

Spring 6-28-2019

# Afro-Latinx Online communities: Creating Connections Through Social Action.

Rita Damiron Tallaj

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Afro-Latinx Online communities: Creating Connections Through Social Action.

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Thesis Advisor(s)

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Master of Arts in Strategic Communication  
Seton Hall University  
South Orange, NJ 07079  
2019



**SETON HALL UNIVERSITY**  
**COLLEGE OF COMMUNICATION AND THE ARTS**  
**GRADUATE STUDIES**

**APPROVAL FOR SUCCESSFUL PRESENTATION**

Master's Candidate, Rita Damiron Tallaj, has successfully presented and made the required modifications to the text of the master's project for the Master of Arts degree during this Spring 2019.

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Dedication

In loving memory of

my best friend, my personal shining star and guardian angel, Kanya. Thank you for the lessons,  
the memories, and the constant inspiration.

## Acknowledgements

It was never my goal to become a writer in my native language; and yet, it was only after learning a *second* language that I found myself becoming the writer I never knew I wanted to be. Through this project I discovered talents I never knew I had and formed relationships that will last a lifetime. This project was a collective journey in which my fellow classmates and I wrote together, stressed together, and celebrated together. We committed to reach a goal and nothing stopped us.

First to my adviser, the feminist, Dr. Ruth Tsuria. This journey was challenging but your constant support not only guided my professional development but my confidence as a writer in a foreign language. There no words to express how much I learned from you and with you the past two years. Thank you, for allowing me to be creative and make this project something important not only for the development of my personal identity but most importantly for guiding me on the creation of a document that opens up a broader conversation about race, ethnicity, and identity with the purpose of inclusivity and longing for equality . Thank you for being the first professor I was able to identify with.

To my classmates and friends, we did it together, through late nights and unhealthy amounts of cheese platters - cheers to the future!

To my life partner, my spiritual soulmate and my biggest cheerleader, thank you for reminding me of my potential every day and believing in me even when I didn't. Thank you for listening to my theoretical lectures and understanding my complicated thoughts even when I lost myself in them.

To my family, for their constant support even if they did not quite understand the process and to my two little nieces, the bundles of joy I never expected to love this much, for you I become stronger every day hoping to be someone you would look up to.

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### **Abstract**

Considering the power of online media to create communities, this thesis examines how the power of social media is harnessed by the Afro-Latinx individuals to mobilize and call to actions those who identify under the same social category and create a powerful online community to come together in support and advocacy virtually. Through a digital ethnography, this research observes three Instagram pages and performs a textual analysis on 3 posts to further understand the Afro-Latinx community and their adoption of Instagram to create online communities. Findings emphasize the importance of creating and maintaining a niche, user engagement and member satisfaction

*Keywords:* Afrolatinos, Latinos, Latinx, Afro-latinx, identity theory, social identity theory, ethnic identity, social networking site, social media, community, online community,

Afro-Latinx Online communities: Changing the Platform Through Social Action.

### **Chapter 1: Statement of the Problem**

In 2011, thousands of people in the Middle East took the streets to protest against political corruption. It was one of the biggest sociopolitical movements in history and all thanks to the power of communication technologies, more specifically social media. Citizens of the affected countries; Tunisia, Egypt and surrounding areas used social media to mobilize people in their countries to bring down the regimes oppressing these nations (Stepanova, 2011). Three years later, in 2014, on the other side of the world social media users in the United States began using these platforms to spread the unfair death of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, African Americans who were victims of police brutality (Day, 2015). The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter took over Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook all over the world as the African American community shared information and demanded justice. Later in 2017, another minority group used social media as a tool for call to action like this creating the biggest march in the history of the United States, #WomensMarch (Przbyla & Schouten, 2017). These are only a few of the many examples that could be given to show the power of social media and how it brings people together, even when they are far apart, physically. As Brock (2012) describes it, these sociopolitical circumstances allowed for individuals to create communities online, “constructed through their use of social media by outsiders and insiders alike” (p. 530).

The importance of online communities is highlighted in the key characteristics that differentiate them from just a website or online group including the creation of a more intimate setting to cater a specific niche. A niche then becomes the purpose of the group and what members

identify with. It is, in other words, the reason why people join. It is important to understand how these online communities are created and maintained because they have shown to be powerful creators of social movements, high influencers of individuals' identity and also provide a sense of belonging.

The Latin American population has gone through significant major colonizations from powerful and very different world economy since the 15th century (Pikerman, 2002) that have exposed their natives to other cultures and races as they mingled. This blend of numerous cultures and the enforcement of new beliefs by the colonizers to the natives has created identity confusion in the Latin American populations all over the world (Ramos, 2011). Latinos possess very diverse physical characteristics and their traditions vary from country to country. The concept of *mestizaje*, which refers to the result of a mix of multiple races, is very common to the Latin American population identity. The cultural and racial richness of this community placed this population into different categories when it came to race (Johnson, 2010). An immigrant from South America could be identified as white, black, Asian, native or a mix (CNN Library, 2018).

For Latin-Americans, questioning their identity does not happen mostly in their country but rather in the diaspora and particularly in the United States where they are constantly exposed to racism (Lamb & Dundes, 2017). For example, a Mexican living in Mexico is not shocked by the various physical characteristics the population possess; varying from black to white, blonde to brunette, curly to straight hair. A Mexican understand that there is not one image that represents the entire population of said country. Misconceptions, racism, and stereotypes are not new to the Latinx population, this ethnic group has been subjected to deal with misrepresentation in media such as illegal and cheap workers, delinquents, and sexualized exotic looks for many years

(Negron-Muntaner et al., (2014). These stereotypes create perceptions among those outside of this ethnic group leading them to associate everyone with those roles. To fight the misrepresentation given to the group in popular media outlets, social media has given Latinx and Afro-Latinx a platform in which they can voice their concern as prosumers (defined in the next paragraphs) with the ability to create and distribute information with the goal to break away from these stereotypes.

Afro-Latinx is a term used to identify the mix of two ethnic groups, African and Latinos. This term is the label the communities observed preferred to use when it comes to their social identity. The term “identity” is a very dense term and could cause confusion when it comes to defining it. Race, gender, and ethnicity are all classification that have been created to address a fragment of an individual’s identity (Cerulo, 1997). However, these previously mentioned classifications isolate people into single categories and create a pattern or specific characteristics that those belonging to the group should “fit.” This research explores the relationship between communities and identity through the lens of the Afro-Latinx population online.

But why is it important for the Afro-Latinx ethnic group to have a voice or create a community? Over 1.2 million of Latinxs living in the United States identify as Afro-Latinx, representing over a quarter of the total Latino population in the United States. This group is often misclassified as African-American because of their physical appearance (Dundes & Lamb, 2017; Habib, 2018). Phrases like ‘You don’t look Latina’ are some of the commonly heard ignorant comments this sub-ethnic group is exposed to, according to Gabriella Thorne (2018). Thorne in her article for *The Nation* discusses her experience of living in the limbo and not being accepted as either Black or Latina. This misrepresentation not only affects the results of any census but

also accurate knowledge of the market for any organization that is trying to target specific groups. Although in 2016 some research companies began including Afro-Latinx as a sub-category of Latinx in their surveys (Medina,2018) their representation continues to fall behind or comply with stereotypes. Others like Thorne have voiced their concerns of Latinx and Afro-Latinx representation of media outlets through Social Networking Sites, and specially discussing the Hollywood star Gina Rodriguez (Moreno, 2018) and Univision reporter Ilija Calderon (Reyes, 2018). Out of the one billion active Instagram users (Statista, 2018), 34 percent of those users identify as Latinos and 38 percent as black, this is a significantly high number compared to the 21 percent of white users that prefer this platform (Krogstad, 2015). It should also be noted that, because this survey uses Latinx as an ethnic and racial group, some of the participants who identified as Black could actually fit under the Afro-Latinx category like this creating a confusing outlook of the market.

Although there is extensive academic research exploring social media, online communities, and race in general, there is an existing gap on research that combines both Afro-Latinx and online communities. Considering the power of online media to create communities, this research seeks to identify an online community based on a Social Networking Sites (SNS) platform that caters to the Afro-Latinx community. Through a digital ethnography, this paper will identify and explore Afro-Latinx online communities to answer how the online community are successfully created, maintained and influencing Afro-Latinx individuals' identities. The results of this study could be essential for different areas of the communication field such as digital content distribution, selective group marketing and fair media representation.

This research uses Instagram to examine how the power of social media is harnessed by the Afro-Latinx individuals to mobilize and call to actions those who identify under the same social category and create a powerful online community to come together in support and advocacy, virtually, despite the distance. While observing the Instagram pages, this research aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Are Afro-Latinx using social media to create online communities?

RQ2: How are Afro-Latinx using social media to create online communities?

In order to answer those questions, this research used Instagram as the field in which the digital ethnography was performed through the observation of the following pages: @diasporaradical, @Afrolatindiaspora, and @Afrolatinas\_. To answer the questions, the pages selected were analyzed in order to determine whether or not they fit the characteristics of an online community.

Apart from Instagram's openness that allows individuals to read other users' comments even when their profile is set to private, the platform's popularity makes it the ideal field space for this research. As of 2018, 4.3 billion people have access to the internet (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2018) and one billion of those are active Instagram users (Statista, 2018). Just as the internet connects us to those all around the world, it also allows individuals to be "prosumers," a term used to describe the active participation and collaboration online, which allows users to be involved in the creation of content (Gerhardt, 2008). Re-tweeting, re-posting, sharing, liking, following and unfollowing create a nonlinear interaction among multiple users and allows them to reshape information. The accessibility to content creation and distribution all around the world has also opened the borders for individuals to reshape the concept of community and its association to a physical location. Today, community is something that can happen online and offline

(Kumar, 2017) and could satisfy multiple purposes including grouping individuals based on their identity. Like the groups mentioned at the beginning, the Afro-Latinx group has been vocal about the need for that group to be represented and known to others but what steps are they taking to achieve this?

The next chapter explores the available literature looking to explain critical concepts used throughout this research. Beginning with community, the literature review observes how the definition of this concept has shifted with technological advances and the characteristics of online communities. The chapter moves on to discuss the relationship that communities have with the self and the personal identification process, but more specifically how social identification categories such as race and ethnicity are used to create online communities. The literature review concludes by tying together all these previously mentioned topics into their connection with online communities and the development of the same. What is an online community? How to create a niche? and How can an online community be successful? were some of the areas explored in the literature review prior to the beginning of the data collection. Chapter three will provide a detailed explanation of methodology used for this research and chapter four will discuss the data by highlighting patterns and important observations. This research will conclude by answering the research question stated above with an analysis of the data gathered.

## **Chapter 2:**

### **Literature Review**

In order to answer the research question and understand the Afro-Latinx community use of social media, this section explores the available literature that guided this research. This chapter takes the reader through a breakdown of the keywords used in the research question such as Afro-Latinx, community, online community, social networking site and identity theory.

When individuals hear the word community, their brain usually conjures up images of what they most associate this term with: the place where they grew up, or where they live now, their neighborhood. Alternatively, maybe it drafts away to think about their country of origin or culture. Perhaps the word community means something more than a physical location; it represents those who you shared something important with, whether it is a goal or your physical characteristic: your race. As seen in the previous chapter, with technological advances and the popularization of the internet, communities have been emerging through different platforms to accomplish a specific goal or purpose and that is what this research looks to explore. This chapter will serve as the base for the research. Here, the term community will be defined and explored in relation to identity. This will be done so the readers have a common understanding of terms such as community, online community, ethnicity, identity theory and any other term that will be used throughout this research. The term “community” is difficult to define because of the different ideas individuals have of what a community needs to be like. After defining the term community, this chapter will continue to explore how the concept’s definition has shifted with technological advances and how individuals form parts of the community as active members. Furthermore, this literature discusses the relationship of communities with the self and how identity is influenced

by the communities an individual belongs to, more specifically the Afro-Latinx community. A significant fragment of this chapter will also discuss social networking sites and the platform's role in the creation of a successful online community. Understanding the structure and value of every aspect of an online community will help fulfill the overarching goal of this research, which will explain how these communities are created and maintained into a successful online community.

### **Defining Community: More than just a group**

Ferdinand Tonnies (1957) defines community by comparing the term with organizations to highlight the key differences. The base of his argument states that groups become communities as they grow, and organizations are groups that are created with a specific purpose and follow a common structure. While other theorists argue that communities also have a purpose, Tonnies (1957) contradicts by stating that there is no global purpose but rather multiple individual ones that are satisfied by belonging to the community. Ladd (1998) calls the goal of a community a "general good" (p.160) that is shared among members and it is only received if each individual contributes to the community by their involvement in it. However, the term community could represent a physical location, nationality, social group, etc. Durkheim (1964) suggested that human interaction and mutual interest can also create communities (despite the location, a claim that will be explored later in this chapter), this was then extended by Gusfield (1975) who argued that there are different types of community, ones that refers to territory and ones that speaks more to human relationship and interaction. This importance of member's interaction in the communities Gusfield (1975) discusses made the difference between a group and a community even more clear. In 1981, Riger, LeBailly and Gordon amplified the importance of interaction and in-

volvement within a community by categorizing it in four different levels: connection with other members of the community, their history with this community, or their ‘residential roots, and use of social facilities’ (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p.7) and reciprocity with fellow members.

McMillan and Chavis (1986) define the “sense of community” with four different characteristics:

The first is membership or “the feeling of belonging or sharing a sense of personal relatedness” (p. 9). Next is influence, defined as “making a difference to a group and of the group.” The third, is “reinforcement,” which is the members assurance that their “needs will be met,” and last is “shared emotional connection [...] history, places, time together and experiences,” these shared connections could be in the past, present or future (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p.9). These different levels of interactions help community creators find a shared goal, or niche for their users to come together. In the case of Afro-Latinx community, their physical characteristics as well as their ethnic background and experiences helps them relate to one another. As can be seen from this short review, there are many things that bind a community together: location, goals, shared activity, religious views, and ethnicity. The next section will explore ethnicity, as it is the focus of this thesis.

### **An ‘inherent’ community: The relationship between Ethnicity and community**

Another way in which humans think of community is their ethnic group or the race they identify with (black community, Hispanic community, etc.). However, these are also terms that are mixed up colloquially because of the complexity in their definition and social use. Although these terms are used to associate groups according to their differences and similarities, both ethnicity and race look at different characteristics in the individual before grouping them. Swedberg and Agevall (2016) define ethnic groups according to Max Weber’s definition from his *Economy*

*and Society* book, “as those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration” (p.123). The problem with Weber’s definition is that by adding “similarities of physical type” (p.123) he combines racial characteristics with the ethnicity. Lee-man (2004) on the other hand states that the historical connotation given to this term is established as one that looks at “cultural differences that, while generally passed from generation to generation, may change overtime” (p. 508), leaving behind any reference to physical characteristics and exclusively associating it with culture. In the book *Surviving Race*, Garcia (2005) contradicts Weber’s (Agevall, 2016) definition that includes phenotype by defining both terms: Ethnicity and race, differently. He begins by defining ethnicity as a word that means “members of an ethos,” and he defines ethos as:

A subgroup of individual humans who...belong to many generations; are organized as a family and break down into extended families and are united through historical relations that produced features that serve to identify the members of the group and to distinguish them from members of the group (p.49).

While Garcia includes in his definition some “features” which serve to identify the group, it is crucial to highlight that he goes on to say that these are not a representation of all the members. For example, not all Caucasians have blue eyes and not all Africans are black (Outlaw Jr., 2015). Like Garcia, Yinger (1994) sets characteristics to define ethnicity. He suggests three variables to best identify the term:

(1) The group is perceived by others in the society to be different in some combination of the following traits: language, religion, race, and ancestral homeland with its related cul-

ture; (2) The members also perceive themselves as different; And (3) they participate in shared activities built around their (real or mythical) common origin and culture (p. 3-4).

Both Garcia (2005) and Yinger (1994) separate human of the same ethnicity into groups according to their phenotypes, genotypes and culture. These pre-create groups are communities that individuals are born into, but the name used to identify them has been shaped by both internal and external social forces.

Race, on the other hand, is a term that is mostly associated with a human's phenotype. The National Cancer Institute (n.d.) defines phenotype in its *Dictionary of Genetic Terms* as the visible "characteristics in an individual resulting from the expression of genes," the National Human Genome Research Institute (n.d.) simplifies this definition as just "observable traits" on any individual, these includes hair, skin color, eye color, and any other observable feature. One can look at phenotype as the scientific name of race and the term that is used to study the relationship of race with human physiology and biology. Leeman (2004) defines race as "physical, hereditary, and immutable" characteristics which differentiate us. It is also a term particularly used in the United States to group individuals that share the same or similar skin color (The U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Garcia (2005) defines race as:

A subgroup of human beings that satisfy two conditions: each member of the group is linked by descent to another member of the group who is also linked by descent to another member of the group and second, each member of the group has one or more physical features that are genetically transmittable (p. 88).

Outlaw Jr. (2015) adds to Garcia's definition that in order to belong to a race group, one must be born from someone that already belongs to the same race group and even though the members of

a race group share the same racial characteristics, there is no necessary need for historical tie. A black Dominican does not necessarily share historical ties to a black French, but both belong to the same racial group. The U.S. Census Bureau (2018) formulated its own definition of race according to questionnaires given to citizens. These “reflect a social definition of race recognized in this country and are not an attempt to define race biologically, anthropologically, or genetically.” (The U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). The Census uses the following categories of race to group individuals: White, black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or “other” (The U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). These census definitions are based on the reflection of common understanding by society and not a scientific or official definition in any other country. The U.S. Census Bureau (2018) is also aware that U.S. citizens have shifted their perception of race with the years and this has resulted on constituents opting to be identified as of “some other race” (The U.S. Census Bureau, 2018).

With a clearer understanding of the terms race and ethnicity, misuse of the word could be avoided, and a shared definition is understood which will be used throughout the paper. An ethnic group can have multiple races, and a racial group can have significant similarities. Mountain and Risch (2004) confirm that genetics can influence phenotype differences within groups. This means that there is a possibility that people belonging to the same ethnic group, look different physically. These differences are important to this project because when discussing how humans are grouped into different communities, it is vital to mention the communities individuals are born into. A discussion about ethnicity as a community cannot happen without a clear definition of the term and what an ethnic group constitute. For some, their ethnicity is complicated. This is the case with the subject community of this paper – Afro Latinx, who have been living under an

ethnic category, Latinx, which leaves behind part of what makes up, their African roots and how this is visually manifested in them. In the next section, this paper explores the relationship of ethnicity and identity through the term “ethnic identity” and how this theory explores the connection between the ethnic group, the labels used to address them and their individual identity.

### **Ethnic Identity: When the one and the group meet**

When discussing communities and identity, the importance of racial and ethnic groups rises from the term “ethnic identity.” This term refers to the part of the individual’s personality that is influenced by, and an influencer of the ethnic group it belongs to (Martinelli, 1993). This theory contributes to the formation of the community through different aspects: self-identification, knowledge and connection (Bernal & Knight, 1993). Self-identification refers to the individual’s use of the “ethnic labels or terms” to identify themselves or others (Bernal & Knight, 1993, p.1). This connects to the way in which society uses language to group individuals into different categories and the governmental terms versus the term they prefer, a constant struggle seen within the Hispanic/Latinx community in the diaspora as is further explained below. The second aspect of ethnic identity is knowledge; this refers to the individual’s general knowledge about the ethnic community, meaning the culture and history. For an individual to choose an ethnic label, he or she must first understand what the term means. In most cases, individuals are born and categorized by what the family accepts as their label, making this a part of the identity that is chosen for the individual. The last dimension is connection or preference, and it reflects on how the individual embraces or rejects the ethnic identity they were born into (Bernal & Knight, 1993). This last dimension is critical because individuals could choose to deny the social group in which they are born into (for example, with ethnicity, Afro-Latinx refuse to use Latin

and go by Afro-Latinx instead) because of the feeling of not belonging. This is what could be happening with the Afro-Latinx ethnic group and the reason they have come to create these on-line communities.

Congressional Research Service analyst Clare Ribando Selkee (2008) defines the term “Afro-Latinos” as a term that is used “within the international development community and the U.S. government, generally refers to Afro-descendant populations in the Spanish and Portuguese speaking nations of Latin America” (Selke, 2008), meaning that this term is used to define the genotype of a person and not the phenotype. The terms Hispanic, Latino, Latina Latin@, Latinx, Latin-American and Afro-Latino or Afro-Latinx are terms that emerged from the United States government’s necessity of identifying the group’s differences (Salinas & Lozano, 2017). These terms have been created to fit the community into different categories based on their physical appearance and geographical roots.

There has been an increase in the number of terms used to identify South American immigrants (Rinderle & Montoya, 2008) and the most modern one suggests using X at the end to avoid gendered bias, creating the word Latinx. To refer to South American immigrants, the United States began using the term Hispanic to define this community through their connections to Spain in the 1970’s (Vidal-Ortiz & Martinez, 2018); these include the language, religion and other cultural characteristics. The term Hispanic is often used to refer to Spanish speaking immigrants from Latin America, but this term became challenging when many third-generation non-Spanish speaking Latinos and US citizens ages 18 and younger occupied 93% of the 17% of Hispanic/Latinos in the USA as of 2014 (Arias & Hellmueller, 2016). The social issue with the word Hispanic is that it categorizes individuals based on the language and country who colonized

their hereditary land, therefore, Latin-Americans have refused this term stating it as derogatory and offensive (Gonzalez, 1992). The term Latino disassociates this community from their colonization in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and highlights the groups as one with distinct cultural characteristics, despite the language or cultural background, this includes Brazil, Guyana, Haiti, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, etc. (Mora, 2014). The term Latino emerges as a way of “resistance to the explicit colonial relations that ‘Hispanic’ sets between Spain and countries in Latin America” and the inclusion of U.S. born Latin American that do not share the experience of those who migrated but are Latinos nonetheless (Vidal-Ortiz & Martinez, 2018, p. 387).

In the year 2000, The U.S. Census Bureau began separating Hispanic/Latino from race groups and acknowledging it as a broad ethnic group including all of the previously mentioned race categories. Allowing the Latino community to identify with any race changed the way in which the community was seen by other ethnic groups and their ethnic background moved from being associated with a “race” to a stand-alone ethnic label that grouped all Latin American born/descendant constituents despite their nationality, language or race (Rinderle & Montoya, 2008, p. 145). The U.S. has moved from identifying Latin American immigrants with their nationality to “more pan-ethnic labels” such as Latinx (Vidal-Ortiz and Martinez, 2018, p.338) This new understanding of the Latin community allowed for their members to begin exploring their personal identity and the word they prefer to use to be identified. The term Latino/Latina went from being binary to now including an x at the end to welcome gender-non-conforming individuals and support the LGBTQ community within the Latino community. The origin of this term is unknown; however, it has been used by feminist scholars as far as the year 2004 (Vidal-Ortiz & Martinez, 2018). To establish inclusion, this research will continue to use Afro-Latinx as the preferred term

to refer to this community. This next section moves the discussion of communities to an understanding of identity and the influence the communities one belongs to have on the “self.”

### **Making sense of “yourself”: exploring Identity theory**

The sense of identity works in correlation with the groups one belong to, our characteristics, and the roles individuals occupy in society. In other words, understanding one’s identity is tied to which groups one sees themselves as belonging to. Therefore, the following section seeks to define identity and its relation to community. The term identity was first discussed in a theoretical framework when Foote (1951) introduced the idea that humans have multiple identities. The term identity was later distinguished from the self by Stone in 1962 who began looking at individuals as a conglomeration of identities (Cooper, 2004). Identity theory has been around for over 40 years, but it has been reshaped by many theorists. This theory comes from two previous set of ideas that studied the composition of identities. These ideas include symbolic interactionism, a term created by George Herbert Mead in the 1930’s and then further developed by different ideologists into the theory available today, coined by Stryker, as well as William T. Powers’ perceptual control theory that originated in 1973 (Burke and Stets, 2009). Identity theory draws on Stryker’s argument that the “self” is composed of multiple identities that individuals developed according to the role individuals play as well as the groups they belong to (Cooper, 2004). Burke and Stets (2009) define identity theory as a collection of ideas that, “seek to explain the specific meanings that individuals have for the multiple identities they claim” (p. 3). Burke explains that the self exercises reflection and places itself in comparison to the categories it belongs to as well as the purpose it fulfills (Burke & Stets, 2009). This theory puts emphasis in the connection between our behavior, emotions and identity standards (Carter, 2010).

Identity theory has two subcategories: social/group identity and role identity. Role identity, which also defines identity based on a social structure, however, it differs from social identity since it looks at the roles one fulfills in society and the behaviors it evokes in those individuals. Some noticeable examples of role identity are student, mother, father, researcher, etc. (Hogg, Terry & White, 1995). One must also consider where the two theories intertwined since role identity and social identity are not mutually exclusive. One can belong to a group and have a role (or multiple) to fulfill outside or inside of such a group. While social identity theory tries to predict the group behavior and the influence of a group membership on an individual, role identity theory analyzes our identity and behavior based on the roles one conforms in society.

The other sub-division of this theory, Social identity, instead of looking at the roles an individual occupies, it looks at the social groups it belongs to. Theorist Hogg (2018) believes that an important part of what makes up the self comes from the social groups and categories one belongs into such as: nationality, ethnicity or race. This division of identity theory suggests that as individuals identify themselves with a group, they take away from their uniqueness and create patterns for what those group members ought to look and behave like (Hogg, 2018). Eventually, the individual's conscious participation in the social environment defines their social identity and the social identity defines the group. The group changes the individual identity and the individual brings change to the group through his/her/their participation (Jin & Phua, 2014). However, creating connections with multiple groups is a very important part of the identification process (Hogg & Reid, 2006). The groups/community the individuals associate with must maintain a satisfactory level for the individuals to fulfill their self-esteem, otherwise the identity an individual gives to the group (as they choose to be part of it) changes to a negative one and a disassociation

process begins in which the individual no longer uses this label. The individual then finds another community/group to identify with (Brown, 2000). This disassociation process could be seen with the sub-ethnic group Afro-Latinx and their strong desire to be identified with this label instead of Latinx.

With an understanding of this theory, this research can identify how the social groups and roles individuals occupy influence their identity process and the communities they decide to be part of. In the next section, this paper will take a closer look at what online communities are, how these are maintained, created, and last how these create a space for a group to identify with and therefor support one another.

### **Online communities: Coming together, online**

As technology advanced, the definition of community started to be reshaped and scholars began to look at the influence of technology in human interaction and how the internet was being used to create and maintain communities and identities. The term ‘online communities’ was created by scholars as they tried to define it as a unique phenomenon that happens exclusively on the internet. Communities are no longer tied to a physical space and our identity (or identities) is being shaped by our interaction and connections in the virtual world.

Early observations of online communities (hereafter OC) could be seen in Roxanne Hiltz’s (1985) work as she used this term to refer to group interactions online, but specifically, to the way in which these groups were connecting with their members through empathy. A few years after, Howard Rheingold (1993), also considered one of the first pioneer of virtual communities, explored this phenomenon more closely when he documented his experience in several online communities. Most notably, his experience within the well-known bulletin board and one

of the earliest OC, Whole Earth Lectronic (WEL). In his book, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, he opens the door for other researchers to further understand how interaction in the virtual world take place. Rheingold (1993) defines online community as a group of people that “bump into each other enough on cyberspaces” to “exchange ideas” and might not ever meet “face-to-face” (Rheingold, 1993, p.14). Although the internet was new in 1993, Rheingold’s research guided scholars to understand the internet’s potential to become a public space for interaction, education and advocacy.

Both Hiltz (1985) and Rheingold (1993) initial exploration of online communities opened the door for other scholars to question these definitions. After the popularization of the internet, Preece (2000) and Owston (1998) define online communities as a place in which people with shared goals would meet and interact virtually. Additionally, Hunter (2002) states that these individuals participate in the group by providing information. Later, Preece (2001) added a layer to this definition highlighting the members’ roles in contributing information to support the group and emotional aspect attaching them to the same.

Initial studies of online communities placed the success of such in the structure of the software in which the community interacted (Preece 2000), but this was later challenged by scholars such as Kazmer & Haythornthwaite (2001) who shifted the conversation’s spotlight from the platform being utilized to the members and how their participation makes the group a community. With this new understanding of OC and their functionality, scholars identified that OC were not limited to a physical or virtual place but rather the integration of both through technology-mediated communication (Kazmer & Haythornthwaite, 2001). People’s relationship in the offline world were brought to the virtual world and those online connection sometimes met

offline (Lee, H. and Lee, J., 2010). The value of OC was suddenly not placed on the space in which it develops but rather in the relationships that were formed (Smith & Kollock, 2001) and the different levels of interaction and engagement (Lazar, Tsao & Preece, 1999). Although each community is different, and its success will vary according to the distinct goal it has, Preece (2001) states that the success can be guided by its members' satisfaction with the following factors: sociability, purpose, abundance of members, dialogue, accessibility, navigation and information.

Michael Hammond (2017) begins to explore online communities through his analysis on the available literature and all the definitions previously coined by other scholars such as Rheingold (1993) and Preece (2000, 2001 & 2003). Hammond (2017) redefined online community based on the level of commitment that users must have for an online group to become a community. Agreeing with previous definitions, Hammond (2017) adds the importance of the members interaction in these OC, and states that this “should be sustained enough to be observable and to leave observable and useable artifacts and records” such as advice, tips, rewards and trackable comments (p.123). Hammond (2017) concludes that successful communities must contain the following elements: Interaction, commitment, connection, reciprocity, agency and consequence (p.127-128). An application of all these guidelines can successfully be seen in Massa's (2017) research, which dives into the creation of the popular online community, Anonymous, and its successful global reach. Massa's exploration of Anonymous leads her to address the cycles any online community goes through after being formed. These consist of four steps after the formation: experimentation, value-driven engagement, reconstruction and disengagement (Massa, 2017, p. 979).

Other scholars further explored these groups to try to identify the similarities and come up with a definition, eventually agreeing on key characteristics that groups must have in order to be identified as online communities. For the purpose of this research, based on this review, any reference to online communities will be identified as a group of people with shared goal or purpose and that actively connect mostly through technology-mediated interactions in exchange of information, support or identification. The next section will discuss the creation process of a successful online community and how these are maintain. Understanding how this is critical for this research because it helps assess whether or not the online space selected fits the criteria of what an online community is and how the same came to be.

### **New online communities: Stating the perfect niche**

As outlined in this review, defining online communities is not an easy task, but creating one brings even more challenges. Most online communities often fail to become successful because they either do not have a set purpose or is not clear enough to its members. There are three challenges that new online communities face: identifying their unique audience (or niche), standing by that niche, and knowing how it compares with other online communities (Kraut, Kiesler, & Resnick, 2012). Creators must identify if they are supporting other existent groups or working against them by starting a new one. Lastly, audience development is an important issue. For a group to become a community, members must integrate into the group and be active participants (Kraut et. al, 2012).

Finding an audience, or as Kraut et al. (2012) calls it, “carving out a niche,” (p. 232) is the first step to creating an online community. Although there are billions of users of online technology for a community to be formed, members must have a mutual interest or a purpose, this is

what Kraut et al. (2012) call the “niche.” This purpose/goal or theme can be based on preexisting interests such as international students, women in film, women solo travelers, or, as in the case explored in this thesis: Afro-latinx, in which case the community’s purpose would be to either inform, advocate, connect, or all of the above (Kraut et al., 2012, p. 232). Kraut et al. (2012) also observe that after establishing a niche, the community must make itself notable within that unique point of interest to have users prefer it over any other similar community to then have members recruit other participants in order to expand the network (p. 249).

Currently, online communities are especially active in Social Networking Sites (SNS).

Boyd and Ellis (2008) define Social Networking Sites as:

web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (p. 211).

The connections mentioned can be interpreted followers, friends, or any other term utilized to represent those connections. Your profile is a representation of you online, in which you will display yourself to those connections as you choose to be “identified as.” What is important about SNS’s is that it allows you to see others’ connection and creates a bridge from your group to someone else’s group permitting you to join other online communities.

How can a social networking site become a community? How can people who do not actually interact with one another in person create a supportive online community? These questions are often hard to answer because of our understanding of communities as a physical space. Earlier in this review, communities were defined as groups that a person belongs whether these were

based on a location or human interaction (Gusfield, 1975), however, this definition puts emphasis on a physical space. With technological advances and the popularization of the internet, online communities emerged and this definition constraining to a physical space had to be revisited. So, what exactly is a community? Chavis and Lee (2015) define it as follows:

Community is not a place, a building, or an organization; nor is it an exchange of information over the Internet. Community is both a feeling and a set of relationships among people. People form and maintain communities to meet common needs. (n.p.).

This definition combines pieces of all previously coined definitions by earlier scholars and puts the importance on what brings everyone together, the shared goal or purpose. Redefining the word community entails redefining the human understanding of it and opens the door to new kind of communities. Through their research on *the Role of the Sense of Community in the Sustainability of Social Networking Sites*, Mamonov, Koufaris and Benbaunan-Fich (2016) explore communities on Social Networking Sites (SNS) and the factors that affect their development and success. The researchers identify the difference between physical communities and those in the online worlds while trying to compare and identify which one offers a more sustainable space. The uniqueness of an online community is its ability to connect a mass number of individuals from different locations and time zones. However, today most communities are connected online and offline, thus allowing for individuals to participate in their preferred way.

### **Summary**

Previous understanding of community has been and continues to be reshaped by scholars because of the constant technological and sociological changes individuals go through. When thinking about community, a physical space in which individuals gather together is no longer the

dominant idea since communities can be online or offline, a group of Alcoholic Anonymous meeting weekly, or a simple ethnic group created for census purposes. What makes a community relevant to all constituents is their connection to the same, a shared goal or purpose that evokes the feeling of belonging within them. Individuals could be born into a community by their ethnic association but feel unfulfilled and reject the same. On the other hand, individuals are also categorized into racial communities but their association to the same could not be rejected due to unchangeable physical characteristics that connects them with the group. How communities are labeled influence the representation of the same, and both the label and the association with the community changes individuals' identity/ies and their behavior.

However, the shared goal or purpose and members are not the only key components of a community. When it comes to online communities, the platform or online space in which the community lives can influence the success of the same. When it comes to communities on social networking sites, the platform's flexibility and aesthetics help the users feel more comfortable and willing to interact with the service, like this increasing their participation within the community. This literature review offered a list of key components that successful online communities possess, like finding and keeping their niche. To continue exploring the connection identity have with community and how this can lead to successful communities, this research will explore selective Afro-Latinx online communities' correlation with members of the same. The next chapter will explain in details the method used to select and explore these Afro-Latinx online communities.

## **Chapter 3:**

### **Methods**

This research looked at Afro-Latinx communities online to understand their use of social networking sites to create and maintain online communities and its relation with members' identity; this topic makes the nature of this research a virtual one and therefore the data collection process needed to happen through a methodology that allowed for interaction with the individuals and observation of the platform. While exploring the available methods, ethnography seem best suited for this project since it focuses on community; and because of the online aspect of the research question, this ethnography took place online through digital platforms, therefore becoming a digital ethnography. An ethnography, in this case a digital ethnography, is a methodology that incorporates other methods such as observation, surveys, textual analysis, interviews, and more. For this research, the other methods incorporated within the digital ethnography performed were observation and textual analysis of three Instagram pages that cater the Afro-Latinx community.

#### **Ethnography and digital ethnography: The offline and online**

Davis and Lachlan (2017) define communication ethnography as the "study of communication within a culture [...] characterized by immersion in the cultured called fieldwork to fully understand beliefs and practices in context" (p. 347). Ethnography looks to answer how humans communicate within cultural groups by joining the group and being part of it to understand the same from the inside out. Because there is no physical space to be studied in this research, instead of conducting an ethnography, a digital ethnography was employed. As discussed by

Tsuria, Yadlin-segal, Vitullo, and Campbell (2017) the study of digital environment places the attention on both the location where the interaction takes place and the data that is being collected as well as their connections with the offline world. Digital ethnography continues to be the study of culture, but the fieldwork moves from a physical place to the digital world. However, this is done with the understanding that a user's participation online is highly influenced by their offline lives (Orgad, 2008). Digital ethnography helps us “explore the relationship between the digital, sensory, atmospheric and material elements of our everyday lives and the social worlds we inhabit, and to consider the implications of such interconnectedness” (Gyor, 2016). In the case of this project, the influence that is being observed is the users’ identity and how this plays a role in the online community or how the online community plays a role in the users’ identity.

Ethnography is a social research method that has been used extensively in the past in fields such as anthropology, sociology, and of course, communication. When it comes to online communities, a lot of other researchers have used digital ethnography to observe phenomena that take place online (Kazmer & Haythornthwaite, 2001; Jin & Phua, 2014; Dich, 2016; Yadlin-Se-gal, 2017). One such example of this is Dich’s (2016) use of digital ethnography to explore Asian American online communities of writers and their relationships between race, ethnicity, and digital environment; another example is Ringland (2018) who through an ethnography of the game Minecraft observes how the game create an online playground (similar to online communities) and how the technology assists children with disabilities, more specifically autism. This method has been proven to be successful when it comes to online research and the connection between the online world, the offline world and the individual’s identity. Therefore, this research employs

digital ethnography to further understand how Afro-Latinx use digital platforms, in this case, Instagram, to create a strong community and online presence.

### **Observation: more than just lurking**

One of the main parts of an ethnographic research is observation. In his work on how to conduct digital ethnography, Sangasubana (2011) uses Angrosino's definition of observation that states that it is "the act of perceiving the activities and interrelationships of people in the field setting" (p. 568). When doing research, observing become an active way to participate in this community by taking notes of all the little details and going back to them later to analyze them. Often, the researchers will join a community and live close to the cultural group as they observe their behaviors while also taking part in their community. After selecting the pages that were going to be part of this research, the observation process for began. This consisted of actively using the platform to see the content being shared and the reactions these posts created. Through this observation process, the researcher was just another active member of this page looking to explain if this was, in fact, an online community and why; however, in order to prevent bias throughout this research, interactions on the pages were limited to comments containing questions, not statements. Notes were taken actively and kept organized in an excel document. To keep track of the content even if it was taken down the platform, any comment or post that was noted for the research was also captured with a screenshot to be kept as evidence on files labeled according to the source.

Instagram was selected as the main site for the ethnography because of the high percentage of users of the platform that identify as Latinos (34%) or Black (38%) and the openness of

the platform that allows for users to see each other's full profile completely unless it is set to private (Krogstad, 2015). Through the Instagram search featured, the key terms Afrolatino, Afrolatinas, Afrolatinx, diaspora, Latino, and black Latinos were used to find accounts that hinted to be catering the Afro-Latinx community. The results were mostly humor and media related pages; however, the most popular accounts with significant interaction and members were the following: @diasporaradicalex with 1.4 thousand followers, @Theafrolatindiaspora with 34 thousand followers, and @Afrolatinas\_ with 16.6 thousand. When comparing the search results on Instagram versus Facebook, Instagram had more pages covering the Afro-Latinx theme, this helped make the decision of using Instagram. Apart from their significant popularity, these pages were selected based on the following criteria: (1) clear observation that the main topic of discussion is Afro-Latinx and/or the black Latin diaspora, this could be stated on the page description (known as biography on Instagram) or because of the overarching message in the content shared, (2) visible engagement within the community creator/s and members, (3) pages are open to the public. Observation of these pages has been happening casually since March 2018; casually meaning that there has not been a specific time dedicated to each page, but rather seeing what comes up on the feed daily. This observation changed at the end of November 2018, when the observation progressed to be four times a week. These days, half an hour was dedicated to each page (total 4 hours) to read posts, comments and Instagram stories.

### **Textual Analysis: Making sense of the text one post at the time**

Casual data collection and observation of these pages began September of 2017; however, December 18th to January 18th, 2018-2019 was selected as a representation month in which

small scale textual analysis was performed after recognizing the four most engaged posts within this time frame. McKee (2003) defines textual analysis as “a way for researchers to gather information about how other human beings make sense of the world” (p. 1). This research will be trying to make sense of the content shared on these pages by analyzing it through the lens of identity theory. While observing the interaction between users in the pages, this research has also paid attention to the type of content shared by the page administrators to get a better understanding of what generates the most engagement. A textual analysis helped identify the connection between the Afro-Latinx identity and the content shared. All the selected Instagram pages were scanned to look at the type of content, interactions in the posts, comments, likes, and hashtags that were used by both members and the page creators through their posts. All the data was storage on an excel documents in different forms. Screenshots of the posts and comments were taken and labeled with the date and user name followed by a number to identify them on the excel document. If the post had a caption, this caption was copied and pasted into the excel document as well to have two versions of it. Same process was applied to comments and stories. These posts were selected by adding the total amount of comments and likes of each, then compared to all the posts within the dates of the study. These post where then analyzed looking at any the content it provided, its connection with the identity umbrella of Afro-Latinx, and the engagement it created within the members of the community.

A framework was created to guide the textual analysis. This framework was separated into three different categories. The first one looked at the selection process of the text to identify where it was placed, what it explicitly implies, the account that posted and how at first sight, this could influence the research being done. The following category looked at the text and the re-

searchers relationship with it. In this part, any pre-assumed bias will be stated as well as a basic interpretation of the text. Who is the protagonist, if the text is creating argument, stating information or questioning and that the interaction the text brings to the users. The data was analyzed by different categories according to the platform's format; these categories were: About the page, Highlights, the most engaged post, and an overview. Some of the questions explored here were who had racial/ethnic authority, what identities were accepted or rejected, signs of shared goal or purpose, interaction among individual, terms used to refer to their group and communal concerns.

### **Limitations and Summary**

It is important to acknowledge any possible limitations that this particular method can have on this research. The analysis of three Instagram pages might not reflect the overall connection of the Afro-Latinx population identity with online communities in general but gave us a better understanding based on the significant sample size of over 57K combined Instagram users' members. This has to be taken as a holistic digital ethnography that looked to intimately connect with the community to deeply understand it. Although there is a connection established, it is also important to consider that this is a multi-site community, and just as it interacts online through the use of digital platforms, a lot of events are organized and promoted online but take place offline. This research only looked at the online aspect of this community and therefore leaves behind the multi-site characteristic of the same.

Another possible limitation is credibility of the users' information since the platform does not provide ethnic background information or how the members carry their identities through

their daily lives. Do they identify as Afro-Latinx offline as well? Without a multi-sited and longer ethnography, it was difficult to answer such questions. Last, it is important to mention that although the ethnography began with observation of the pages starting March 2018, a time-frame was set for the textual analysis performed in this digital ethnography, these dates were between December 2018 and January 2019. This time frame was chosen to fit the master's project timeline requirements; however, in the United States, these are major holidays dates in which some individuals are vacationing or simply at home. This can alter the amount of data collected negatively by decreasing the level of interaction or positively by spiking the same due to the vacation.

Now that the method has been defined and explained in detail, readers can understand why a digital ethnography was chosen as the most fitting methodology for this research. Including a description of the two other methods incorporated in this research; Observations and textual analysis, this chapter has outlined the steps taken to arrive to the conclusions stated on chapter five. The next chapter will state the findings obtained through the digital ethnography followed by the concluding chapter answering the research question.

## Chapter 4:

### Findings

This chapter begins to review the data found through the digital ethnography and textual analysis. The initial introduction to this fieldwork began a year and a half ago, while exploring social networking sites and finding several discussions of race in which users would comment back and forth to argue their point. This chapter has been divided into three different sections, each dedicated to one of the pages in which the fieldwork took place. The sections are **@Afrolatindiaspora**, **@diasporaradicalx**, and **@Afrolatinas\_**. All sections respectively will show findings as result of the observation collected throughout an 18 month period but will concentrate in the data analyzed during the time frame selected for most of the data collection which was December 18th through January 18th, 2019. These findings are structured with sub-headings based on the category analyzed. The final section of this chapter summarizes the findings before proceeding to the conclusions made on chapter five.

Before looking at the findings, it is important for the reader to become familiarized with some keywords that are used on Instagram and throughout the rest of this paper to refer to specific areas of the profile and the type of content shared on each account.

**Page name.** This is often the same as the username but at times, users can choose for this to be different. Page name is displayed under the username on the top right corner of the page.

**Page type.** When using the Instagram business profile, users are allowed to select a type of page to identify their account. Some of the pre-selected by Instagram are celebrity, public figure, business, media company, an option to type in your own answer is also available. Not every page requires a type, this only applies to the business profile option.

**Bio.** ‘Bio’ is an abbreviation for biography. This is the description of the page in which the user can type up a description that shows right under the name of the profile.

**Story(ies).** Images, videos, or text that shows on the Instagram account for 24 hours before it disappears. A story does not appear in the feed where all the other posts are, these are found (if available) by clicking on the user’s profile picture. These could be saved into highlights (see below for highlights definition).

**Highlights.** This refers to the circles displayed on the profile of a user right under the bio. This section permits the user to set up previous post that were shared on their story to live permanently in their profile under a label of their choice. Not every profile has highlights as it is not mandatory for a profile to save stories to this section. If Instagram TV (IGTV) content is available, this will appear next to the highlights as well. IGTV is not being used for this study.

**Posts in the feed.** Commonly known as just ‘posts,’ these is the actual content that show on the profile feed as one scrolls through the page from the top down. These could be images or videos and usually include a caption (text, emojis or both). These posts live in the feed that is displayed as a three-column grid on a user's profile.

The sections mentioned above were selected to keep an order in the analysis of the data gathered through the digital ethnography. Each section mentioned above (Bio, highlights, stories, etc...) represents a section of the Instagram page in which the users can share content or choose their name. Below, we look at all these areas in the pages selected for the digital ethnography.

### **@TheAfrolatindiaspora**

**About the Page.** At the beginning of the observation process of the page @TheAfrolatindiaspora, it labeled itself as a “society & culture website” with a total of 38.9K followers this

page is the most popular page of the three selected for the research. As the observation continues, it was noticed that the page changed the label under its name from society and culture website to Non-profit organization. This shift in the label changes the perspective people might have of the platform as being a non-profit organization might represent for the viewers that the users can obtain certain aid from this “organization” and while there is no profit made for the page, there are finances involved. This moves the page from a broad multi-purpose media group that a “society & culture website” represents to what could appeal as a more structured organization. The page welcomes their users with a very lengthy biography that has a rhythmic phrase that proclaims their blackness and their goals and reads as follows, “We are BLACK. We are PROUD. We uplift. We Educate. We are children of the African Diaspora.” Although this bio does not necessarily describe the content that you will find in the page, it gives readers a sense of what the community is about. This bio reads similar to protest language with short phrases and emphasis on certain words. For reference, this could be compared to one of the chants used at #BlackLivesMatter marches, “We are the children! The mighty, mighty children! Here to tell you, Black lives matter!” as they both put emphasis in the “we” to create the feeling of a community coming together.

The biography talks about the African diaspora and finishes with a selection of flags from Latin American countries, thus combining these two continents through visual and textual content. These flags represent the following countries, in order: Argentina, Peru, Chile, Colombia, Brazil, Dominican Republic, Cuba, Haiti, Mexico, Panama, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Belize, Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay, Costa Rica, and Ecuador. According to the study of flags, known as vexillology, all these flags have different

meanings individually. However, all together in this section of the page's bio could be seen as a way for members or descendants of those nations to be identified with the page and decide to follow, it helps create a connection prior to the user's engagement with the page. These flags could serve as a representation of all the countries in Latin America the page identifies as African Diaspora because of a substantial percentage of their population being of African descent (Lopez & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2016). If the creators are using the flags for representation, then this is problematic since they did not include all the Caribbean islands, which spread from the South-eastern coast of the United States to the northeastern coast of South America. These islands, including Martinique, St. Lucia, St. Kitts and Nevis to mention a few, are run by a nation of mostly African descendants as they served as the hub for slave trades. However, while these flags are only from a particular part of the world, the African diaspora is not only limited to Latin America. These flags contradict the meaning of "African Diaspora" by excluding the rest of the countries with significant African and African descent presence. If the purpose of this page was to refer to a group of specific countries that are part of the Afro-Latinx diaspora, these flags would perhaps be appropriate then. However, this textual and visual combination is contradicting the call for unison of the Afro-Latinx community that the page invokes by leaving behind over 10 islands in the Caribbean that form part of Latin America.

Another conflict with this "chant like" bio is that it states, "we are black," but does not mention "Afro-Latinx" at all. This can lead the members to assume all Afro-Latinxs are black since the name of the page is Afro-Latin-diaspora. As explained in the review of the literature on chapter two, this use of phenotypes to classify individuals into the label of Afro-Latinxs instead of the genotype is what creates a lot discussion outside the page as well as within it. This is not

only a conflict of the use of phenotypes over genotypes but also contradicts the physical characteristics of those who run the page as one of the founders is a light skin Afro-Latinx woman.



Figure 1. @TheAfrolatindiaspora post on Instagram discussing stereotypical looks [Screenshot]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/BuW0I27lx5E/>

**Highlights.** In the highlights of this page they only have three sections: Highlights, Vodou, and Our Influences. However, none of them seem to be very well crafted or thought of because of the lack of a cover page, and the unstructured content it contains. A well-crafted highlight story usually contains a designed cover page with a catchy title to attract the audience and the content would be updated frequently unless it was a past event. These stories are helpful to grow the page as the platform, Instagram, places most of the algorithm attention on them (May, 2019).

One of these three highlights sections is titled “Our Influences” and it discusses race in a very defensive way stating that lighter skin Latinos (known as Mestizos) claim there is no colorism, “Mestizos/white Latinos LOVE to push this idea that ‘white’ and ‘black’ doesn’t exist in

Latin America” says the first image in the section. The following image in the section continues this idea by stating that if color does not exist, why are the nicknames of negro or moreno (translates to black and dark skinned) are so popular when it comes to dark skin Latinxs. The same section goes on to discuss that blacks gave Latin American culture everything except the language. This is a strong claim that could be very problematic considering how cultures vary within the continent and that some have more observable African influences while others have more Native American or European influences. Some of the things noted on the story as what Africans gave Latin Americans are the following: music, religion, food. While this could be correct, it leaves behind the other cultures that mixed to create Latin America. Overall, the highlight section does not offer the followers a lot of content and it is not updated frequently. However, the content found here is very strong in advocacy.

**Most Engaged Post.** This section includes an in-depth analysis of the most engaged post in the feed of @theafrolatindiaspora page through the dates of December 18, 2018 and January 18, 2019. This image was selected explicitly to see what kind of content is generating the most engagement for this page particularly. This post has many layers as it has visuals, text within the visual, and a lengthy caption.



**Full Caption: [theafrolatindiaspora](#)**

This one goes out to all the white, light skinned, mestizos, or just straight up black but stuck in the sunken place people: If you constantly diminish the validity of issues like, White privilege, police Brutality, mass incarceration, media bias, improper representation, and systematic oppression by defending it/ justifying it/victimizing yourself and feeling a way about the topics.... but choose to play the "I'm not racist because I date Black people, or I have this many Black friends, or "my great great grandma twice removed was black".." YOU are a huge part of the problem. I dgaf what you say... THIS is why I stand firm in my beliefs that Black Queens and Kings should ONLY date / get married to other Black folk. 🙌! ❓ **\*\*That's just my opinion.\*\*** You Guys are free to choose what you feel is best for you. Cause what do I know...? I'm just a light skinned by product of a broken Black king, falling into the trap of black Dominicans needing to "Avanzar la Raza" 🍌🍷

*Figure 2. @theafrolatindiaspora post on Instagram discussing interracial relationships [Screenshot]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/BrvS6ySnnFE/>*

The image above was originally posted on December 23, 2018 in @theafrolatindiaspora page, it has over 3,500 likes and a total of 190 comments. At first sight, one can observe that the text is explicitly considering racial identity and the relationship this community has with those racially considered white. This selected text appeared on the feed of the page @theafrolatindiaspora where all the other content they shared could be found as we scroll through the page from the top to the bottom of it. As stated above, the selection of this text was based on popularity (amount of likes and comments combined in comparison with the others post during the time

frame selected) and the content was observed to enrich the research with a closer look at what exactly brought up such a high level of engagement, whether negative or positive.

To begin analyzing the image, we can identify that both the image and the text are stating an idea in which the protagonist of this image are blacks and the antagonist are whites who are portrayed as the evil group in power. This was easily identifiable as it discusses whites' action towards blacks in what could be negative or racist and portrays blacks as the protagonist because they are the victims of the actions discussed in the text. The image, including the text within discuss the ideology of race. The paragraph in the image states one main idea supported by three different arguments within it: relationships with the black community, black culture appreciation and support from whites to the black community, and whites using their connection to the black community as a representation of solidarity with blacks.

The first out of four ideas in the text states that because of having some sort of connection with an individual who belongs to the black racial category, this does not mean solidarity with blacks. The text says, "having friendships, sexual relations, or even marriage with a black person doesn't equal solidarity." The purpose of this sentence is to make it clear that everyone is connected with someone of color in one way or the other but that does not mean that they viewed as equal. Even within more meaningful relationships, such as marriage, or having a mixed-race child, unequal treatment could be seen. This idea connects with the last sentence of the image where the text states that this "proximity" to a person of colors, more specifically black, does not automatically make you not a racist and justifies any action that you might consciously or subconsciously do towards that race. Although it is not repeated with the same words, the creator of this text used similar ideas to express the same idea twice, bringing a lot of impor-

tance to it through repetition as it is seen through their use of “proximity to blackness” in the last sentence to reiterate what was stated before in regard to relationships. The second sentence supporting this idea in the text is that of solidarity that the non-black community needs to have with the black community, they use this idea again to express that being friends is not enough and actions must be taken. This claim is supported yet again by criticizing the use (from a white person) of black culture to clear their association with racism.

When looking at the image, we can see there are two mixed race couples. One of them is a white man with a black woman and the other a black man with a white woman. Here the image is portraying one of the many kinds of connections to the black community the text mentions, intimate relationships but both couples are portrayed differently in terms of position and physical characteristics. The white man is carrying the black woman in his arms, she looks helpless and weak and he looks almost as if he was “saving” her. The position of these characters (white man and black woman) shows who is the authority by featuring the black woman (black race) as helpless. The white man, carrying her in his arms and looking at her could be interpreted as the savior or hero rescuing her. He is wearing a white shirt with open chest and seems like a fit man.

On the other hand, the black man is portrayed as very muscular and with no shirt. He is holding the white woman in a way that can almost look a bit aggressive or too strong. This could be seen as offensive or almost as if the lady was “in danger” since it is not showing a delicate hold like the white man holds the black woman. The white lady pictured with the black man is barely dressed and parts of her clothing could be seen lower near the black man holding her, almost as if he pulled her clothes down. All these characteristics combined pictures an image that

this black man is wild, and perhaps animalistic in comparison to the delicate way the white man is portrayed. In addition, despite that the black man looks big and is above the white woman, she is still holding him and looking up, showing more power in comparison to the black lady.

Whether this image was selected purposely or not, it plays along with the text included within by portraying the racial stereotypes and the relationships roles that they question in the text. The image was posted on their Instagram page with a lengthy caption that further discusses the issue with racial relationships and the concept of it being solidarity.

This post was shared with a lengthy caption that further discusses this issue with stronger words. The first sentence calls out all the light skin Latinxs and blacks who question their racial identity or stuck in the “sunken place” as they call it. After, they state that part of this “sunken place” is supporting the privileged and staying quiet against injustice; some of the ones mentioned are “white privilege, police Brutality, mass incarceration, media bias, improper representation, and systematic oppression.” They stated that “feeling a way” about these issues is part of the defending the enemy which in this case are those with privilege, the whites. The caption then touches on the same idea the text in the picture emphasize of whites’ using their association to people of color as the reason they are “not racist.” One can say that the simple act of having to defend yourself as “not racist” could potentially mean feeling guilty or that you in fact, are acting in racist ways or as the caption state, it makes the individual “a huge part of the problem” (theafrolatindiaspora, 2018).

In the caption, the creator/manager of the page goes on to make another strong statement as he/she shares that “Black Queens and Kings should ONLY date each other” (theafrolatindiaspora, 2018), a statement that might support the Afro-Latin community but also isolates

them from interacting and mixing with the rest of the world with the idea that that everyone will be against them. However, this was a personal statement as the caption goes on to explain that the manager/creator who posted this is a light skin Afro-Latina who's black dad (referred to as "broken black king" in the caption) chose a lighter skin partner to "avanzar la raza" (theafrol-atindiaspora, 2018). *Avanzar la raza* translates to advance the race, this is a term used to describe the bleaching of the race by procreating with lighter skin individuals resulting in lighter skin next of kin. This very controversial term is popular within Latinx families as it comes from the believe that the lighter the skin, the superior the individual is.

Overall, one can see that this post is pushing the boundaries by bringing a tough discussion of interracial relationships of all kinds to get their followers talking about the ethnic group. These discussions set the tone for the kind of group they want to be; an activist group creating a community through the discussion of difficult topics about race and ethnicity.

**Overview.** The posts shared above are not the only examples available of this page's tendency to push the boundaries. To talk about racism, prejudice and any other topic of discrimination is normal for this page as the creators and administrators are not afraid to call out anyone who is guilty of those. In the images below, we can see how they are discussing discrimination in two different ways: As it pertains to race in Latin America and to culture globally. Both of these posts created a very interactive discussion driving users to comment extensively on the post. The post discussing racism in Latin America. Some interesting comments observed in this section supported the ideas in the post above stating that it is true or saying "preach." The most eye catching post was made by the user @prisjul who commented that she is "not allowed to speak or know" her dad's family because they do not want to be associated with a black skin relative

(like her) and adding that she has been a victim of racial slurs by her dad's family who have attacked her and her mom for being black. This comment not only highlights a story of a victim of racism agreeing with the page but also shows someone who identifies with the content this page shares and found a home, somewhere where she fits and people like her fighting for the same, equality and respect.



Figure 3. @theafrolatindiaspora post on Instagram discussing interracial relationships [Screenshot]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/Br-n1rBHIHg/>



Figure 4. @theafrolatindiaspora post on Instagram discussing interracial relationships [Screenshot]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/BreZ65VHe2M/>

As seen in the examples above, this page uses controversial conversations as the tool for engagement and even though it seems to be a successful tool for this page, is this the same technique applied in the other two? The following section begins to analyze another of the Instagram pages with the same structured we saw this one: bio, highlights, most engaged posts and overview.

### @Diasporaradicalex

**About the Page.** This NYC based account is titled @diasporaradicalex and it is classified as “Community Organization” on Instagram. This title already implies the page is trying to form a community, this it connects it to research question since this research looks to explore if the Afro-Latinx community is using Instagram as a platform to create online communities and how. What this section will be looking at is whether or not this page fits the characteristics of an online community as discussed in the literature review. With only 1,482 followers, the page already falls behind in comparison with the previously mentioned account when it comes to the number

of followers it has. In the biography section, this page claims its purpose is to “demystify the human experience within the black diaspora.” This was an interesting description to come across because of two reasons: The first is the idea that the experience of blacks in the diaspora is mystified and therefore must be demystified which then leads to questioning the meaning of this word. What does demystify mean for the creator of this page? And what exactly needs to be demystified? How is their (the black diaspora) experience mystified? And the second reason is that if the purpose of this page is to demystify the experience of the black diaspora, so the main purpose of it is to educate the audience to learn about the Afro-Latinx experience in a demystified way. Can this page be educational through demystification and create a community at the same time? The below analysis of the page’s highlights and posts showcases how the page uses this Instagram tool to engage with their followers.

**Highlights.** In the highlight section of the page there was not enough content to be analyzed as it only had one category titled “Trauma & Healing,” which features a recap of a previous event they put together. This title already offers a different perspective of the type of content and work this community aims to do in comparison to the account previously discussed (@theafrolatindiaspora). Instead of being a page lead by activism and difficult conversations about race, this page is working towards giving the black diaspora, more specifically Afro-Latinx, the tools they need to heal from those traumas experienced as part of being of this ethnic group. The stories show speakers and a demonstration of breathing exercises conducted by people of color. Because Instagram gives priority to the algorithm of those using highlights, meaning it exposes the highlights and stories to a higher amount of users in comparison to the posts, this

could be one of the reasons that the page is not very popular and if they are not looking to grow their audience, how are they expecting to gather a loyal and active group as their followers.

Having seen the lack of activity in the highlight section of this page, the next section moves on to explore the most engaged post shared on this account within the month used as the time frame (December 18, 2018 through January 18, 2019). The idea is to see if even when the highlights are not a strong tool for this page, The account is stronger in other areas.

**Most Engaged Post.** During the month parameters selected, December 2018, the @Diasporaradicalex page did not have a lot of interaction and only shared five posts. The post with the most interactions had a total of 297 likes and 14 comments, this is significantly inferior to the posts in the @theafrolatindiaspora page and even the @Afrolatinas\_ page (discussed below).



Figure 5. @diasporaradicalex post on Instagram discussing interracial relationships [Screenshot]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/BsdqPiKBSyQ/>

This image is a screenshot of a tweet that was posted by someone else, an external account which user is named Eva Maria (@imyagirleva). The page @Diasporaradicalex used the screenshot of this tweet to share in their platform as a post. The original post that this image displays was made by another user and not @Diasporaradicalex. Something important to understand is why this Instagram page would choose that tweet and post it when they could have written their own statement. To understand this, this research looked for information on the verified Twitter user, Eva. On Twitter, to be verified is a tool the platform uses to prevent identity theft. A blue check mark next to the account name is placed to validate a person's profile. This tool is mostly used for celebrities, public figures and journalists. Having that verification can change the meaning of the tweet and also give more power to her voice for it to become more seen as some people associate credibility with these. This could be a reason the page owner decided to use this instead of posting their own, this gives the page more credibility and shows how they are using another community member's voice to amplify it.

The text in the tweet is clarifying to the audience what is happening with Cyntoia Brown through the use of the hashtag, #CyntoiaBrown. To further understand this tweet, one needs to be familiar with this legal case happening in the United States. Cyntoia has been in prison for several years for the murder of Johnny Michael Allen, a man who allegedly bought her for sex purposes when she was only 16. This case has been a big point of discussion within the black community and supported by women all over as well as they all call for justice. The tweet explains that Cyntoia will be granted clemency and will be on parole for 10 years after. The tweet concludes with the words, "this is NOT justice" (Eva Maria, 2018) Although the tweet does not directly speak about race or community, by sharing it the page is showing that they believe this

woman needs justice and that sharing this post is an act of support towards her and amplifying the voice of the user who originally shared it, Eva Maria. The tweet is a way of saying, “we are black and want justice too” and showing support to their sister. This page does not usually share content like this, their content is mostly educational or highlighting events and it is not very active (if compared to @Afrolatindiaspora) but it felt the need to be part of this national discussion. However, this is not the kind of content usually shared by this page but it is the most engaged one during the timeframe of the study. The next section further explores the type of content usually share by the page and other posts on this page and whether or not those create the necessary engagement to make of the page an online community.

**Overview.** To provide a better example of the kind of posts this page shares, we can see in the images below how both posts are discussing mental health of black man or sharing informational posts on other topics of race empowerment or support groups events. The posts are also shared with captions that for the most part are statements providing information about the posts shared but not interacting with the users by asking questions or generating any controversy that could be contradicted. Most of the posts have some likes but very few comments or none at all. Majority of the comments seen on the posts of this page were users tagging friends for them to see the content. This type of content is not generating activity on this page and therefor makes the community less active.

Overall the page has a safe feel to its content in which they use the platform to distribute information instead of opening the platform as a space for difficult conversations about mental health and trauma within the Afro-Latinx group could take place. Although the page tries to create a mental health conscious community of Afro-Latinx individuals and those interested in help-

ing them, it uses the platform as an event and aggregator by sharing events where the individuals could go to find those connections that can help them heal trauma and improve their mental health or information about improving the same. In addition to not creating enough interaction through the different tools Instagram provides them, the page does not stick to the selected theme or niche as it shares other content as seen in the most engaged post section. This page lacks a strong identity and that is visible across all sections of it.



Figure 6. @diasporaradicalx post on Instagram discussing interracial relationships [Screenshot]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/Brn5wP0h21n/>



Figure 7. @diasporaradicalx post on Instagram discussing interracial relationships [Screenshot]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/BsuKqpuBTtH/>

The final section below looks at the third page, **@Afrolatinas\_** and how the different areas of page are being used followed by a summary that compares and contracts the findings from all three pages.

### **@Afrolatinas\_**

**About the Page.** Afrolatinas\_ brands itself as a page for “Beautifully black Latinas” where their purpose is to highlight them, their beauty and diversity almost as if it was a networking site inside of Instagram from Afro-Latinx to Afro-Latinx to boost their self-confidence through the appreciation of their phenotype. This page was created by the username @youraverageafrolatina who according to her Instagram biography is a graduate student living in New York. Through this description of the page, one can understand that the theme of the page is to portray Afrolatinx, more specifically females, as beautiful. From this we can also understand that the creator of the account identifies as a well-educated Afro-Latina who wants to advocate for diversity in beauty standards.

**Highlights.** In the highlights section of the Instagram page, the account has a few categories in which they grouped the items shared in their stories. These categories feature the following: events, opportunities (related to jobs, mostly), sales, meaning items for sale by the page or other members, and features in which they showcase a member by sharing their photo on the page. These items show a connection to the members of the page as it is looking to help and feature them for other members to learn about and network between one another. With what the bio and the highlights have available, it is already seen that this page serves as something similar to a social networking sites but catering to Afro-Latinx exclusively as we gathered from the bio section as well.

**Most Engaged Post.** The image below was the image with the most interactions in the page @Afrolatinas\_. This post is a good illustration that although the page has a niche that caters beauty in the Afro-Latinx community, they share other type of content as well. Although the content in this image is outside of their niche, this post generated the most engagement from the page's members. The image has 1403 likes and 22 comments and was originally posted in another user's Instagram page and re-shared by @Afrolatinas\_.



Figure 8. @afrolatinas\_ post on Instagram discussing interracial relationships [Screenshot]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bsg9hjZgmWH/>

This image has both text and visuals and it seems to come from a post on Twitter because of the format in which it displays the username, profile photo and content. The image itself does not have a lot of content just states that Creole is not a dialect but rather an actual language. It is commonly said amongst Latin Americans and French colonies that Creole is not a language but rather a slang or street version of French. The image refers to Creole as "broken French." Al-

though the image does not have much content, it was posted with a very lengthy caption that discusses some statistics (not verified or cited) about the language and the amount of people who speak it worldwide. This text states that Haitian Creole is “one of Haiti’s official languages” since 1961. Furthermore, this is not only official language and its incorporation in news, tv, and literature is sporadic according to the state. Even though the post itself just state some information and does not ask a question to engage their members, some of the users added to the discussion by adding comments like “YESS,” “PREACH,” or a selection of emojis. Some users went ahead and confirmed that Haitian Creole is a language but that the meaning of creole is just the mix of something with African to form a third thing. User @just\_pmw (2019) said that, “Creole mean a mix of anything with African... mainly Europeans and Africans,” while the user @tameratarwoe99 (2019) added that “there are many types of creole and Haitian Creole is FRENCH BASED KREYOL.” On the other hand, further into the comments a user whose account is private and therefor will not be disclosed states that the statement shared by the account “is so wrong and people are applauding it with no facts.” The same user name claims to have a Master's in education concentrated in Linguistics as her credibility background. The page @Afrolatinas\_ commented on this asking to provide facts as to why the statement was wrong and while the user did not respond, another user added to the discussion by stating that Haitian Creole is in fact a language and was recognized in the 90s. It is hard to know who is right and who is wrong when it comes to the truth about Haitian Creole, but this post did initiate a conversation with the users and stepped out of the page’s usual type of content of sharing photos of Afro-Latinxs to showcase their beauty. This page provides yet another example (like seen with the most engaged post in the @Diasporaradicalx) of a page that has a niche but the content outside of this niche, sparks

more interaction between their users. The overview section that follows explores other themes and important observation seen in this page.

**Overview.** When it comes to the posts, the account is very active and shares content once or twice per day. However, as the description of the page says, their main purpose is to showcase beauty so most of the posts are photos of Afro Latinas and the captions tend to be flags of their country of origin or descent. There are very few images on the page that are not photos of black women, some of those posted under the hashtag and theme for the page called #MorenoCrushMonday. Moreno means dark skinned man, and this is used to highlight a black male the members of the community could find attractive. With this we can already see the page is limited to female members mostly and perhaps it is trying to create more of a sisterhood kind of community. Highlighting the #MorenoCrushMonday is a way to keep their audience engage as they introduce something that is not part of their niche as it is the opposite gender, but it creates conversation within the followers as they express their opinions on the selection of the week (see image below). Sharing these pictures of Afro-Latinx men does generate a lot of interaction and makes the page feel similar to a dating app or a profile to rank people based on their physical appearance.



Figure 9. @Afrolatinas\_ post on Instagram discussing interracial relationships [Screenshot]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bs6EAQJgMcJ/>

For the most part, the content shared are selfies of followers or famous Afro-Latinx who they are featuring in the page, but sometimes other posts are shared that discuss the topic of race. Overall, this page does not share conversation started posts and although it receives a significant number of likes, the comments tend to be just people highlighting the ethnicity of the girl in the post with flags, hearts or just cheering on their beauty (see image below).



Figure 10. @Afrolatinas\_ post on Instagram discussing interracial relationships [Screenshot]. Retrieved from [https://www.instagram.com/p/Br-40xRAX\\_L/](https://www.instagram.com/p/Br-40xRAX_L/)

As seen with @diasporaradicalx, this page also falls behind when creating interactive posts for their followers. They concentrate in the beauty of the Afro-Latinx community based on the phenotypes. The next section summarizes the overall findings on all three pages before moving to the following chapter, the conclusion.

### Summary

The purpose of this chapter has been to explore the data gathered throughout the research performed and see how this guides the conclusion provided in the following chapter. Throughout this digital ethnography, it was understood that the three pages have very different styles, but they all discuss race as their niche in their respective different ways to attract users who identify with that niche. The @Afrolatindiaspora is the most active and the page that puts more emphasis on discussing race, the African diaspora, and any related topic through their content. This page provided thoughtful argumentative posts that opened the comments to discussion that engaged their followers to interact with one another. Their approach to the content shared on their

page is that of thought-provoking conversations driven by advocacy. On the other hand, the @Diasporaradicalx is not very active, and the content shared does not spike interaction among their user, but it continues to sustain the community by discussing mental health and self-care. Although their niche is stated clear, at times the page steps away from this theme and shares different content that even when it does not follow the page identity, it generates significant engagement amongst their followers. Lastly, the page @Afrolatinas\_ focuses on highlighting Afro-Latinx beauty. Even though this page rarely shared posts that were not sharing the beauty of an Afro-Latinx, when they did discuss race it generated a conversation in the comments within their followers and even none followers that ran across the page. Like with @Diasporaradicalx, @Afrolatinas\_ was another example of a page that when stepping away from their niche, it was able to drive more interactions.

All three pages had very different visible purposes based on the information provided in their bio, the type of highlights and how they used them, and the content in the posts. @Theafrolatindiaspora gives their followers the image of a page that is not afraid to speak of controversial topics and take activism seriously through this platform, while @diasporaradicalx and @Afrolatinas\_ create a more relaxed atmosphere for their users. In the next section, this research takes the data gathered and analyzed to response the research question. After providing the conclusion obtained from the findings, the last chapter moves on to state any possible limitations found throughout the research and share ideas for future areas of study.

## **Chapter 5:**

### **Conclusion**

This thesis explores how the Afro-Latinx community uses social networking sites to create an online community that provides a sense of belonging. This thesis has highlighted how social networking sites have been used as tool for ethnic or minority groups to create a globalized community online and use the same for advocacy as well as its relevance in to today's sociopolitical climate. While looking through existing literature, chapter two introduced the readers to the concept and meaning of community and how these are formed by the various factors that bind people together. Chapter two continued to explore communities and its relationship with ethnicity and race, as well as the online space. When discussing online communities, this thesis considers the communities one is born to such as ethnic communities and the communities one decides to identify with. Last, the literature review discussed the available text on the creation of online communities, the characteristics that separates them from groups and the steps to successfully maintain them. These claims are re-examined in this chapter based on the data collected and analyzed in this thesis.

Chapter three followed with a detailed description of the methodology used to perform this research. The method used was a digital ethnography carried on in three different Instagram pages: @Theafrolatindiaspora, @diasporaradicalx, and @Afrolatinas\_. This digital ethnography not only included an in-depth observation of the fieldwork but also a textual analysis of the most engaged post during the selected time frame. This methodology allowed for the data in chapter four to be gathered. The chapter on findings (Chapter four) provided the analysis of the data obtain through the digital ethnography. The next section will discuss the findings observed in the

data that were used to answer the research question. Some of these findings reveal the differences between all three pages and which one reflects the characteristics of an online community as well as the relationship these have with the members' identity.

## **Discussion**

**Online community or virtual group? When the niche is not enough.** Creating an online community requires much more than what could be seen. The literature review listed the challenges that online communities often face as follow: creating a niche, supporting that niche, and knowing what differentiates them with other online communities (Kraut et al., 2012). As Kraut et al. (2012) state, any chosen niche should be broad enough to attract a sizable group but focused enough so that the members have a reason to choose this community over any other. The selected niche will represent a purpose or goal that connects with potential members and interest them about that particular online community. In all the three pages observed, the niche was very evident. Although all three pages catered the Afro-Latinx community, they all have particular ways of doing so with very different themes: advocacy, trauma and healing, and beauty. One noticeable difference between all three pages was the loyalty to their selected niche. While @Diasporaradicalx and @Afrolatinas\_ introduced the page with a unique identity and had an evident niche, they did not stay truth to it as they mixed their content with posts that did not follow their theme. These posts did create interaction among their users, but it did not fit with the page theme. Examples of this are the #Cyntoiabrown advocacy post shared by the @diasporaradicalx page while their content concentrates on mental health, or the post shared by @Afrolatinas\_ dis-

cussing Haitian creole as a language which differs from their typical selfie posts showcasing the beauty of their members.

As concluded in the literature review, staying truth to the niche is one of the important steps to creating a successful online community as it lures people in based on pre-existing interest (Kraut et al., 2012). This niche becomes the goal of the community and what makes it more than just a group, it brings users together to achieve or support such a goal that aligns with their identity, it is part of who they are and what they believe in. While @Diasporaradicalx and @Afrolatinas\_ take a more subtle approach to the Afro-Latinx community by supporting mental health and celebrating beauty respectively, @Theafrolatindiaspora uses their strong voice of advocacy to bring together those who want to make a change and are not afraid to speak up. Their approach is to create argumentative discussions that teaches their audience through agreement or disagreement as their followers voice their strong opinions. @Theafrolatindiaspora creates a safe space for what's not safe, it opens the door to discuss controversy within race. In the literature review the term community was discussed in reaction to how this is represented in the online space. Rheingold (1993) stated that the internet brought the potential of bringing these communities online by creating virtual spaces for education and support. This technique is effectively used by @TheAfrolatindiaspora as they develop engaging conversations that touch on topics of race, racism and the challenges the diaspora faces.

But building a community is much more than just figuring out a niche. It requires active interaction and a virtual relationship between the users that validates their purpose for joining the community. If interaction does not exist, then it makes the page just a group and not a communi-

ty (Kraut, 2012). A community must make members feel like they belong and encourage them to participate. @Theafrolatindiaspora is an example of good online engagement as they use the platform to provoke their audience to comment, whether this is with questions or strong statements that connects with their followers and sparks interaction. They take personal experiences that their ethnic group goes through and put them into perspective for discussion. This page is not afraid to call out names nor state their point of view. The space created by @Theafrolatindiaspora brought in a loyal group of members that are willing to share their stories for others to relate with. Users are engaged in most of the post through likes and comments, creating similar discussions as if they were meeting offline. They active interaction makes it seem as if users feel comfortable to freely express their opinions in the comments and hear what others have to say. This illustrates to perfection what Chavis and Lee (2015) state is one of the most important characteristics of a community, “both a feeling and a set of relationships among people” (n.p.).

@Theafrolatindiaspora is different from @Afrolatinas\_ and @Diasporaradicalex in multiple ways. If comparing the engagement received in all three pages, it is visible that the content shared in @Theafrolatindiaspora brings a bigger audience as their page currently has over 38.9K followers and their posts receive thousands of likes and hundreds of comments. @Afrolatinas\_ is somewhat engaged but their posts do not receive thousands of likes and the most engaged post during the time frame was not within the niche of the page. The same could be said for @Diasporaradicalex as it is the least engaged of all three pages receiving less than a hundred likes on their normal posts and failing to fulfill the characteristics of online communities.

It is hard to consider @Afrolatinas\_ and @Diasporaradicallex online communities due to the low interaction levels these pages provide. They are not creating discussions nor manifesting people to be vocal about their identity and the connection that brought them to the page. Both of these pages do the minimum to maintain the platform active while trying to follow their selected niche. If the pages @Afrolatinas\_ and @Diasporaradicallex were created with the purpose of becoming an online community, they have failed to do so due to the observable lack of efforts they put into maintaining the interaction within their members to create connections.

This lack of engagement resonates with Brown (2000) discussed in the literature review, which states that in order for an online community to maintain its platform successfully, it must continue to satisfy the members of the same by fulfilling their self-esteem. If the community fail to provide the members with the connection they need, the individual dissociates from it by removing that from their identity and looking for another community to join. In the next section we continue to explore the connection these online communities have with the member's identity.

**On Community and Identity: Is the Space Fulfilling Members' Ego?** Maintaining engagement is a hard task for the creators of these pages, but making sure the engagement is valuable becomes even harder for these online communities as they need to reinforce their members by making sure that some of their needs will be fulfilled or goals achieved (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). When individuals join these communities, they are satisfying a part of their identity. In the case of the Afro-Latinx community, findings show that they were looking for a place in which they are not judged for being black and Latinos. Through some of the posts seen in @Theafrolatindiaspora, members and creators discuss the feeling of not being black enough for the African

community and being too black for the internal racism they encounter within the Latinx community. Afro-Latinx wanted to find something to fill their ethnic identity through their participation in these online communities. They wanted to fit in, and pages like @Theafrolatindiaspora, @Afrolatinas\_ and @Diasporaradicaalex tried to provide that space.

However, the lack of engagement in @Afrolatinas\_ and @Diasporaradicaalex resonates with Brown' (2000) words observed in the literature review stating that in order for an online community to maintain its platform successfully, it must continue to satisfy the members by fulfilling their self-esteem needs. If the community fails to provide the members with the connection they need, members dissociates from it by removing that from their identity and looking for another community to join. And just as the community plays a big role in the members' identity, the members change the community as well through the role they fulfill partaking in it. If the members of a community lose their interest in the same, they refrain from their role as active participants and the group begins to lose the characteristics that made it a community. Because of this, @Theafrolatindiaspora represents the coming together of all the characteristics that an online community must possess to be successful. This page is in fact an online community because it discusses and maintain its strong identity when other pages fail to do so.

Although these findings provide a deeper understanding of the relationship virtual spaces have with human identity through the creation of online communities, with these findings one cannot assume the entire Afro-Latinx community has the same behaviors online. The following sections states some limitations particular to this research followed by future research sug-

gestions that could improve behavioral understanding of online communities and the science to achieving similar successful virtual spaces.

### **Limitations**

This project has opened the door for a deeper discussion about the development of online communities targeting ethnic groups for the purpose of advocacy and education. The creators of the pages examined take different themes or otherwise known as niche, to target the specific audience they are looking to attract. However, it is important to highlight that only three pages that target Afro-Latinx communities were selected for this research. Even when these pages give an overview of the community, one cannot generalize the entire community based on three pages. Exploring more pages would give this research the opportunity to analyze the different themes or niche(s) these pages decide to cover and compare the interaction rate between all of them to see what drives more engagement within the Afro-Latinx community.

This digital ethnography did not have one on one interactions with the users participating in these communities. To elaborate on this research and further develop the relationship the members of this communities have with the online platform, interviews would be ideal to get a sense of the individuals' personal relationship with the pages as well as their interaction habits; Do they like all the posts? Do they comment often? What drives them to like/comment? How often do they check the page? Etc. As a result, this limits the research to comment on intentions from the members and the role they think the community plays on their identity. While this research has answered the question driving this paper, the next section provides some areas in which the thesis question could be further explored.

## **Future Research**

If the opportunity is presented, this research could be expanded to further look at the relationship between online communities and the user's identity. It would be ideal to explore how the identity is influenced by the community and if users who join these communities present behavior changes after joining the same. The identity process is very complex, especially within this extremely diverse ethnic group. Observing how individuals identify prior to and post their initiation in the community could answer questions such as what the meaning of Afro-Latinx is, who gets to claim this identity and why did they decide to embrace this term as a label for their ethnic identity. In an age where constant fair media representation is a controversial topic, future research in this area can lead scholars to further understand what this group needs in order to feel accepted and whether or not these online communities educate others enough or further isolates the community. This research could also be implemented with other communities from ethnic groups, fan groups or brand enthusiast. Using social networking platforms for marketing is a known tool, but what would be different if brands created online communities instead? This type of research shows how to create and maintain a community and the need there is for diversity. Future research would therefore benefit the academic and marketing and advertisement fields as it would provide professionals an in depth understanding of audience development and community engagement.

## **Summary and Conclusion**

This thesis is not just a look at different techniques used by Instagram pages to see what their creation process is like, or a research to state whether these are, in fact, online communities

that successfully captivate an audience. This research lets the reader see that whether in a physical location or in the digital space, individuals look for that human connection even if it is through clicks, likes, comments and follows.

It is evident that like in any other era, in this digital era people long for personal connection and the feeling of belonging, but this has moved online to social networking sites. With the Afro-Latinx online community, this feeling of belonging is part of the questioning of their identity, who are they in this world and what is their purpose. This digital ethnography provided significant data to see how like with many activist movements mentioned in the beginning of this thesis, such as the Arab Springs and #BlackLivesMatter, these social networking sites continue to serve as a space connecting people from all over the world. The definition of community as it was once known continues to be challenged and reshaped through human adaptation of new technology to fulfill their needs. Individuals take social networking sites to create safe spaces that provide members with access to those who think alike. It was found that in order to create and maintain these communities, the space must provide a clear purpose that connects with the members in an actively participatory way. Members must feel satisfied with the role the community is fulfilling in their personal identity formation and choose to be part of this particular community every day. Beyond the niche and the content, creators must be relentlessly willing to nurture the community with their connecting needs.

Being part of these communities changes their story from being overlooked to being strong, and part of a group. They now belong to something greater and this becomes part of their identity. In these communities, Afro-Latinx are together in power, as a team even if this is via

swipes, clicks, follows and likes. They are no longer the underdogs; they are a global team, connected through a virtual space.

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