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THE ECOLOGY OF LATINX TWITTER

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Abstract

Twitter is a conduit of culture – a miscellany of networked communities where participants reinforce and/or dismantle socially constructed ideas and narratives. For nearly a decade, studies on the uses and gratifications, and sociality of cultural and/or ethno-racial driven networks in the U.S. have emerged. This body of literature is interdisciplinary and discusses Black Twitter (Brock, 2012; Florini, 2013; Sharma, 2013; Clarke, 2014; Lee, 2017), and to a much lesser extent, Asian-American Twitter (Lopez, 2016). Largely, research on Latinx Twitter is scarce (Novak, Johnson, & Pontes, 2016; Slaughter, 2016; Rosenbaum, 2018) – a significant gap given that Latinx is the nation's largest minority group, standing at 18% of the U.S. population (Pew Research Center, 2017). Despite epitomizing diversity, U.S. media often describes Latinx monolithically. However, the pan-ethnic represents over 21 nationalities, and a host of European and Indigenous languages, in which regional dialects are blended with African tongues to varying degrees. We take the position that prior to conducting behavioral focused analyses on Latinx Twitter, the network's ecology must be defined. This means, to understand how the network of tens of ethnicities and heritages self-organizes. Therefore, this study purposefully augments existing scholarship by exploring Latinx Twitter's ecology. Upon conducting a content analysis, and one-on-one interviews with six women (18-24 years old) of Latinx heritage, inclusive of Afro-Latinx identity, we identify three major ecological themes: (1) Seeking Latinx Twitter; (2) Mega Network versus Sub-Networks; and (3) Implications for Monolithic Narratives.

Method

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The existing gap in research on Latinx Twitter drove our inductive approach using grounded theory. A random sample (n=600) of Tweets posted between 2016 and 2018, and that use the hashtags #LatinxTwitter, #MexicanTwitter, and/or #CentralAmericanTwitter was pulled using Crimson Hexagon – a software tool that provides researchers with access to content in Twitter’s public sphere. Our content analysis was conducted manually. Additionally, we spoke to six women who self-identified as Latinx or Afro-Latinx (18-24 years old), and also attend a Predominately White Institution (PWI) in U.S. South. Our recruitment efforts included an emailed screener sent to several campus-wide listservs, each managed by one of the institution’s campus-wide cultural organizations.

Our screener included asking respondents two questions specific to cultural heritage. Collecting data about heritage is crucial to this study for two reasons. First, it dismantles the practice of treating pan-ethnic as a monolithic group. Second, it creates room for Afro-Descendientes and Afro-Latinx visibility among our pool of interviewees.

What is your Hispanic or Latinx heritage? *Please check all that apply.*

- a. Mexican
- b. Puerto Rican
- c. Cuban
- d. Colombian
- e. Salvadorian
- f. Dominican
- g. Other (please specify): _____
- h. Prefer not to answer

Do you consider yourself an Afro-Descendiente or Afro-Latinx?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. I’m not sure
- d. Prefer not to answer

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for playback and accuracy. Our analysis was conducted using Corbin and Strauss’ (2008) constant comparative method of qualitative analysis. We began by coding fragments of data to familiarize ourselves with potential themes. Next, we dived deeper into the data by completing line-by-line coding, followed by, axial coding themes to collapse similarities, uncover differences, and detect relationships. Finally, we scaffolded our findings into a theoretical model of emergent themes – one that serves the purpose of the study (and supported by salient quotes as evidence of findings.)

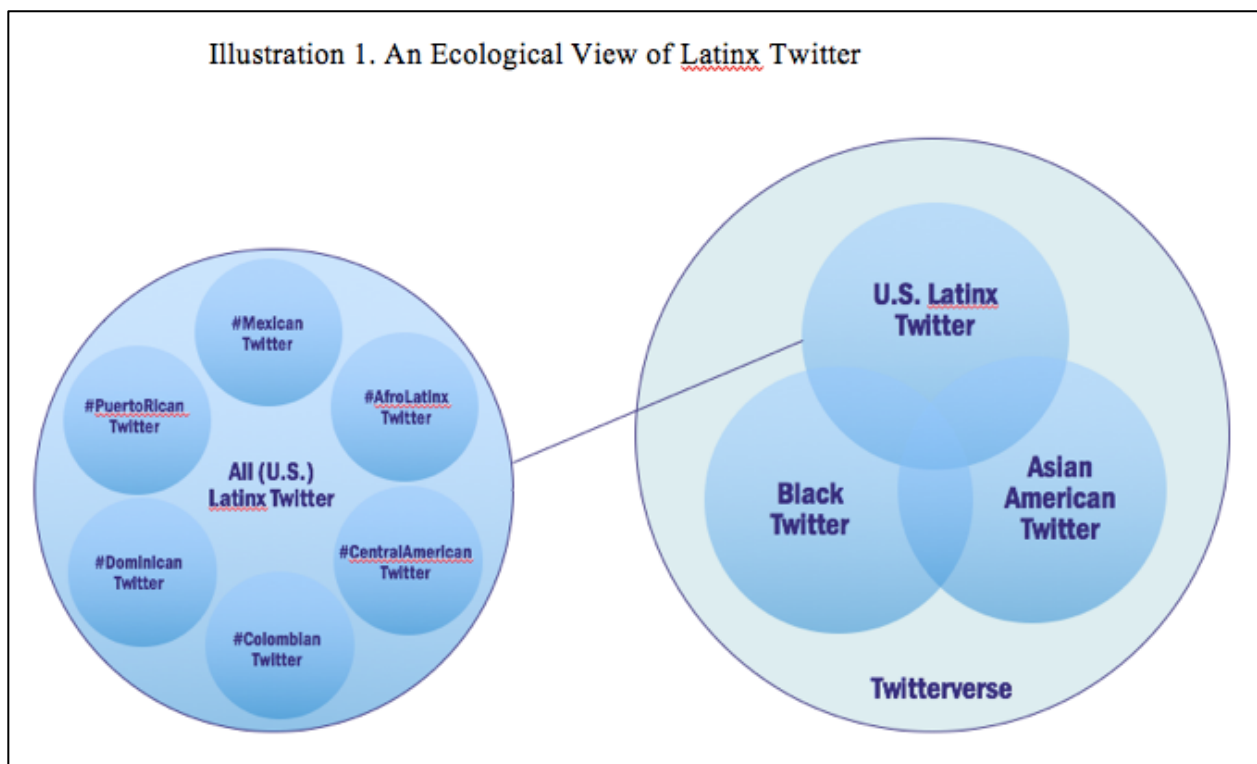
Results

Our analysis results in three major ecological themes: (1) Seeking Latinx Twitter; (2) Mega Network versus Sub-Networks; and (3) Implications for Monolithic Narratives.

We find that Latinx Twitter is a growing network that can be challenging to locate. Descriptions of how interviewees came to find Latinx Twitter reveals their heavy reliance

on platform settings and/or UI components as part of their search strategies. For example, several sought to follow Twitter users whose system language was set to Spanish. They treated the language in which the profile was set as indicator of probable Latinx heritage. Also, all interviewees used a flag emoji to signify their heritage and/or nation of origin, and assumed that other Tweepers used the symbol for the same purpose. For research purposes, we cannot consider the presence of a flag emoji as confirmation of heritage or ethnicity. With that said, worthy of note is that our content analysis does show that emoji flags were heavily used across posts and profiles that used one or more of our specified hashtags.

From the analysis, Latinx Twitter emerged as a mega-network. That is, an umbrella network which encompasses sub-networks. Here, ethnicity and heritage serve as group affiliations – each one demarcating space for participants to opt-in or out of in-group and/or cross-cultural interaction. In other words, the mega-network serves as a townhall of sorts, and sub-networks are participatory member groups whose formation is country and/or region specific (e.g., #MexicanTwitter, #CentralAmericanTwitter, etc.) One can enter Latinx Twitter through the mega-network, or by way of a sub-network. All serve as standalone points of entry.



Reflective the pan-ethnic's diversity, some sub-networks communicate in more than one language. Among our participants, four women were bilingual (i.e.; Spanish and English) and two were monolingual (i.e.; English only). All bilingual speakers report tweeting in English and Spanish; sometimes using a single language or both languages within a single post. This includes instances of Spanglish, a third and distinct use of

language. Further, we find instances of posts written in additional languages, such as, Portuguese and French.

The implications for monolithic narratives are considerable. By way of self-organization, participants do not see themselves as members of a monolith. They clearly explained their perceptions on why subgroups are demarcated by nationality and/or ethnic affiliation – with the most commonly stated as the need to establish visibility and agency amongst an enormous pan-ethnicity consisting of, sometimes competing, Latinx groups located within the U.S. and abroad. Several participants emphasized sub-networks' ability to promote a cause, disseminate news and knowledge, and/or negotiate credit for cultural production.

Discussion

Based on our content analysis and qualitative interviews, we find that Latinx Twitter's ecology supports:

- Negotiating credit for cultural production between sub-networks
- Disseminating ethno-racial news and knowledge
- Creating meaning-making (Lamont, 2000) and collective memory (Assmann, & Czaplicka, 1995; Confino, 1997).

As a participatory network of networks, we believe that Latinx Twitter's ecology illustrates the culture and sociality of stratifying heritage over race (Roth, 2012). Its depth of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) straddles multiracial, multicultural, multiethnic, multilingual, and transnational identities and frontiers (De Bot, & Stoessel, 2002; Eleta, & Golbeck, 2014). From an Afro-Latinx perspective, Latinx Twitter can be a resource for increasing visibility, affirming identity, and building community. Furthermore, studying the ecology of Latinx Twitter is crucial for understanding how its participants – largely representative of the largest minority group in the U.S. – discovered and self-organized the twittersphere. Future opportunities for researchers include investigating the adherence to (or resistance of) politics of gratitude (Rodriguez-Silva, 2013); and dismantling the stereotypical and monolithic narratives that the media so often uses to characterize members of the Latinx pan-ethnic.

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