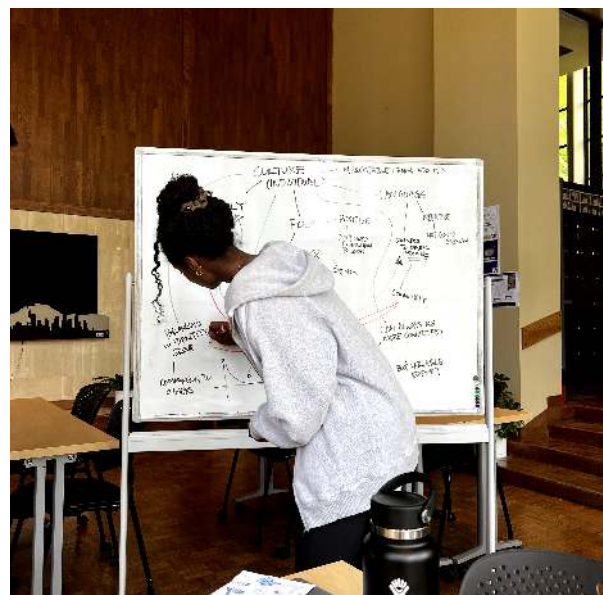
Research methodologies

Sensemaking

We brainstormed our early themes making more connections and went over them with our advisor, Chloe Lee.



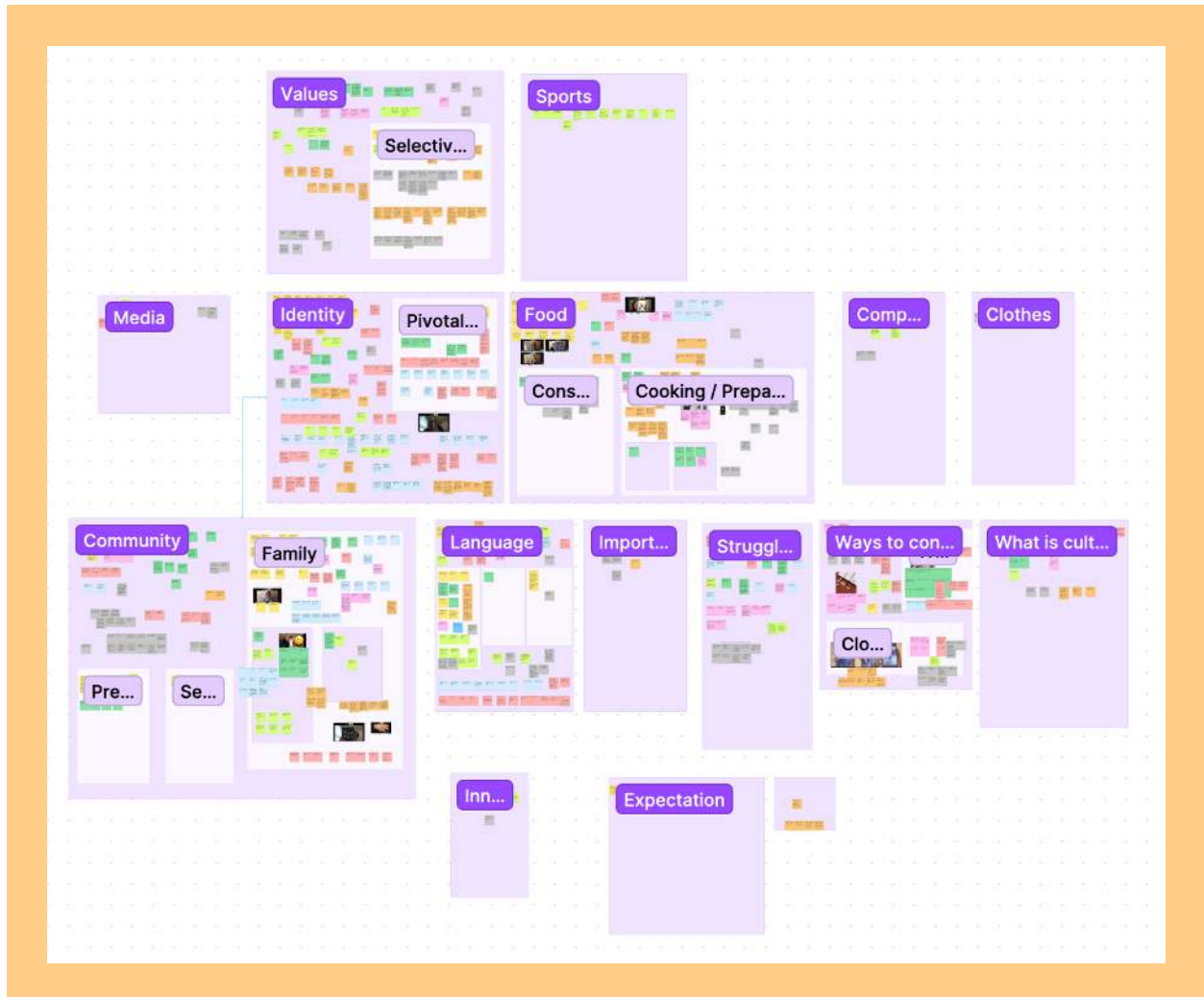
Screenshot of Zoom of the team working with our mentor during the Sensemaking phase



Images of the team whiteboard-ing during the Sensemaking phase

Research methodologies

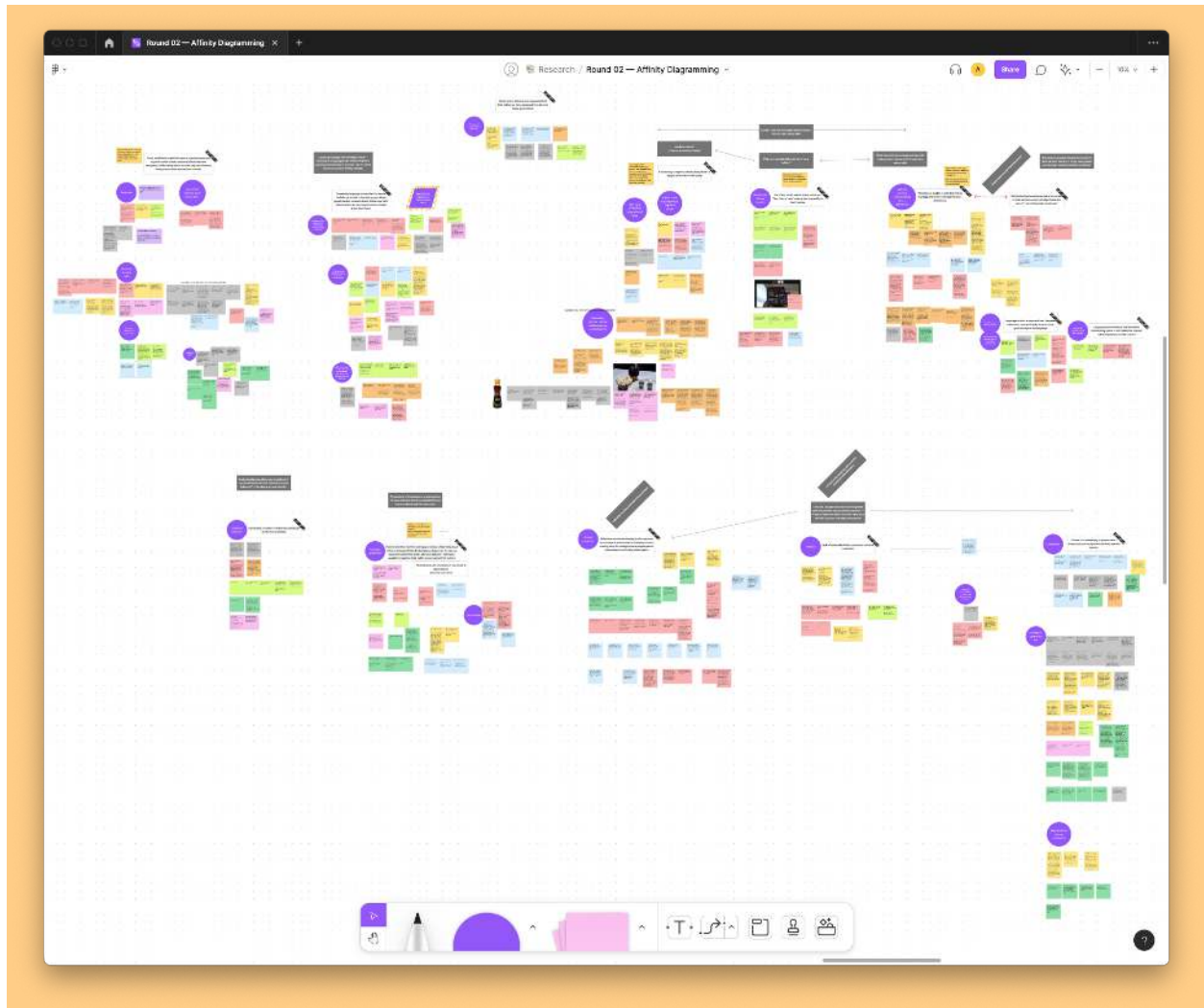
We sorted our notes into affinity diagrams with large groups forming such as identity, values, food, and community.



Screenshot of the first round of our affinity mapping

Research methodologies

We further narrowed our groups making more specific groupings that began to reflect findings.

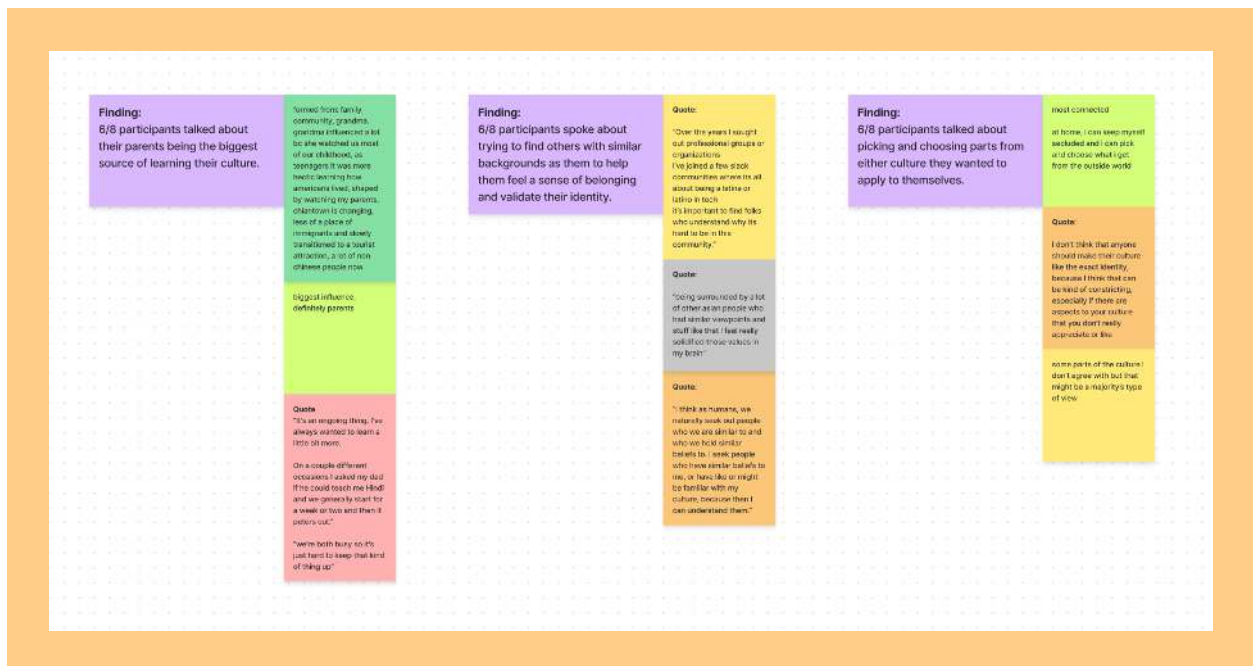


Screenshot of another round of affinity mapping

Collating findings and forming insights

From there, we drew out findings from points that were repetitively brought up by multiple participants.

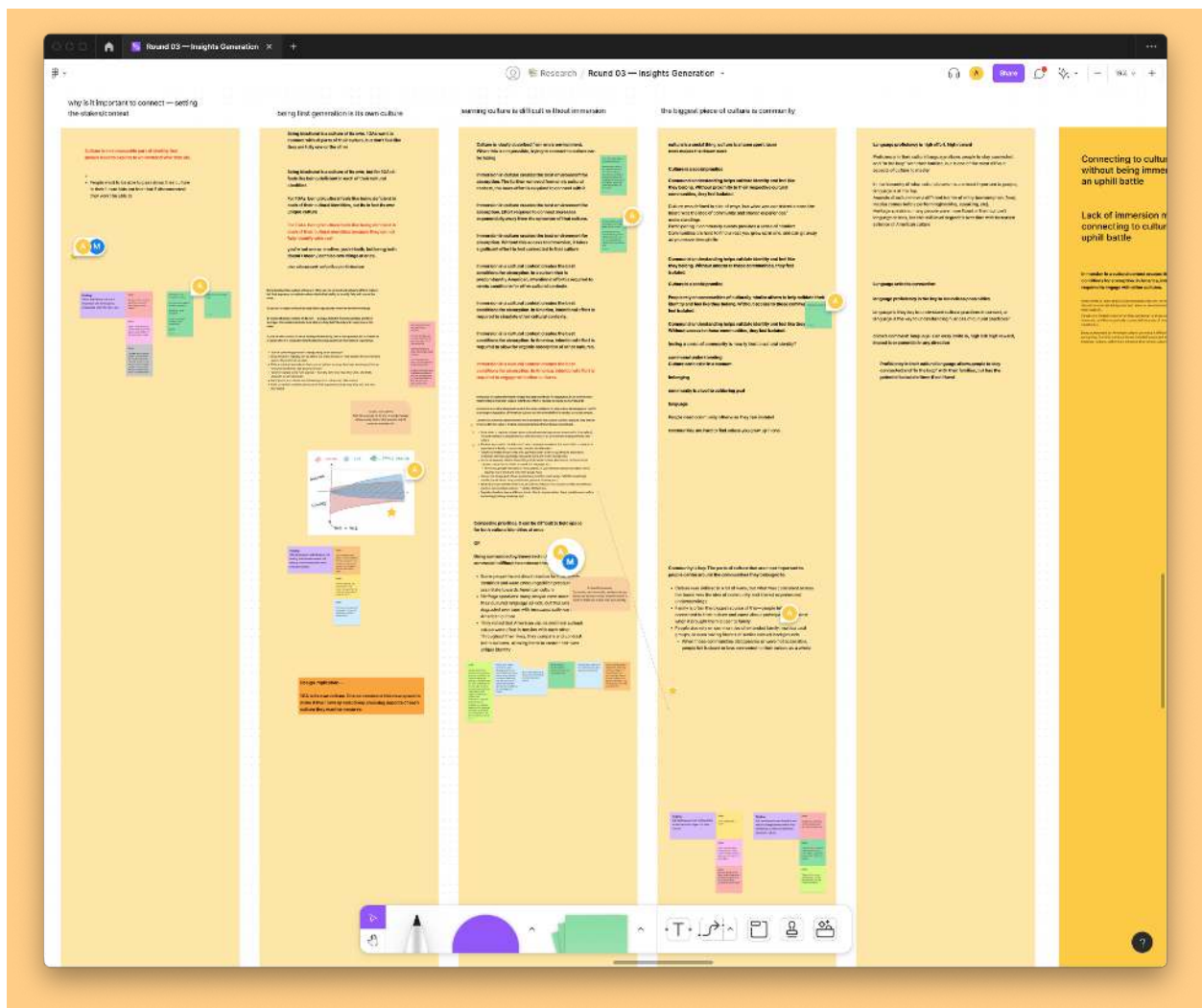
The initial plan was to distill insights over two rounds of affinity mapping. However, the information was too dense to do so, and we felt like we were unable to convincingly convey the subtleties of each group of findings.



Screenshot of some of our findings and supporting pieces of evidence

Research methodologies

As such, we went into a third round of affinity mapping. This time, we adopted an iterative working style and started out by focusing solely on the content that we wanted to convey. We constantly went back and forth discussing and debating the nuances of insights with respect to its supporting evidence, sat on each of these insights for a little while, and repeated this process.



Screenshot of our Figma file that depicts how we continuously iterated on insights

INSIGHTS



Connecting to culture isn't a choice — it's an inescapable part of identity

For 1GAs, not pursuing connection is not an option. People need to explore their culture to understand who they are.

When it comes to connecting to culture for 1GAs, the stakes are high. Heritage is an irreversible part of identity that undeniably shapes who 1GAs are. It's not a hobby or side interest, it's an inherent need.

Because of this, being disconnected from their culture creates a sense of loss about who they are.

People who felt disconnected worried about how they might pass down a part of themselves that felt so central to identity to future generations if they chose to start a family.



*When I don't tap into my culture,
it's like there's this piece missing.
It's like I'm not being true to myself.*

— P03

Belonging to two cultures can feel like belonging to none

Being bicultural can feel like being deficient in each of their cultural identities because they struggle to fully identify with either.

While 1GAs recognize their identity is multifaceted and shaped by both their American culture and their ethnic culture, they **feel that they will never fully be one or the other**. This often leaves them feeling unsure about how to define their cultural identity and hinders their ability to feel confident in practicing their culture. Comparing themselves to their parents or other peers who have experience living in that cultural context makes them feel like they were “not enough” of that ethnicity. Their heritage is an incapable part of them that can never be changed, but they still **question their right to take up that cultural identity**.

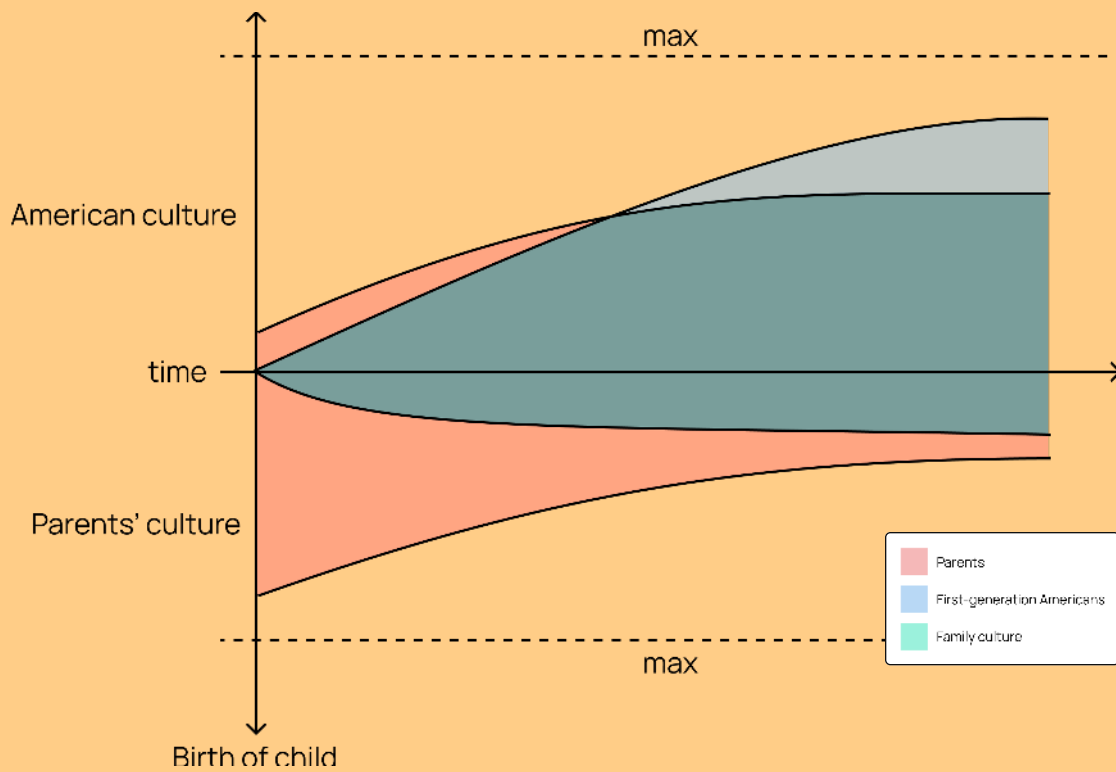


On campus there are different student groups. I didn't have enough of a connection to Malaysia to be a part of that club [Malaysian Student Association].

Connecting to culture without being immersed is an uphill battle

Immersion within a cultural context creates the best conditions for natural absorption. In America, intentional effort is required to meaningfully engage with other cultures.

Without the ability to be fully immersed in a cultural environment, **1GAs can't experience that culture for themselves.** Because of this, it takes extra effort to engage with their culture and they often must rely on other people or resources to learn how. Recreating cultural immersion within the United States is challenging, as traveling to their parent's home countries takes up significant time and financial resources and 1GAs often still feel like an outsider in those environments. Additionally, they face social pressure to prioritize western culture and experiences over their own ethnic cultures. **Because they are constantly immersed in American culture, that is their default mode,** and exploring other cultural identities requires significant work.



This model demonstrates that cultural exposure for 1GAs is secondary in nature, often coming from resources outside of their own immersion within a culture. In contrast, their parents' exposure to culture is largely primary.

*My parents taught me it's always
best to **assimilate to white society**
and culture.*

— P05

Gateways to learning about culture are few and far between

Despite a strong desire to deepen their cultural connection, limited access to resources leaves 1GAs feeling hopeless.

Because cultural connection takes intentional effort, 1GAs must seek out resources or opportunities to learn. Often, this kind of **dedicated learning takes up more time and effort than they have**. Because there is no built-in structure they can rely on, most 1GAs rely on their families, particularly parental figures, as points of guidance. However this **singular point of access is a bottleneck** — 1GAs often face barriers like misalignment of priorities or lack of physical or emotional access to their parents, leaving them on their own to find ways to connect. Without knowing where to start, 1GAs feel hopeless **and that resources are simply out of their reach**.



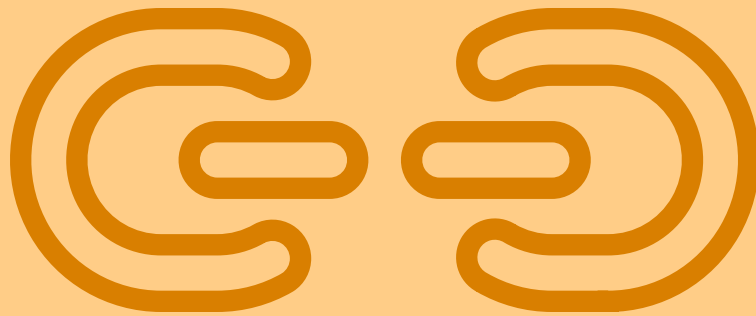
[Dad]'s busy, I'm busy... I don't think he necessarily realizes how important [learning Hindi] is to me.

— P07

1GAs need to connect with others who share their culture, but can't always build bridges

Communal understanding validates identity and builds a sense of cultural belonging, but being 1GA comes with barriers for engaging with those communities.

People defined cultural connection in many different ways, but what was consistent across the board was the idea of **engaging with family, friends, or extended communities of people who shared their cultural background**. However, accessing these networks is not always easy. Many 1GAs **struggle to maintain relationships with intergenerational or international family members**, having lost their ability to speak the language over time, or never having learned in the first place. Connecting with culturally similar peers is also a challenge. Many 1GAs grew up in an environment where they didn't have any access to peers who shared their background, or moved to a new environment without any members of their cultural community. Ultimately, **not feeling connected to other people in their culture results in feeling isolated from their cultural group and identity**.



*[I feel disconnected] whenever I'm
at my dorm in college and **I have to**
walk 20 minutes to find someone
that looks like me.*

— P01

Being connected not only means consuming culture, but also practicing it

Different aspects of culture have different barriers of entry. Consumption (eating, media) is often more attainable than performance (cooking, speaking, hosting celebrations).

Often, the experiences that made people feel connected to culture have two dimensions: consumption, which involves more passive engagement, like attending celebrations or eating cultural foods prepared by others, and performance, which involves cooking those same foods or hosting those same celebrations themselves. **1GAs, have a strong grasp on cultural consumption** because it requires little to no cultural proficiency, while they **struggle with cultural practices that require much more learning familiarity** to master. However, consumption alone is not enough to sustain cultural connection. Many 1GAs want to be able to take ownership over cultural practices, not only as a way to **feel empowered in their cultural identity, but also to help them pass down traditions to future generations.**



*All the food stuff goes over my head.
Hopefully my mom teaches me something.
That's something you have to be taught.
You can't really pick up on it.*

01

Connecting to culture isn't a choice — it's an inescapable part of identity

For 1GA's, not pursuing connection is not an option. People need to explore their culture to understand who they are.

02

Belonging to two cultures can feel like belonging to none

Being bicultural can feel like being deficient in each of their cultural identities because they struggle to fully identify with either.

03

Connecting to culture without being immersed is an uphill battle

Immersion within a cultural context creates the best conditions for natural absorption. In America, intentional effort is required to meaningfully engage with other cultures.

04

Gateways to learning about culture are few and far between

Despite a strong desire to deepen their cultural connection, limited access to resources leaves 1GAs feeling hopeless.

05

1GAs need to connect with others who share their culture, but can't always build bridges

Communal understanding validates identity and builds a sense of cultural belonging, but being 1GA comes with barriers for engaging with those communities.

06

Being connected not only means consuming culture, but also practicing it

Different aspects of culture have different barriers of entry. Consumption (eating, media) is often more attainable than performance (cooking, speaking, hosting celebrations).

DESIGN IMPLICATIONS

Design implications

We just wrapped out the research phase and are still very early in the design phase. Through research we have identified these four directions that we hope to further explore and learn more about.

01

Identity
security

02

Rethinking
gateways

03

Impactful
relationships

04

High impact
participation

Identity security

Feeling insecure about their cultural identity can hinder 1GAs from feeling empowered enough to participate in their culture.

How can we support their journey to connection by reaffirming identity?
How can we avoid furthering the narrative that they are not enough?

Rethinking gateways

Everyone wants to learn more about their culture. There are definitely limitations to those gateways for learning.

Do people need more gateways, better gateways, or more accessible gateways?

Impactful relationships

Connecting to others with shared cultural backgrounds is critical.

What defines the relationships that help people feel culturally connected?
What does an ideal version of these relationships look like?

High impact participation

Connection takes time and effort, but giving up is not an option.

How can we leverage participation vs consumption focused aspects of culture to identify low effort, high reward opportunities?

Design implications



*2x2 of effort required to learn a culture versus the
reward of how much of that culture is learnt*

APPENDIX

Glossary

First-generation American

An individual who has lived most of their life in the United States and has at least one non-U.S. born parent.

Culture

The customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a particular nation, people, or other social group.

Bicultural

An individual who has two distinct cultures. In this case, the individual has American culture and the culture of their parents.

Heritage

Cultural traits and traditions that are passed down and inherited through lineage.

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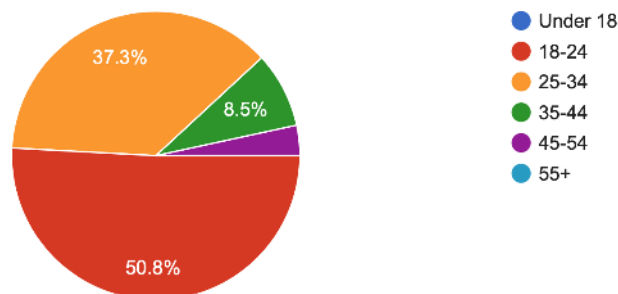
- 09 Schwartz, S. J., & Unger, J. B. (2010). Biculturalism and context: What is biculturalism, and when is it adaptive?: Commentary on Mistry and Wu. *Human development*, 53(1), 26.
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Survey results

This is the **raw data of the multiple choice questions** that we have collected from our survey. We used Google forms as our tool of choice. We had a total of 59 responses but had to remove one response because it was tainted.

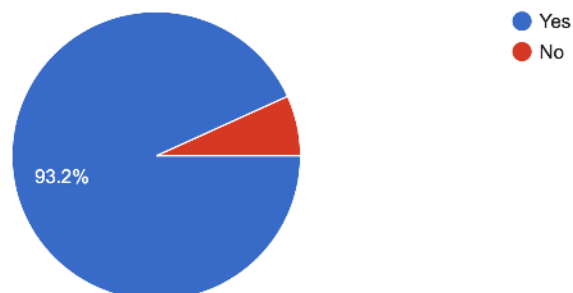
What is your age?

59 responses



Do you identify as a first generation American?

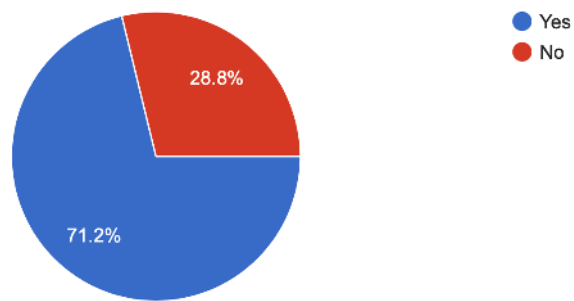
59 responses



Survey results

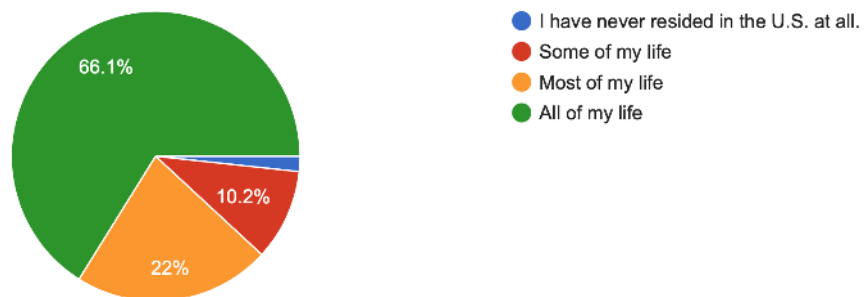
Were you born in the United States?

59 responses



For how much of your life have you resided in the U.S.?

59 responses



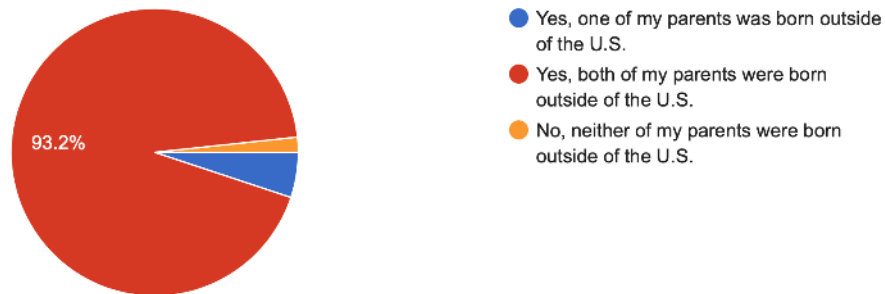
Appendix

part 03 / 05

Survey results

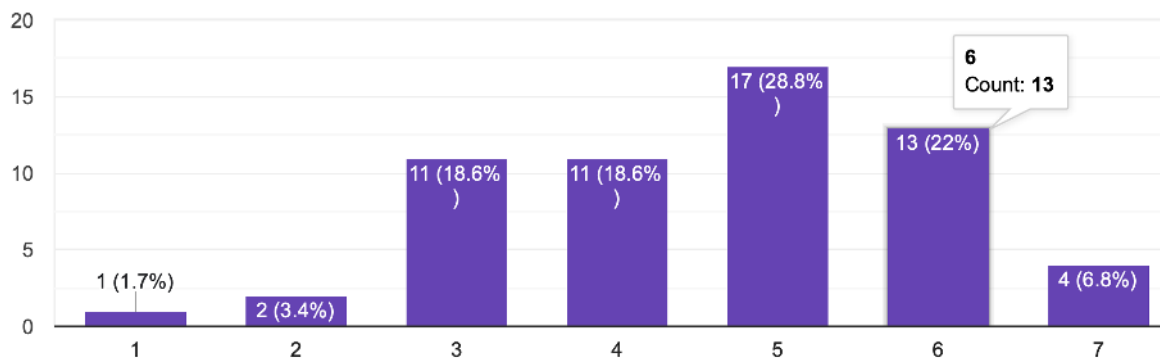
Were your parents born outside of the U.S.?

59 responses



On a scale of 1-7, with 1 being not connected at all and 7 being very connected, how connected do you feel to the culture your parents were born in?

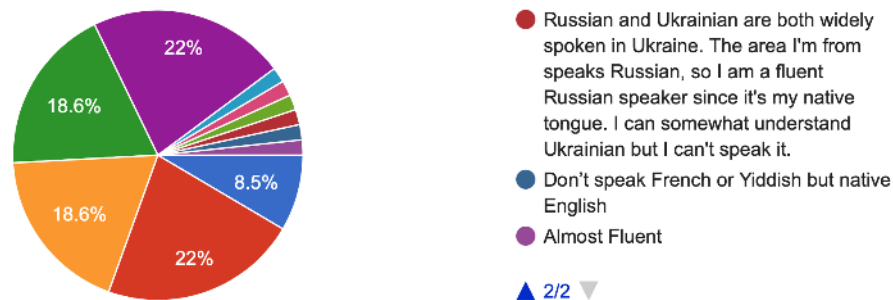
59 responses



Survey results

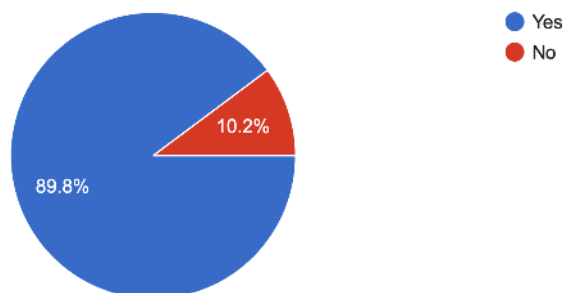
What is your proficiency in the language(s) of the country/countries your parents were born in?

59 responses



Have you ever visited the country or countries your parents were born in?

59 responses



Survey results

Have you tried connecting with the culture your parents were born in?

59 responses

