

# **Decoration makes a home: the role of living room furnishings in achieving a dignified standard of living in urban Mexico**

## **Abstract**

This article explores the ways in which home furnishings and the ability to decorate one's living room form part of a dignified standard of living. The analysis uses data from the Minimum Income Standard (MIS) project in Mexico, which finds the income required to achieve a decent standard of living based on what members of the public consensually define. Six focus groups were carried out in Monterrey and Mexico City in 2016 and concentrated on listing the items that any living room in a family with children in that country should have in order to achieve a dignified standard of living. Results indicate that a dignified standard of living entails more than just having access to housing and includes the ability to produce a home. Being able to imprint one's personality and to feel connected with society were understood as crucial components of a dignified standard of living. Consequently, participants in the study in Mexico stressed the importance of furnishings and decoration in the living room that fulfil a practical function but also help to satisfy the need for self-identification and connectedness with society.

## **Keywords**

Living room; home furnishings; dignity; self-identity; social connectedness

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## **1. Introduction**

Housing has been identified as a human right and as an important element in achieving a decent standard of living (Thiele, 2002). The right to adequate housing is enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and is part of several constitutions (United Nations, 2009). Likewise, adequate housing is included in various measures of well-being, deprivation, or human development. In Mexico, the Constitution indicates that “all families have the right to dignified and decent housing” (Constitucion de 1917, Art 4) and the multidimensional poverty measurement used officially in that country considers housing to be a social right and states that an individual is poor if the accommodation in which they live is made of non-durable materials, has a dirt floor or is overcrowded (CONEVAL, 2010). Nevertheless, despite the prominent place that housing takes in conceptualising living standards in Mexico, the Constitution does not specify what “dignified and decent housing” means, and the official multidimensional measure of poverty includes only material aspects of the accommodation. Neither the Constitution nor the poverty measure account either for the contents of the house or for people’s perceptions of what constitutes dignified housing conditions.

Distinctions between a house and a home are often encapsulated within popular expressions such as ‘A house is made of walls and beams; a home is built with love and dreams’. This differentiation between the physical construction materials of housing and the meanings of its contents is also found in the literature that explores the role of emotions in home-spaces (Blunt, 2005; Hockey *et al*, 2001; Holton, 2017; Smith, 1994), cultural identities of the home (Daniels, 2015; Ozaki and Lewis, 2006), and at the role that specific items play in relation to feelings of

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belonging and home-construction (Van der Horst and Messing, 2006; Haldrup, 2017). Most of the literature that addresses the affective aspect of housing lies within anthropology, geography, sociology or cultural studies. However, within social policy, and more specifically within the literature on living standards, discussions regarding housing are principally focused on the provision, quality, availability and affordability of *housing* as a resource rather than on the *home*.

Within Latin America, research on housing has focused on the phenomenon of self-building (Bredenoord and van Lindert, 2009; Kellett, 2013), on issues around land ownership and illegal settlements (Gilbert and de Joung, 2015; Monkkonen, 2016), on housing materials, access to public services, and asset ownership (Benita, 2016), or on the conditions of housing that impact on habitability and quality of life such as noise or neighbourhood in which housing is located (Moreno Olmos, 2008). This is possibly related to the fact that for many Latin Americans housing conditions are precarious. For example, in Mexico, around half of the housing stock in the country is self-built (Sanchez, 2012), which often means low quality construction, a lack of property rights and scarce access to public services, such as water and electricity. In this context, it is unsurprising that, within the social policy and living standards literature in Mexico, housing has been explored primarily through objective indicators related to tenure and construction material and strategies.

The literature in Mexico that has looked into subjective approximations on living standards has primarily explored perceptions of what constitutes deprivation (Rojas, 2007; Gacitua-Mario and Wodon, 2001), strategies to cope with risk and vulnerability (Gonzalez de la Rocha, 2001), and the association between objective and subjective indicators of economic hardship (ECLAC, 2010). The studies that have looked into housing and poverty have found that notions of precarity and vulnerability are embedded in the experiences of households. For example, Dürr

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(2012), in investigating the issue of slum tourism in Mexico, argued that objective indicators such as poor-quality housing and lack of access to water, sanitation, and infrastructure are unsatisfactory when defining deprived neighbourhoods and that understandings of slums entail complex connotations that range from danger to lust for life, from crime to solidarity. Also in Mexico, Palomar-Lever and Victorio-Estrada (2012) explored emotional disturbance, including indicators such as anxiety, negative self-esteem, lack of self-regulation and depression, among adults living in poverty, which is often coupled with inadequate housing. Salles and Lopez (2009) state that low income households in that country tend to be vulnerable throughout a long process of self-construction and given the limitations to property rights and access to services. This study also indicates women are particularly affected by hardship associated with inadequate housing, by having negative effects on their physical health as well as making it more difficult to satisfy their social roles.

In Mexico, as in many Latin American countries, housing is generally perceived as wrapped up in notions of precarity and vulnerability. Nevertheless, even though there has been some recognition that not only the container but also the contents of the accommodation are important in the notion of dignified housing in Mexico (Salles and Lopez, 2009) the literature has not explored in detail the association between house contents, emotions, and the functions that home furnishings play in developing a sense of dignity. Dignity is a concept that is often included in the literature on living standards but that has been defined in multiple ways. Firstly, dignity has been understood in relation to human rights. For example, Ignatieff places dignity alongside other emotions that are central to human nature: "it is because fraternity, love, belonging, dignity and respect cannot be specified as rights that we ought to specify them as needs" (1984, pp. 13-14). Doyal and Gough (1991) identify having opportunities and the freedom to "maintain self-identity and supporting the dignity of others for whom an individual

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feels a sense of responsibility” (1991, p. 67) are basic human needs. Secondly, dignity and self-respect have been identified as indicators of social well-being, meaning “being able to live without being a burden to others; living without extending one’s hand; living without being subservient to anybody” (Narayan et al, 2000, p. 27). Thirdly, dignity has also been found at the core of the living wage literature (Hirsch and Valadez, 2017). Ryan wrote at the beginning of the XX Century that a living wage should “safeguard the human dignity of the laborer and his family” (1906, p. 124). More recently, the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “everyone who works has the right to just and favorable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity” (1948, Art 23). Academic literature has recognised that “in contemporary life, the word home means both an intangible sense of belonging and a lived space” (Walsh, 2006, p. 271). However, the literature on housing in Mexico presents some gaps as it tends to concentrate on the construction materials and process, on tenure, and on access to public services, but empirical studies have not touched on how the contents of accommodation – and particularly decorative items – may be related to achieving a dignified standard of living. Despite the advances in research focused on housing conditions and subjective living standards, there is at present a limited understanding of how these two areas of research relate to each other: how are home furnishings important for achieving a dignified standard of living? In this light, the article explores the ways in which the goods contained within a hypothetical living room are central to a dignified standard of living, as publically defined within urban Mexico. This article explores the emotions attached to the goods and services that participants in focus groups identified as important to achieve a dignified standard of living. The various functions of items contained in a typical Mexican living room are explored: practical, enjoyment, intrinsic quality, memory, social, and self-identity (Kamptner, 1995). The multiple functions of goods and the emotions described by participants in focus groups suggest that a dignified standard of living entails a home where one could imprint

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personality, where the contents of the house are as important as the container. As illustrated by Blunt and Dowling, “home is both a place/physical location and a set of feelings” (2006, p. 22). Therefore, possessions in the living room could be understood as material representation of emotions related to living with dignity.

### **2. The multiple functions of household goods**

Within the economics and social policy literature, material possessions are usually regarded as objective indicators of wealth, economic wellbeing, or socioeconomic status under the assumption that the quantity and quality of material goods a household has serve as indirect measures of living standards. Some scholars (Townsend, 1979; Vyas and Kumaranayake, 2006) have looked at information on household durable goods, including items that could be found in a living room such as a radio and a television, along with household income, access to infrastructure, and housing characteristics to propose a way to measure poverty. Other authors have included household goods in examinations of how socio-economic conditions of the household influence other indicators of wellbeing, for example BMI (Neuman *et al*, 2013) or developmental outcomes of children (Desai, 1995; Fernald and Neufeld, 2007).

Measuring living standards through household goods along with other socio-economic characteristics has permeated policymaking. For example, one of the wellbeing lines used by the Mexican government to measure poverty is based on a non-food basket which includes 269 items including furniture, electrical appliances, kitchenware, printed material, and computing and communications equipment as well as items related to clothing and footwear, personal care, education, culture and recreation, public transport, healthcare, and leisure (CONEVAL, 2012).

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However, understanding possessions as indicators of socioeconomic status or economic wellbeing usually does not look at the meanings people associate with material items or what kind of functions they serve in achieving a decent standard of living.

Separately, the literature that has looked at people's association with possessions ranges from psychological to sociological perspectives and has focused on specific age groups as well as broad cultural patterns (Pierce *et al*, 2003). Within these fields of knowledge, the practical function of material goods is generally recognised in relation to the usefulness it bears to their owner or users - "possessions have an instrumental function - they make possible certain activities and pleasures" (Furby, 1978b: 60 in Pierce *et al*, 2003), contrasting with the social policy perspective where material goods are usually regarded as proxies for economic status.

Building on the idea that possessions are part of "the extended self" (Belk, 1988), things have been understood to be a way to express oneself and a way to portray self-identity (Dittmar, 1992; Mittal, 2006). Kamptner (1995) summarises five additional functions: enjoyment, intrinsic quality, memory, social, and self-meaning. The enjoyment meaning of things refers to the quality that possessions have of making oneself feel good about oneself, to enhance one's mood, to relax, to get a sense of security, or to achieve comfort. Intrinsic quality refers to the item's worth and uniqueness. The memory of possessions refers to their ability to be a reminder of other people, places, or moments. The social meaning of material objects refers to how it represents interpersonal ties and triggers association with others. Finally, objects have self-meaning because they are a representation of oneself and one's history.

The multiple meanings, or functions, of materials goods have been widely studied, with the recognition that "material possessions have a profound symbolic significance for their owners,

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as well as for other people. (And that) Possessions play an important role in everyday life: they influence the ways in which we think about ourselves and about others” (Dittmar, 1992, p. 3). Therefore, the multiple functions of goods have served, for example, as a framework for exploring bedroom personalization among adolescents (Fidzani and Read, 2014) or understanding the meanings of domestic technologies (Livingstone, 1992). The multiple functions of material goods serve as background in understanding the conversations that groups of people in Mexico had in relation to what items in a hypothetical living room would be needed to achieve a dignified standard of living.

### **3. Methodology**

A study adopting the Minimum Income Standard (MIS) approach (see Davis *et al*, 2016; Padley, Valadez and Hirsch, 2017) was carried out in Mexico in the summer of 2016. MIS establishes consensually-defined living standards based on what members of society agree to be necessary, including both material and non-material needs such as social participation. This ‘consensual approach’ (Walker, 1987) holds that living standards are socially and culturally specific in a similar way in which Townsend (1979) argued that poverty could be understood as a lack of resources relative to what is customarily seen as the approved social norm. Therefore, the study carried out in Mexico looked to establish what people living in Mexican cities agree should be a minimum dignified standard of living for all those living in urban areas in that country, translating that standard into specific goods and services.

The MIS approach, like other forms of qualitative research, facilitates uncovering meanings and interpretations (Mason, 2002) of household goods and in explaining the emotions that seem to



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be important for Mexican society in relation to the ways in which the house contents contribute to a dignified standard of living.

In a country where half of the population are considered to be living in poverty (CONEVAL, 2018) and where 45% of the population lack adequate housing conditions (CONEVAL, 2018), MIS helps to focus the discussion around housing on needs rather than on affordability. MIS allows discussions around housing that go beyond construction materials and that include the various meanings that goods and services that make a *house* a *home* are important for achieving a dignified standard of living.

The MIS approach is carried out through various stages of focus groups comprised of members of the public from a range of different socio-economic backgrounds. The MIS project in Mexico started one focus group in Monterrey and one focus group in Mexico City, who discussed in detail the elements that combine to ensure a dignified standard of living in Mexico. The purpose of these initial groups was to explore what a minimum socially acceptable standard of living means for contemporary urban Mexico. These groups were also responsible for developing two vignettes (case studies of hypothetical families) to be used in the remaining four groups: one household with two parents and two school-aged children, and another based on a single parent with two school-aged children. These case studies were used in subsequent groups as the basis for discussion about what these two types of families in Mexico would need in order to attain this standard of living.

In the second stage, participants in four focus groups worked on translating the definition of 'dignified life', formulated by the first two groups, into the goods and services that the family in the case study, representing any typical family in urban Mexico, would need to achieve it.

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Participants provided a detailed description of the goods and services necessary to meet a dignified standard of living. These lists of goods and services are constructed through a process of consensus building where participants in the groups discuss the quantity and quality of items needed to achieve a decent standard of living as well as the rationales for why such items are a necessity<sup>1</sup>.

While the MIS approach looks into all areas of life, both inside and outside of the home, and all living spaces within a house (Davis, Hirsch and Padley, 2017), the study in Mexico concentrated on defining what is needed for a dignified standard of living within the living area and in relation to leisure time. Given that the principal purpose of this study was to explore the extent to which building consensus regarding living standards is possible in a highly unequal society, the discussions focused on two areas which had the potential to provide a reasonable level of agreement (e.g. having lighting in the living room) but also enough opportunity to discuss potential areas of disagreement (e.g. having a television or going out for a family meal). Groups reached consensus on the quantity and quality of items needed within a hypothetical living room as well as the frequency and type of leisure activities that the case study households would need to be able to do to achieve an acceptable standard of living.

In all cases, groups in urban Mexico defined what a dignified standard of living should look like in urban Mexico. Also, in each of these stages, groups of individuals with a similar demographic profile discussed the needs of hypothetical families with similar demographic characteristics; for example, households with children discussed the needs of households with children. The result of the process is a list of goods and services the public agree are

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<sup>1</sup> The MIS approach includes two further stages of focus groups are held to discuss and refine the lists created in the previous groups, which were not carried out in the study in Mexico in 2016. The MIS study in Mexico started to be further developed to include all areas of accommodation and non-material elements in 2019.

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necessary to achieve a consensually-defined decent standard of living for different household types.

The MIS approach is based on the premise that consensus about living standards which truly reflects a range of socio-economic backgrounds, and not a specific sector of society, needs to be sought through groups that include a mix of economic and social characteristics (Davis et al, 2015). To facilitate capturing a broad representation of urban Mexican society, research was carried out in Mexico City and Monterrey, two of the largest cities in the country with more than twenty million and more than four million inhabitants respectively, and the study concentrated on families with children because they represent almost 90% of the Mexican population (INEGI, 2017). Therefore, the project carried out in Mexico in 2016 consisted of three focus groups in Monterrey and three focus groups in Mexico City. Each group included ten participants, all parents of children up to eighteen years of age. Each of the focus groups in Mexico included a mix of men and women aged 19 to 55, with a wide range of socio-economic profiles based on six occupational types that ranged from manual to professional occupations; three housing situations (self-built, social mortgage, custom-built); and five income brackets that represented the income distribution of the country. Participants were recruited through two specialised social recruitment agencies, one in each city; recruiters received training by the research team on the purpose of the study and participants were provided with written information on the research project as well as consent forms.

The study of MIS in Mexico carried out in 2016 aimed at exploring whether consensus on living standards could be reached in a highly unequal society – Mexico, one of the most unequal countries in the world. Studying people's opinion on what constitutes a dignified standard of living in a highly unequal country aimed at pushing the theoretical boundaries on consensual

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budgets and on living standards. Monterrey and Mexico City , with four million and twenty two million inhabitants respectively, provided an opportunity to explore contrasting points of view in relation to the emotions and rationales behind goods and services that were seen as important to achieve a dignified standard of living.

The discussions carried out in the six focus groups were transcribed and anonymised (pseudonyms are used in the quotations offered in this piece of research). Thematic analysis was developed on the six focus groups and the coding of conversations around the living room were based on Kamptner's (1995) classification: enjoyment, intrinsic quality, memory, social, self-meaning; as well as practical function. The definition of a dignified standard of living that resulted from the first two groups served as the framework for the analysis of the associations between the living room and its contents to a dignified standard of living.

### **4. Examining the social and self-identity functions of living room possessions**

There was strong agreement in all groups that a dignified standard of living referred to a condition beyond survival and that *living with dignity* was about more than just meeting basic material needs. Consequently, emerging from the group discussions was a definition of a dignified standard of living in Mexico that captured this:

*'A dignified life in Mexico today is about meeting basic needs, such as food, housing and clothing, as well as having the opportunity to work, access to healthcare, education and free time. It is also about living in a stable and secure environment that allows people to be connected and be part of society.'*

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This definition of a dignified standard of living in Mexico drafted by the first two groups was used in the following four groups to identify the goods and services that a living room in a hypothetical family in urban Mexico would need to achieve such standard. Participants in focus groups highlighted that living with dignity was an important component of living standards and the feelings of self-esteem, self-respect, and self-concept, which are related to the notion of dignity (Dixon *et al*, 2011), consistently emerged as part of the discussions. Notably, two elements of the definition produced by focus groups in the MIS project in Mexico are related to Kamptner's (1995) classification: "the opportunity to work, access to healthcare, education and free time" is understood as the practical function of goods found in the living room, and "to be connected and be part of society" is understood as the social function of the items in the living room.

The focus group conversations brought to the fore the idea that "a home is a place where personal and social meaning are grounded" (Blunt and Dowling, 2006, p. 22 *apud* Papastergiadis, 1998). The items described in the focus groups as necessary to achieve a dignified standard of living served not only a practical function, but also bear a social meaning and a self-identity meaning. The analysis concentrates on these two functions, social and self-identity, because they were the most salient in the focus groups conversations, although the enjoyment, intrinsic, and memory meanings also appeared in the conversations.

### ***The social function of home furnishings***

To be part of society - to feel connected with others- is a crucial element in achieving a dignified standard of living, according to participants in the focus groups. Discussions within groups

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reveal that feeling part of society not only encompasses activities outside the house but it also permeates the goods and services inside the house, particularly in the living room, which is regarded as the main area for social interaction. As Blunt and Dowling argue, “people create home through social and emotional relationships” (2006, p. 23). The discussions in the focus groups in Mexico are aligned with the literature on the social aspect and function of the living room: “the sitting room acts as the all-encompassing central space for family use as much as the place for visitor entertainment” (Dayaratne and Kellett, 2008, pp. 18-19). Similarly, Graham *et al* (2015) found that the living room has been associated with the following words: relaxation, cozy, togetherness, comfort, and family, all of which emerged in this study too.

The need to feel united with other members of society clearly emerged when discussing the types of items that could help to meet this need. Therefore, some of the items identified by participants of the study of MIS in Mexico as necessary to achieve a decent standard of living directly speak to social connections: family portraits, pictures of memorable moments, or diplomas which help “... to be connected; that is what I think of the painting, the family portrait, your mother’s portrait, the picture of your grandparents” (Salvador, Group 5, Monterrey).

The material contents of a house “carry sedimented personal meaning” (Young, 1997, p. 150) and this was evident in the discussions within groups in Mexico. In this study, being able to decorate the living area with items that bear personal meaning was linked to feeling part of society. Decoration provides “family ties” (Sandra, Mexico City, Group 4), for example by displaying items that explicitly reflect social connectedness, such as pictures of family members. Decorative items seemed particularly important in the living room because this area of the house is considered a space to spend time with family and friends:

Pamela: It gives you warmth, harmony; you feel united.

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Rogelio: Unity.

Hector: Yes, because you are with your son, your wife, with friends. (Decoration) is important because it welcomes you, it makes you feel fine.

(Mexico City, Group 3)

The importance of feeling connected with other members of society permeated not only ornaments - like portraits - which explicitly remind one of the connection with family and friends, but also other items in the living room, which may at first seem to merely serve a practical function. Many of the items that people in the focus groups identified as necessary to achieve a decent standard of living in Mexico indeed carried a practical function. For example, groups agreed that the living room of families with children would need to have a bookcase, a lamp, and curtains. The practical function of these items was firstly acknowledged; the bookcase would satisfy the need of keeping the area tidy, the lamp would satisfy the need of lighting and helping eye health, and the curtains would satisfy the need of warmth, protection from the sun, and privacy. "Many of the material objects we own are used as practical tools to make everyday survival easier, more comfortable and pleasurable" (Dittmar, p. 1). This was clear when groups were discussing why items like lamps and curtains were necessary in the living room, "because you would feel comfortable in your own home; it would look pretty" (Juan, Group 3, Mexico City).

Curtains were included as goods necessary to achieve a dignified standard of living and as a way to facilitate security and safety, both of which were important elements in the definition derived by the first two groups. Curtains were seen as a barrier against the world outside the home, both in terms of sunlight and in terms of strangers, because they would provide "privacy, security, and protection" (Group 5, Monterrey). Safety and security are two elements in the urban imagination of Mexico, to the extreme where citizens have been installing gates and

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physical barriers not only to their homes but also to streets. These gated communities, result of the initiative of neighbours, have transformed and appropriated public spaces in the search for higher security (Mendez Aranda, 2014). Consequently, participants of the study highlighted the importance of having a home that feels safe and secure and where curtains play a role in providing some of those.

While participants pointed to the practical purpose that the bookcase, the lamp, and curtains serve, they also positioned and understood them as helping social bonding because these items would “be part of the decoration” (Juan, Group 3, Mexico City) in a space that is meant to be shared with family and friends. The following conversation around how being able to personalise the living room was important for achieving a dignified standard of living illustrates the multiple functions of furnishings:

Interviewer: What would decorative items give?

Andrea: Satisfaction

Sergio: Quality of life

Pamela: It is more comfortable

Juan: Happiness

Jessica: You like being at home

Raul: Comfort

Pamela: Pleasure

Andrea: It is dignified because it is pretty; there are a lot of prices (to choose from), but it is nice (to have decoration); you feel comfortable.

Jessica: For me, the living room is where I enjoy the most; it is nice.

Interviewer: And why is it important to feel that a family can rest?



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Jessica: "(The living room) gives warmth; it gives you harmony, you are united; it is the most important area in the house"

Hector: Because you are there with your son, your wife, with friends...

Rogelio: On your own.

Pamela: Yes, with my book as I said before.

Juan: The fact that it makes you feel welcomed, you feel well.

(Group 3, Mexico City).

With regard to specific items, the lamp was identified as an item necessary to achieve a dignified standard of living because it serves the practical purpose of lighting, but also because it bears social meaning, which came out in the conversations in the study in two ways. On the one hand, groups in the study indicated that being able to change the lighting with a lamp facilitates smoother social interactions, for example "if children want to stay up studying and the rest of the family would like to sleep" (Pamela, Group 3, Mexico City). As found in the literature elsewhere, the living room is a place where "although the emphasis is placed on togetherness, some allowance has also been made for the specific needs of the individuals" (Daniels, 2015, p. 49). Similarly to the discussions in this study, where it was assumed that family members would be sharing the living room while doing things like homework, reading a book, watching television, or just relaxing, other research in Mexico has found that "the living room works as a family room, helping collective life with children in a spontaneous way of sharing, where each individual is often doing different things (within the same space)" (Cruz Petit, 2015, p. 85). On the other hand, a lamp can allow for the creation of different environments for different social occasions; "you have the beauty provided by a lamp, which could also create another ambience... you can have a lamp that creates another ambience and the living room looks cosier, nicer" (Pedro, Group 5, Monterrey). The discussions of participants in focus groups around how a lamp could help

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create different moods and foster a variety of emotions resonate with the literature around the home: “an environment that is inviting, soothing yet stimulating and intimate” (Arora, 2015, p. 219). Discussions around the lamp also reflected Ignatieff’s (1984) notion of dignity, in the sense that it is part of human nature alongside fraternity, love, and belonging, as illustrated by this phrase: “to me, having one (lamp) is enough. It looks pretty. I actually have two and it looks nice; I do not need any more” (Rebeca, Group 3, Mexico City).

With regard to curtains, groups mentioned that these would protect the living area and family members from direct sunlight or from cold weather and also provide “privacy, safety and intimacy” (Group 3, Mexico City), all of which are practical functions. Additionally however, curtains were consistently regarded as a decorative item that would bring emotional warmth to the house, as illustrated in the following conversation:

Andrea: To harmonise

Jessica: To harmonise and feel good in your living room

Hector: (To make it) a nice place

Sergio: Yes, to make the area more pleasant

(Group 3, Mexico City).

An element identified by the focus groups that would be needed to achieve a dignified standard of living, and which that clearly served a social function, was the choice for seating in the living room. Participants in all groups agreed that the living room of families with children in Mexico would need to have a three-two-one sofa suite and a coffee table. The practical function of sofas and tables is to provide somewhere to sit and somewhere to place things. Additionally, having a sofa suite satisfies the need for social participation, allowing family members “to have

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the right to invite friends over... because it is part of a dignified life to have the opportunity to share with others, to laugh, to enjoy” (Sergio, Mexico City Group 3).

Interviewer: Why is it important to have a place to sit?

Clara: To be comfortable.

Andres: To be able to rest.

Sofia: To talk to others at ease.

Clara: To watch TV... To spend time with others...

Teresa: ... with family

Marta: ... with friends, with everyone

(Monterrey, Group 5)

The living room is considered to have a “public-private character; (to be) the place we welcome guests, display family photos, watch television and so on is the central space for enacting and experiencing such diverse sets of social relations, memories and emotions” (Haldrup, 2017, pp. 53-54). All of these ideas consistently emerged in the focus groups when talking about how furnishings were necessary to achieve a decent standard of living, “because you feel more comfortable in an environment where you feel you belong” (Pedro, Group 5, Monterrey).

### ***How furnishings serve a self-identity function***

Imprinting one’s personality and taste was seen by groups in Mexico as necessary in order to achieve a dignified standard of living, which could help to boost “independence, freedom, responsibility, (and) autonomy” (Group 2, Mexico City). Therefore, groups discussed the need to include mirrors, vases, portraits, framed photographs or similar decorative elements in the

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living room. The elements included in the living room could be understood using Kamptner's (1995) classification of the function of objects (enjoyment, intrinsic quality, memory, social, and self-meaning). Within the focus groups, participants indicated that decoration helps to improve the emotional wellbeing of individuals and help families "to have a sense of belonging" (Pedro, Monterrey, Group 5). The sense of belonging has been found to be a crucial element of human nature, as illustrated by Walsh: "concepts of 'belonging' elicit the emotional register of identities, our geographies of the heart" (2006, p. 270).

To achieve a dignified standard of living, groups agreed to include a modest budget of 1,000 Mexican Pesos per year (45 USD), to enable families to purchase items that could reflect their choices, preferences and tastes. Groups agreed that personalizing one's home is one way in which to feel better about oneself because decorative elements provide comfort, peace of mind, warmth, and happiness (Mexico City, Group 3). The ability to feel better about oneself relates to the concept of dignity, which could be understood as "the ability to feel important and valuable in relation to others" (Haddock, 1996, p. 930). Participants mentioned, for example, that "you need to arrive to a comfy home... that you like it when you arrive... to have a pretty house, with decoration, where you feel like you want to be there" (Salvador, Monterrey, Group 5). As Riggins (1994) indicates, domestic artifacts help to represent someone's cosmology and ideology. In other words, household goods serve as a way to portray one's ideas, religious views, morality, or perspective on what values are important.

The literature has also suggested that "group identity can be expressed in a number of ways through possessions" (Phillips, 2003, p. 12). Similarly, discussions with the focus groups included how goods in the living room help to manifest group identity, for example in explaining how including decorative items that represented personal history and beliefs, such as

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certificates, pictures of events or religious items provided some sense of belonging. Given that home “is an essential component of one’s being” (Dayaratne and Kellett, 2008, p. 3) and acts as a ‘materialization of identity’ (Varley, 2008, p. 59) through its objects, it could be argued that spending money on decorative items could be a way of fulfilling self-identity needs.

Decoration appeared to play such an important role in achieving a dignified standard of living in Mexico that not only was a budget for purposely-decorative items included but the decorative function of certain other items also emerged. The following example illustrates this point, while discussing why having a coffee table is necessary:

Hector: (Having a coffee table) is comfortable; you are sitting down and you put your drink.

Pamela: (It gives) comfort and it looks nice.

Rogelio: (It gives) functionality.

Andrea: It is part of the decoration.

(Group 3, Mexico City)

Groups in Mexico agreed that the decorative function of the items in the living room was necessary in order to feel good about oneself. Participants agreed that, within a reasonable budget, it is important to be able to choose the style and material of items because this is closely related to feelings of self-esteem and self-identity. As the literature on possessions (Belk, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Dittmar 1992) has indicated, things are a way in which we can express our own identity. For example, one of the participants indicated that choice was important, illustrated when discussing the type of sofas that the case study family would need to achieve a decent standard of living: “maybe this person likes black, this other person likes yellow, and I like pink, and this other person likes brown, so we need

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variety; maybe someone likes the sofas to be very soft and someone else likes them to be rigid (...) and it is important to have variety for a dignified standard of living” (Jessica, Group 3, Mexico City).

Groups in Mexico agreed that being able to add a personal touch to one’s home is part of a dignified standard of living. Similarly, research in low-income settlements in Colombia found that people invest resources in improving their homes “to satisfy ‘image and appearance needs’, sometimes before resolving practical questions of space and quality” (Dayaratne and Kellet, 2008, p. 261).

### ***A cosy living room as part of a decent standard of living***

Within the living standards literature, items like bookcases, lamps, and curtains are usually understood as indicators of wealth or economic wellbeing. However, qualitative research like that at the heart of the Minimum Income Standard approach, allow for deeper understandings of these items, which reflect on “characteristics that distinguish the idea of ‘home’ from merely a place of residence” (Graham *et al*, 2015, p. 346). The socialization and personal decoration aspect of sofas, tables, bookcases, and lamps is what people in Mexico argued was needed to make them feel at home and to achieve a dignified standard of living.

The living room has been identified in the literature as “expected to be a place in which you can reconstitute the self and behave contrary to public performances” (Walsh, 2006, p. 273). The affective aspect of the living room is something that came across in the group discussions in Mexico, as the physical space where emotions are shared and where social connections within

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the home take place. As indicated across all focus groups, “the living room is the most important area (in the house)” (Jessica, Group 3, Mexico City) because it is where members of the family can enjoy free time, develop conversations with other family members, invite family and friends over, share memories with others, and develop further social connections. This resonates with Pile’s idea of emotional geography, which “privileges proximity and intimacy” (2010, p. 10).

Emotions were found to be important throughout the goods and services identified in focus groups as necessary to achieve a dignified standard of living. On the one hand, decorative items were seen to explicitly serve the purpose of social connectedness and self-identification. The main emotions related to the ability to decorate one’s living room were happiness, self-fulfilment, feeling harmonious and relaxed, and a sense of belonging and being part of a larger community. On the other, living room furnishings like sofas, lamps and curtains served not only practical purposes but also satisfied the needs of social connectedness and self-identity. Similarly, the emotions related to living room furnishings were self-esteem, a sense of empowerment, responsibility, happiness, and the capacity to feel part of society. In both cases, these items were considered necessary to achieve a dignified standard of living in Mexico today, which goes beyond having a roof over one’s head but also includes the capacity to choose what furniture and decorative items should be there. “Qualities such as community, privacy, self-expression, personal identity, and warmth are used to describe homes but not mere residences” (Graham *et al*, 2015, p. 347) all of which appeared in the conversations in this study.

## **5. Conclusions**

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Having a place to live has been recognised by the international community and by the Mexican government as human right. The Mexican Constitution frames the public duty to promote dignified housing for all citizens; however, there is no indication of what dignified dwelling means. The literature on living standards in that country have mainly focused on the construction and fabric of accommodation, not on the social or self-identity functions of the home, both which have been identified by members of Mexican society in this study as important to achieve a dignified standard of living.

From the discussions held in focus groups as part of a Minimum Income Standard (MIS) study in Mexico carried out in 2016, it can be argued that having a roof over one's head is a necessity, but on its own is not sufficient to achieve a dignified standard of living in a modern society. Living with dignity, participants indicated, includes the opportunity to decorate one's home and the ability to stamp one's identity on home furnishings. Participants of the focus groups in Mexico argued that living with dignity is a core emotion attached to the social function of the home, particularly the living room and its furnishings.

Results of this study indicate that the living room is regarded as the main area of social interaction and that decoration fulfils the needs of self-identification and connection with society. Goods and services that "live" within the home carry emotions that people have identified as necessary to achieve a dignified living standard, related to feelings of self-esteem, identity, relaxation, achievement, and unity with loved ones. Sofas, curtains, and lamps serve a practical function but also boost sentiments of self-fulfilment, a sense of belonging, and feeling connected with society. Decorative items have been described as important elements for a dignified standard of living, eliciting emotions related to self-identity, enjoyment, memory, and social connectedness.



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An important finding of this study is that the standard of living described was recognised to be an aspiration rather than a current reality for many within Mexico. Given the high levels of poverty and material deprivation in the country, there is a clear tension between the standard that groups agreed everyone should be able to have versus the reality that many Mexican families face. In any case, there is still room to explore about how the material contents of a house relate to feelings of achieving a dignified standard of living and connectedness with society. In order for the government to truly promote better living standards and adequate housing, it would be necessary to take into account people's opinion on what constitutes dignified housing. The results of this study contribute towards that goal.

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