ONLINE PARTICIPATION, SOCIAL ISOLATION, BICULTURALISM, AND

EMPOWERMENT: A VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF KENYAN DIASPORA

WOMEN LIVING IN NORTH AMERICA

By

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Online Participation, Social Isolation, Biculturalism, and Empowerment: A Virtual

Ethnography of Kenyan Diaspora Women Living in North America

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This virtual ethnography was conducted in two online communities on Facebook, a

popular social media platform comprising of Kenyan diaspora women residing in Canada

and the United States of America. The author used a convergent, parallel mixed-methods

approach to investigate whether and how online communities provided a pathway for

reducing social isolation, attaining biculturalism, and exercising empowerment. The

quantitative research questions tested the hypothesized directions, magnitudes, and

relationships of the following variables: online participation, positive acculturation

(biculturalism), empowerment, opportunity role structure, sense of community, and social

isolation. The qualitative research questions explored participants' perceptions of the

relationships between the variables mentioned above. The author applied a postcolonial

theoretical framework, among others, to contest the generalizations of African immigrant

women, valorize their unique cultural identity, and demonstrate the expanded notions of

civic participation. Quantitative data were collected using validated modified scales (n =

287) and analyzed using path analysis. Qualitative data were collected using systematic observations (n = approx. 18,000) and semi-structured interviews (n = 39) and analyzed using discourse analysis and thematic analysis, respectively. The final output model was a good fit for data $X2 (4) = 5.42$, $p = .25$; CFI = .997; NFI = .987; TLI = .987; RMSEA = .035. Findings from systematic observations indicated that salient topics in online interactions included acculturation, managing relationships, social support, among others. Findings from semi-structured interviews revealed descriptive categories and themes such as varied motivations for joining the online community, empowerment, benefits, and drawbacks of online participation, etc. Overall, the results from the qualitative and quantitative analyses were consistent. The findings supported existing theories of empowerment, sense of community, and opportunity role structure but indicated the need to redefine acculturation theory. Overall, participants' acknowledgment of their social isolation predicted positive acculturation (biculturalism), empowerment, and a sense of community. Online participation and opportunity role structure mediated the relationship between social isolation and biculturalism, empowerment, and sense of community. Despite apparent social inequities, participants perceived online communities as serving a utilitarian role in countering perceived social isolation, increasing access to information, and as a source of emotional support. The online communities demonstrated the heterogeneity of Kenyan diaspora women whose complexity cannot be reduced to generalized simplifications. Future research should focus on how to collaborate with online participants in digital activism for social justice and humanitarian assistance efforts. To ascertain civil discourse, online community administrators should institute rules for engagement. This study contributes knowledge to Africana Studies, Diaspora

Studies, Social Work, New Media Studies, and Women and gender studies. Social Work

curriculum should incorporate virtual ethnography as a research method because it

presents a practical and useful way of learning about communities. After all, in present-

day, online communities have become universal for people with access to the internet.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

"Internet social networking services can be particularly beneficial for some groups to address social isolation"(Fong et al., 2018, p. 115)

In this section, the author introduces the social problem that will be addressed throughout this study.

Statement of the Problem

Diasporans are at an increased risk of social isolation from broader society. Diasporans are immigrants who are established in their region of domicile but maintain economic, political, and social ties with their countries of heritage (Butler, 2001). Diasporans experience social isolation due to geographic separation from their social networks, distinct cultural differences with broader society, language barriers and the change in the pace of life, which is in most cases, seems faster than they are accustomed to (Butler, 2001; Habecker, 2017; Mana et al., 2009; Salami et al., 2017). Social isolation is a state of having inadequate social relations with others at the individual, group, and community levels (Mcpherson et al., 2008; Zavaleta et al., 2017). Social isolation is an insidious and severe social problem because it jeopardizes physical health, contributes to mental and emotional disorders, substance abuse, and addiction (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009; Cornwell & Waite, 2009; Khullar, 2017; Marchand et al., 2017). Moreover, social isolation impedes one's capacity to access social, economic, and political resources (Gatua, 2014; Hawthorne, 2006), which could potentially hinder biculturalism (positive acculturation) and empowerment. Social isolation can be prevented or remedied by strengthening social connections that an individual has with others in society (Fong et al., 2018).

Despite Kenya being a secular and relatively liberal nation-state (Alidou, 2013), the social lives of many diaspora women continue to be governed by patriarchal customs that limit their social interactions, thus putting them at risk of social isolation (Kyeyune, 2014; Musyoka, 2014). Ample evidence exists to suggest that having frequent contact with one's social network reduces social isolation (Gaulen et al., 2017; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Hossain & Veenstra, 2013; Khullar, 2017). In recent years, there has been an increased interest in investigating how online (virtual) communities can curb social isolation (Ahn & Shin, 2013; Annisette & Lafreniere, 2017; Hossain & Veenstra, 2013; Primack et al., 2017; Shensa et al., 2017).

This entire study is a virtual ethnography, and the terms *study* and *virtual ethnography* are used interchangeably. A virtual ethnography refers to an online research method that adapts field research or ethnographic approaches to studying communities and cultures created through online interactions. The product of this online research method is also called a virtual ethnography. Therefore, the term virtual ethnography refers to both a research technique and a research product. Also, the terms online community and virtual community are used synonymously throughout this study. The author conducted this virtual ethnography within two Facebook groups (group A and group B), where she was a participating member. The virtual communities (group A and group B) comprised solely of Kenyan diaspora women living in North America (the United States (U.S.) and Canada), and in fact, many group members belonged to both groups and members engaged on similar topics hence necessitating studying them in tandem. The author was motivated to conduct the virtual ethnography after observing how members of groups A and B utilized the virtual community to expand their social

networks, organize social activities, and disseminate information effectively. For this reason, the author hypothesized that online communities provided a pathway for its members to eradicate social isolation, attain biculturalism and exercise empowerment, as will be explained in subsequent sections of this dissertation.

Biculturalism is essential for diasporans because it confers them the ability to simultaneously maintain the desired cultural practices and values of their heritage and adopt those of the society they are currently living in, hence allowing one to live cohesively in their present environment (Cohen, 2011). Biculturalism or integration (López & Contreras 2005) is what social scientists generally agree to be the most beneficial of all acculturation forms because it provides an individual with a wide range of appropriate behaviors for problem-solving (Berry, 2003). Empowerment, on the other hand, is crucial for diasporans because it provides them the enhanced ability and confidence to direct their actions towards desired effects (Christens et al., 2011; Miguel et al., 2015; Peterson et al., 2002; Rodrigues et al., 2017).

Hossain & Veenstra (2013) argued that for diasporans who engage others on social media, online communities become an extension of everyday life and provide opportunities for initiating friendships, sharing information, organizing collective action, learning about their host and heritage societies (attaining cultural competency), etc. Other researchers concur that within online communities, participants, i.e., members of an online community often share a great deal of personal information leading to the creation of strong emotional bonds and a sense of intimacy (Papp et al., 2011; Park et al., 2009; Whitty & Joinson, 2009). These characteristics of online participation (engaging others in online communities) provide clues to its association with reduced social isolation and its

utility in promoting biculturalism and empowerment, as the author will explain in the literature review section of this dissertation.

Much of the past research on online communities focused on demonstrating the adverse effects of online participation on social isolation (Ahn & Shin, 2013). For instance, Blackwell et al. (2017) claimed that spending time in virtual spaces was attributed to social media addiction, while (Shensa et al., 2017) argued that online participation caused depressive symptoms. Some studies have explored how online participation influenced the acculturation and empowerment of diaspora women from non-Western countries (McKelvy & Chatterjee, 2016; Mirza & Meetoo, 2018). However, past research has mostly overlooked the role of online participation in the acculturation and empowerment of African diaspora women. Some research on Diasporas' online engagement has focused on Asian Diasporas (Cila & Lalonde, 2015; Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016; Lee, 2013; Oh, 2016). But until now, no study has examined the impact of online participation on social isolation of Kenyan diaspora women living in the U.S. and Canada. Therefore, this virtual ethnography is a novel attempt to elucidate the connections between online participation, social isolation, biculturalism, empowerment, and social isolation among Kenyan diaspora women in the U.S. and Canada. The author proffered that, for the study sample, online participation reduced social isolation and offered a pathway for attaining biculturalism and increasing empowerment. The rationale for the author's hypotheses was based on the conceptual relationships of the variables discussed in the literature review section of this dissertation.

Chapter 2: Background and Literature Review

"Please do not let someone tell you that you cannot do something. As Will Smith put it, 'if you got a dream, you gotta protect it'. When people can't do something themselves, they will tell you that you can't do it. You want something, go get it." (Priya, [Online Participant], 2018)

In this chapter, the author describes the diaspora, online communities, the variables in the study, and their conceptual relationships. In this exposition, the author highlights the connections between the variables under investigation within the research setting. The author also underscores the theoretical frameworks guiding this study. This chapter is not meant to be an exhaustive literature review; rather, it is intended to present the main body of literature, which serves as a basis for the proposed study.

Diaspora

A diaspora is an immigrant community with four central characteristics. First, a diaspora is a community of people originating from one nation but with a presence within a minimum of two nation-states outside of their homeland (Brubaker, 2005). Second, despite living away from their homeland, a diaspora maintains socioeconomic or political ties to the nation-state where they originated (Clifford, 1994; Leblang, 2010; Tsuda, 2012). Third, a diaspora has an awareness of their group's identity and may outwardly display markers of ethnicity (e.g., language, religion, and phenotype; Vertovec, 1997). Fourth, to be considered a diaspora, a community needs to have existed for at least two generations in the nation-state in which they currently reside (Ben-Rafael, 2013; Butler, 2001).

Following the definition mentioned above, many Kenyans living in the U.S. and Canada qualify to be considered a diaspora. Many Kenyans in the U.S. and Canada maintain strong economic, political, and social ties to Kenya. A recent report by a leading Kenyan newspaper, The Sunday Nation, indicated that Kenyan diaspora remittances to Kenya totaled over $2 billion, making it the highest source of Kenya's foreign exchange and an essential source of revenue for the economy (The Sunday Nation, 2019). Kenyan Diasporas remit money to assist their relatives with financial problems, to purchase assets, or invest in business ventures. Anecdotal evidence shows that some aspiring Kenyan politicians successfully solicit campaign funding from Diasporas, with the promise of representing diaspora's interests once elected into office. Also, Kenyan diasporans have, in recent years, agitated to have the right to vote in national elections via absentee ballot and have a diaspora representative in the Kenyan legislature, but that is yet to happen (Whitaker, 2011). Although this may be true, the Kenyan government has, in recent years, provided incentives for diasporans to invest in various sectors of the economy (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, 2014).

An accurate headcount of diasporans of Kenyan origin in the U.S. and Canada is currently unknown. The genesis of the Kenyan diaspora into the U.S. and Canada began in the 1960s and 1970s when young Kenyans emigrated to seek educational opportunities at colleges and universities in the U.S. and Canada (Chege, 2016). Before Kenya's independence in 1963, the Republic of Kenya was non-existent. The present-day nation-state of Kenya was part of the larger British East Africa colony. Therefore, any immigrants from the region into the U.S. before 1963 were considered British nationals or subjects. Later, many of these students originating from what is now the Republic of

Kenya were joined by their relatives. Others settled and had children, thus creating the present-day Kenyan diaspora community. Over the years, the Kenyan diaspora has grown through chain migration and family expansions in large cities such as Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Edmonton, Minneapolis, New York City, Houston, Seattle, Toronto, and Washington D.C. (Chege, 2016; Agbemenu, 2016). Other Kenyan diasporas reside throughout the globe with a large community in the United Kingdom, Australia, South Africa, and the Gulf States. With the proliferation of social media use, the diaspora identity has become more apparent because diasporans have a platform and audience to articulate on Kenyan issues.

As established, diasporas are transnational communities with a collective identity, a history of dispersal, and a degree of loyalty to their homeland (nation of heritage) (Clifford, 1994). Typically, diasporans live out their 'heritage culture' differently as compared to others from their ethnic group who reside in their homeland (Dossa, 1999). The difference in cultural expressions rests on the fact that diasporans typically make various accommodations to fit into their countries where they reside. Therefore, it is plausible to say that diasporans are more likely to be biculturalized as compared to other immigrant groups because they embody the culture of the host society while retaining some cultural practices from their heritage culture (Ben-Rafael, 2013). Nevertheless, this assertion will be tested and explored through the research questions of this study.

Online Communities on Facebook

At the time of this study, Facebook users could construct online identities using posts (audio files, pictures, texts, videos; Young, 2013). Generally, Facebook users can create posts and share them with the public or specify a select audience. Facebook posts

comprise electronic links, photos, words, videos, or a combination of any of these. Motivations for using Facebook include the desire to maintain social relationships with friends, family, and acquaintances in an online setting (Alhabash et al., 2012). Additionally, users join Facebook to organize social activities, relieve stress, and alleviate boredom, all of which could improve life satisfaction (Valenzuela et al., 2009).

Ordinarily, Facebook users have considerable control regarding whom to interact within their network of Facebook connections (Facebook friends). Nonetheless, much of the control over one's social network diminishes when a Facebook user joins a Facebook group (online community) because other group members can view their online activity within the group. Facebook groups are 'spaces' within Facebook that offer a private (or semi-private) space for users to generate discussions and share information of mutual interest. After joining a group, Facebook users can quickly and efficiently interact as well as share information with other group members (Pi et al., 2013). Within Facebook groups, other members (participants in the online community) interact through various actions such as:

- posting - publishing information like electronic links, photos, text, or videos;

- replying - reacting to or responding to others' comments, posts or shared material;

- sharing - sending posts made in the group to other Facebook users (within or outside the group);

- tagging – drawing the attention of specified online participants to a specific post, and

- viewing - browsing others' published information or profiles (Valenzuela et al., 2009).

Facebook groups bring together people with common interests such as hobbies, social activities, activism, in memoriam, and so on (Young, 2013). People join Facebook groups (online communities) to express solidarity with other users on similar issues and increase their social influence through accessing a larger audience for their posts (Park et al., 2009). Some educational institutions have used Facebook groups to increase interactions among students and improve their learning experience (Boykova, 2015; Dalsgaard, 2016; Miron & Ravid, 2015; Ranieri et al., 2012). In some instances, political or business marketing entities have extracted user data from Facebook groups to develop targeted messaging for specific demographic groups (Barnidge et al., 2017; Park et al., 2015).

Kozinets (2002) suggested that online communities which warrant in-depth study are those that have the following characteristics:

- relevant topics for the group;

- regular posts made by members;

- interactions with a significant number of participants;

- detailed or descriptively rich data, and

- more between-member communications around issues related to research questions.

Based on the above criteria, the online communities of this study were ideal research and learning environments. At the time of this study, the online communities were closed Facebook groups, i.e., one could not join the group without approval from a group administrator. Besides monitoring the recruitment of new members (to ensure they meet membership criteria), the group administrators also moderated online interactions and encouraged members to participate appropriately. The content of the posts usually ranged

from questions, musings, sharing information, and seeking clarity on various dilemmas and issues. Participants typically posted on topics such as business ideas, celebrity gossip, educational opportunities, health concerns, immigration problems, job prospects, marketing products, relationship problems, and so forth.

Online communities play a crucial role in the identity and psychological reference for diasporans. Bernal (2005) stated that "people in diaspora have experienced displacement; they cannot fully understand themselves by reference to their present location and context. They feel out of place, and to make sense of who they are, they must construct a social context for themselves that transcends their location" (p. 661). Bernal further explains that many diasporans experience a self-consciousness that could be attributed to the cultural distance between the mainstream society and their country of heritage, making their displacement not an event, but an ongoing process. Moreover, online communities by diasporans are *imagined communities* used as a vehicle by diasporans to seek social belonging and to affirm their preferred identity and frame of reference. Details on how online communities by diasporans are imagined communities are provided in Chapter 6.

Exposition of Variables in the Study

Social Isolation

By definition, social isolation is having inadequate quality and quantity of social relations with other people (Zavaleta et al., 2017). Socially isolated people have low levels of social contact, little social support, live separate from others, and feel lonely (Hawthorne, 2006). Individuals who perceive themselves as being socially isolated may report feelings of loneliness and a lack of social support from friends and family

members (Cornwell & Waite, 2009). Social isolation is a serious social problem because it is associated with adverse health outcomes, including decreased immunity, poor sleep, and reduced cognitive functioning (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009; Stranahan et al., 2006). Likewise, social isolation is linked to coronary heart disease, stroke, and can negatively impact mental health (Whaite et al., 2018). Social isolation contributes to psychological distress and substance abuse. Furthermore, social isolation has been linked to the current opioid addiction and overdose crisis in the U.S. (Eitan et al., 2017; Gaulen et al., 2017; Marchand et al., 2017; Roberson, 2017).

Social isolation could either be objective or subjective. Objective social isolation is lacking social interaction with other people, while subjective social isolation is the perception of being disconnected from one's social network (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). This study focuses on perceived social isolation, which has been linked to poor mental health outcomes (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009) and could potentially affect acculturation and empowerment. Online participation has the potential to reduce loneliness and social isolation because of increased opportunities to form relationships with a variety of people, particularly in situations where face-to-face meetings are not possible (Pimmer et al., 2017). Online communities provide opportunities for initiating friendships, enhancing collaboration, and facilitating information exchange (Garton et al., 1999; McKelvy & Chatterjee, 2016), all of which promote biculturalism, empowerment, a sense of community while reducing social isolation.

Online Participation

In this study, online participation refers to creating posts, observing posts (reading, listening, watching), and responding to posts (Boykova, 2015). Online

participation can be linked with empowerment for three reasons. First, any form of

participation encourages someone to take action towards a desired effect (Lardier, 2018).

For example, social service agencies seek to empower their clients by motivating them to

volunteer on various committees, engage in agency tasks, and complete feedback

surveys. (LeRoux, 2009). Secondly, discussions that occur in online communities have

provided previously marginalized populations opportunities to interact with others of

similar interests, seek information, and pursue common goals (Barnidge et al., 2017).

Thirdly, online platforms have been used by professionals in various sectors and

educational settings to share technical knowledge, expand their social support network,

and access information, all of which contribute to professional empowerment (Atanasova

et al., 2017; Rambe & Bere, 2013).

Online communities are empowering because they facilitate the strengthening of

relationships (Fuentes Gutierrez et al., 2017) and organizing for social action. Although

lacking a physical space, online communities do qualify as proper communities because

they were scopes in which members express themselves and live out their consciousness

(Fernback, 1999). Posts exchanged by participants in online communities can be said to

contribute to a sense of community because they elicit and elucidate a wide range of

emotions that cause solidarity, tension, relief, disagreement, antagonism, and so forth,

among community participants (Barnes, 2004).

Some studies found that online interactions encouraged people to disclose more

information about themselves as compared to similar face-to-face encounters to

compensate for the absence of nonverbal cues (Whitty & Joinson, 2009; Kendall, 1999).

This enhanced self-disclosure often led to intimate relationships because it made one

seem more trustworthy (Annisette & Lafreniere, 2017; Ellison et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2014; Papp et al., 2011). A cursory look at someone's online profile and online posts on Facebook provides a glimpse into their life history, interests, and aspirations (Jones, 1999; Kendall, 1999). Back et al., 2010 and Seidman, 2013 as cited in Azucar, Marengo, & Settanni (2018), went as far as to emphasize that information shared in online communities revealed one's character traits that were sometimes disguised in offline settings owing to social desirability bias. Thus, online communities offer a viable starting point for understanding the culture of a population because, as Chen (2014) established, people's online persona often mirrors their lived reality, and people are more likely to admit to socially undesirable behavior online than they would in face-to-face encounters.

Social Capital. In simple terms, social capital refers to the resources available to people through their social networks (Majerski, 2018; Nawyn et al., 2012). Typically, an increase in social capital and social networks decreases social isolation (Steinfield et al., 2008; Valenzuela et al., 2009). Social networks change over one's life course as relationships are formed or abandoned (Majerski, 2018). Relocation may cause someone to lose some social networks (Nawyn et al., 2012). Nevertheless, online communities help immigrants (diasporans included) to (re)build their social networking by overcoming geographic separation from one's social networks and providing channels to initiate and sustain relationships (Steinfield et al., 2008). Empirical research supports the claim that Facebook reinforces existing social ties by keeping users updated about the ongoings in the lives of members of their social networks (Valenzuela et al., 2009) therefore sustaining social capital (Ellison et al., 2007; Steinfield et al., 2008; Steinman et al., 2015).

Characteristic features of possessing social capital include having a social network with resources that an individual can access to solve everyday problems (Berry & Welsh, 2010). Online communities can be a repository of resources such as contacts and information, which are essential to building and increasing social capital (Park et al., 2012). In other words, social capital can be created and accumulated through conscious investments in social interaction with friends, acquaintances, or even strangers within online communities (Valenzuela et al., 2009). While some researchers acknowledge that online participation could foster social capital, others believe that it contributes to social isolation. Some studies have shown that online engagement leads to social disconnectedness and social isolation since most online relationships lack emotional closeness and depth (Chan, 2014; Cornwell & Waite, 2009; Sanders et al., 2000; Shensa et al., 2016). Moreover, critics of the notion that online communities are empowering argue that online participation may detract one from face-to-face interactions with others in their social network, therefore, diminishing their social capital (Ahn & Shin, 2013; Burke et al., 2010; Kendall, 1999, 2004; Primack et al., 2017; Whaite et al., 2018).

Cyberviolence. Detractors of the idea that online participation increases social capital often cite that cyberviolence is rife within online communities. Online participation increases vulnerability to cyberviolence, such as cyberbullying, online teasing, and cyber-harassment, which have negative emotional repercussions (Barnett et al., 2013). Annisette & Lafreniere (2017) found that participants who frequently engaged others in online communities were likely to have cognitive and moral shallowness because they were less likely to engage in reflective thought. The presupposed moral

shallowness increased the likelihood of online participants to engage in uncivil online behavior.

Several scholars contended that online communities enable cyberviolence through "hyper-dishonest" relationships which promoted deception and exploitation (Annisette & Lafreniere, 2017; Panek et al., 2013; Whitty & Joinson, 2009). There has also been some research on how online participation predisposes people to identity theft, phishing, cyberstalking, and cyber-harassment (Papp et al., 2011). Moreover, online participants have been targets for social engineering, i.e., psychological manipulation through reproduction and dissemination of hyperreal or falsified content (Beddows, 2008; Dadas, 2016; De & Singh, 2016; Whitty & Joinson, 2009). Evidence of psychological manipulation in online communities was brought to light when Facebook admitted that lapses in their cybersecurity systems made its users' data accessible to Cambridge Analytica, a firm has linked to social engineering that influenced electoral outcomes in Kenya, the U.S., and other countries (Solon, 2018).

Different Outcomes from Online Participation. Despite its supposed benefits, online participation does not benefit everyone in the same way. Verduyn et al. (2017) encouraged active involvement in virtual communities. Verduyn and colleagues argued that passive online participation roused social comparisons and envy while active online participation improved well-being by creating social capital and stimulating feelings of social connectedness. Demographic characteristics such as socioeconomic status, age, income, marital status, and gender generally affect the impact of participation on empowerment (Christens & Lin, 2014). Virtual ethnographers agree that most online participants tend to be middle-income or middle-class individuals (Dadas, 2016; Hine,

2008; Kleinman, 2004; LeBesco, 2004; Marres, 2017). Further, Speer et al. (2013) found

that the effect of community participation on empowerment differed across income

groups, whereby participation contributed to emotional empowerment across all income

groups but to cognitive empowerment for only low-income groups.

Sense of Community

A sense of community (SOC) is a feeling of belonging and a shared belief that

community members will meet each other's needs through their existing relationships

(Lardier, 2018). McMillan & Chavis (1986), in their seminal paper, defined SOC as a

feeling that members share of belonging and commitment to each other. The association

between participation and SOC is clear. Cicognani et al. (2008) argued that SOC was a

catalyst for community participation and social involvement, while Hughey et al. (1999)

posited that participation enhanced SOC. There is also some empirical support for the

role of SOC in increasing personal well-being and life satisfaction while reducing

loneliness, a precursor to social isolation (Hughey et al., 2008; Peterson et al., 2007;

Peterson et al., 2002).

Several studies have linked SOC with empowerment at many levels (Christens,

2012; Cicognani et al., 2008; Lardier Jr., 2018; McMahon, 2016; Miguel et al., 2015;

Peterson et al., 2014). For many minorities, having SOC is positively associated with

empowerment (Lardier et al., 2017) and is seen as mitigating against negative life

experiences (Lardier, 2018). It is precisely the feeling of connectedness (SOC) that

promotes perceptions of empowerment, particularly for low and middle-income persons

(Speer et al., 2013).

In online communities, as with any other organization, the distribution of power and opportunities are not necessarily equitable (Thai et al., 2019). McMillan & Chavis (1986) posit that the most influential members of a community are those who consistently validate other members' needs, values, and opinions, while those that tend to dominate or ignore the wishes and views of other members are usually the least influential. The generalized statement by McMillan and Chavis about the embodiment of power within communities fails to account for the systemic factors that influence community member's positionality such as race, income, education, etc. Some studies have shown that SOC is demonstrated by how members of a group distinguish themselves from nonmembers by having their own unique culture, shared language, rituals, and codes of conduct, all of which promote group cohesion (Nowell & Boyd, 2014). Other researchers found that besides seeking friendships, people generally join groups where they feel they can yield some influence (Cicognani et al., 2008; Raj, 2012). These notions of SOC indicate its paradoxical elements whereby it promotes solidarity among its group members while marginalizing others. These opposing elements of SOC are investigated in this study.

Opportunity Role Structure

Opportunity role structure (ORS) refers to the "…availability and configuration of roles within a setting, which provides meaningful opportunities for community members to develop, grow, and participate" (Maton & Salem, 1995, p. 643). In community settings, members exercise ORS by taking charge of group tasks to apply their skills and competencies (Forenza, 2016). Pi et al. (2013) posit that people prefer belonging to online communities that aligned with their values, offer equal opportunities, and treated participants fairly. Thus, ORS encourages members to undertake a variety of positions

and to remain engaged in different aspects of group functioning (Forenza, 2016; Powell et al., 2017). Studies such as Peterson et al. (2014) demonstrate how ORS was an essential contributor to empowerment. ORS promotes member participation and decision-making (Lardier, 2018), which also reinforces SOC.

Biculturalism

Biculturalism is also known as positive acculturation. By definition, acculturation is the dual process of cultural and psychological changes that occur following contact between members of two or more cultural groups (Berry, 2005). The author adopted Berry's acculturation theory to explain acculturation. Berry's acculturation model views acculturation as a bi-dimensional concept. Berry's model assumes two crucial standpoints: ethnic minorities can maintain their own cultural identities and are can also adopt the mainstream culture.

In the model, Berry explains that there are four possible acculturation processes and outcomes for immigrants (including diasporans) characterized by the degree to which one retains their cultural heritage or adopts the cultural norms of the present broader society. Accordingly, one form of acculturation is assimilation, whereby immigrants from a different culture fully embrace the cultural norms of the dominant (mainstream) culture (Cohen, 2011; Habecker, 2017). Another form of acculturation is integration (biculturalism), which occurs when immigrants adopt the dominant culture while simultaneously retain aspects of their heritage culture (Avenarius, 2012; Berry, 2005; Cohen, 2011; Wachter et al., 2015; Ward, 2008; Ward & Kus, 2012). The other form of acculturation is separation or segregation, which occurs when immigrants reject the dominant culture and opt to maintain the culture of heritage (Berry, 2005; Ward & Kus,

2012). Lastly, marginalization is the form of acculturation that occurs when immigrants reject both their heritage culture and the cultural norms of the mainstream society (Berry, 2005; Cohen, 2011; Ward & Kus, 2012). Figure 1 illustrates the four forms of acculturation from Berry's model.

	Identification with Heritage (Kenyan) Culture **HIGH**	Identification with Heritage (Kenyan) Culture **LOW**
Identification with Host (U.S.) Culture **HIGH**	*Integration (Biculturalism)*	*Assimilation*
Identification with Host (U.S.) Culture **LOW**	*Separation*	*Marginalization*

Figure 1. Acculturation outcomes as proposed by Berry's model.

Of these acculturation processes and outcomes illustrated in Figure 1, biculturalism is the most ideal because it equips immigrants with the psycho-social skills to cope with living in a new society (Berry, 1997, 2005; Cohen, 2011). Factors that influence biculturalism include (a) the age of the individual at immigration, (b) cause of migration (whether migration was voluntary or involuntary), (c) education level, (d) socioeconomic status and, (e) length of stay in the new society (Agbemenu, 2016; Simbiri et al., 2010; Wachter et al., 2015; Ward, 2008). Exhibited behaviors that provide indications of an immigrant's acculturation include language use, choice of social activities, cultural retentions, to name a few (Berry, 2010). It is generally assumed that diasporans (or other immigrant groups) with a good command of the language of the mainstream society have assimilated in that said society (Kang, 2006). However, some researchers have argued that diasporans display varying levels of acculturation depending

on whether they are occupying a public or private domain at the time in question. For example, a diasporan may exhibit levels of acculturation akin to separation in their private domain by doing such things as speaking heritage languages and eating heritage foods but display levels of acculturation resembling assimilation in public areas by speaking the dominant language and displaying mannerisms deemed as the norm by the dominant culture (Habecker, 2017).

There is broad agreement that one's ethnic identity is depicted through their dressing, food, spiritual beliefs, language use, artistic expressions, participation in social events, relationships with heritage or host communities, to name a few (Cabassa, 2003, Habecker, 2017; López & Contreras, 2005; Mana et al., 2009). Regarding cultural or ethnic identity, the author observed that among the Kenyan diaspora in the U.S. and Canada, there was a tendency to want to identify as African, Kenyan or African American depending on their perception of what constituted the privileged cultural identity in the current context. Among diasporas, cultural identity is not static (Hall, 2005). Instead, identity is a concept based on power, either explicitly or implicitly (Bourdieu, 2005; Butler, 2001; Habecker, 2017). Hence, most diasporans gravitate toward identities that hold some benefit and away from those that do not (Butler, 2001). In the author's view, the ability to navigate through host and heritage cultures in a fluid, effortless manner, as is the case with some biculturalized diasporans, could be considered an indicator of empowerment. Subsequently, biculturalism could be a manifestation of empowerment because it allows an individual to access information, social support, and other resources from both the heritage and host cultural groups. These mentioned above

are among the reasons why the author believes that biculturalism is positively correlated with empowerment.

Empowerment

Empowerment is the process through which people and groups gain greater control over their lives and exercise influence within the environments around them (Christens et al., 2013). Empowerment is the mechanism by which people and groups understand their socio-political context (Powell & Peterson, 2014) and exert influence on the issues that are important to them (Christens et al., 2013; Christens & Lin, 2014; Wahid et al., 2017). Thus, empowerment is both a process and an outcome (Miguel et al., 2015; Rodrigues et al., 2017).

Within the field of Social Work, empowerment is "a process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals can take action to improve their life situations" (Gutiérrez, 1990, p.149). Existing literature emphasizes that the features of empowerment are: having power over resources and decision-making, accountability, timely access of information, being in relationships of mutual benefit, having a sense of belonging, sense of community, social support, and opportunities for participation (Miguel et al., 2015; Cheryomukhin & Peterson, 2014; Christens et al., 2013; Christens, Peterson, et al., 2011, 2011; Eisman et al., 2016; Holden et al., 2005; Hughey et al., 2008; Maton & Salem, 1995; Speer & Peterson, 2000; Peterson et al., 2002; Rodrigues et al., 2017; Christens, 2012; Neal, 2014; Wahid et al., 2017: Amir Hossein et al., 2013; Christens, Winn, et al., 2016). Some empowerment studies have focused on the intrapersonal aspects of empowerment, i.e., looking at beliefs about one's competence, ability to exercise control, and others on the understanding of the sociopolitical environment (Bester et al.,

2015; Chew et al., 2015; Christens et al., 2016; Eisman et al., 2016; Lardier et al., 2018; Li et al., 2015; Rodrigues et al., 2017; Speer et al., 2013).

A hallmark manifestation of being empowered is the innate belief and ability to make changes to the conditions in one's immediate environment (Wahid et al., 2017). Some studies supported the assertion above by delineating the contributors to empowerment as participation, sense of community, and having meaningful roles (Gonzales, 2015; Kuokkanen et al., 2016; McMahon, 2016; Peterson et al., 2014; Silva & Langhout, 2016). In other words, being empowered is characterized by having opportunities for meaningful participation, a sense of community, and access to resources and information (Christens, 2012; Neal, 2014). Consequently, for diasporans who may have felt disempowered by being away from their 'natural' habitat, participating in online participation could provide them opportunities for social support and meaningful social roles, leading to empowerment.

It is plausible to think that diasporans who have faced challenges of 'otherness' such as racism and discrimination would choose to join and participate in online communities where they experience an 'accepting' homogeneity. Nevertheless, the idea that online participation is cardinally empowering because of facilitating access to information (Eisman et al., 2016) and decision-making (Úcar Martínez et al., 2017) is misleading. Participating in groups has the potential of introducing cultural hegemony that produces social inequities, which are generally disempowering for those at the lower rungs of power dynamics. More details on cultural hegemony are in the theoretical frameworks section.

Theoretical Frameworks in this Study

To conduct this study, the author applied various classical and contemporary theoretical perspectives in an eclectic manner. The author investigated the relationships between the constructs and their theoretical contestation in the everyday lives of Kenyan diaspora women living in North America to contribute new knowledge to social work practice, policy, and research.

Currently, there is a shortage of knowledge regarding the specific experiences of diaspora women. Past diaspora studies subordinated women's issues under the collective interests of the entire diaspora group (Dossa, 1999; Hall, 2005; Tsuda, 2012; Vertovec, 1997). Earlier research on diaspora women portrayed them as disempowered because of the misguided assumption that they lacked socio-economic resources comparable to those of non-immigrant women (Butler, 2001). But, classifying diaspora women as a disempowered lot may not be entirely accurate. For instance, Kenyan diaspora women living in North America have the potential to tap into social and economic opportunities both in North America and in Kenya, thus making them a relatively more empowered constituency than the average citizen in both regions.

Although online communities are a present-day phenomenon, their functions can be explained using classical theories of human behavior because they mirror everyday life (Guimarães, 2005). To illustrate this point, the classical theorist, Alfred Adler, posited that the striving to find a meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in a person's life (Adler, 1932). Adler further argued that every person has an innate desire to become their ideal self. In the same way, online communities support the striving to one's ideal self by providing opportunities for participants to recreate themselves (virtually)

and project their preferred identity. The classical theorist Carl Rogers rejoined that

humans thrive in an environment that provides genuine acceptance and empathy (Rogers,

1979). Likewise, African diasporans in Western regions such as Europe and North

America use social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to imagine

belonging and to represent idealized representations of themselves through expressed

iconography, ideas, and ideologies (Mainsah, 2014). By choosing to join online

communities that target a specific population, such as the ones in this study, participants

can belong to a caring and nurturing environment. Overall, online communities' relative

accessibility and pliability allow participants to (re)create identities and select the type

and intensity level of social relations, thus lending credence to Adler's and Rogers's

theories in present-day.

In this study, the author used a postcolonial paradigm to highlight the complexity,

richness of culture, and abilities of the participants. Postcolonial approaches advocate for

the rejection of oversimplifications, which produce stereotypes against people who have

experienced imperialism (Agger, 1998; Harvey, 1989; Lyon, 2005; Lyotard, 1984). A

postcolonial paradigm acknowledges that knowledge produced in and by the West is

often layered with imperialist power, which has the effect of fortifying the positions of

power and privilege of the West (Manning, 2016). The West, in this case, refers to the

Global North or developed countries. Therefore, this study conducted by the author, an

African diaspora woman, challenges Western imperialist notions which have, for a long

time, viewed immigrants from existing metanarratives of the marginalized and

subservient population (Brader et al., 2008; Foster, 1999). Other female African scholars

have engaged in similar work that emphasizes the voices of African diasporan women in

the diaspora by portraying their strength and resilience. For example, Warsame (2019) examined how the mass media perpetuates negative homogenizing of Somali diasporans by using language such as "oppressed women," "pirates," and "terrorists" in the homeland and "welfare users," "gangsters" and "drug dealers."

The author also believes that the widely held myopic view of the 'victim African woman' (of whom Kenyans are included; Manning, 2016) compelled to indignities such as female genital mutilation, forced marriages, and polygamy has been contested in recent times owing a proliferation of literary works, and increased online visibility and participation of African women. Online communities provide a platform for groups who were previously viewed through metanarratives to harness language and symbols in constructing and sharing the knowledge that represents their group. Subsequently, it is plausible to claim that online communities have accelerated the deconstruction of existing metanarratives about African diaspora women.

Because of social media, African diaspora women are more recognizable in the world arena and are influencing popular culture. In the present day, many African diaspora women advocate for postcolonial approaches when defining African Diasporas. One example of such a woman is Chimamanda Adichie, an award-winning author who, in her famous essay and TEDtalk titled "The dangers of a single story" cautions against lumping Africans as one homogenous unit but instead advocates for an acknowledgment of their complexity and diversity. In that presentation, Adichie (2009) states that "…the single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story." These words by Adichie explain how a collection of beliefs, social stories, or narratives about

Africans are pervasive and have the effect of marginalizing them. Furthermore, in her highly acclaimed novel *Americanah*, Adichie vividly described the experiences of an African immigrant woman as she navigates her new status as an African immigrant woman in the U.S. (Adichie, 2014). Although *Americanah* is a fictional piece of work, the scenes and experiences described therein resonate with many African diaspora women, including the author herself.

Another example of an African diasporan woman who has influenced the popular culture is Taiye Selasi, also an acclaimed literary author. In her essays titled "Bye Bye Babar" and "Don't Ask Where I'm From, Ask Where I am a Local," Selasi responds to the complicated question of identity for individuals with some African phenotype (origins) but cultural, political and social ties to other regions outside Africa by coining the term *Afropolitan* (Selasi, 2005, 2014)*.* Afropolitanism is embraced by many African diasporans who define themselves as Africans with two or more distinct cultures, identities, continents, social connections, languages, and levels of awareness (Durán-Almarza et al., 2017; Gehrmann, 2016; Mugo, 2015; Selasi, 2005, 2014). The notions of identity proposed by Selasi (2014) and Adichie (2014), among others, indicate the subtle but persistent shift in self-perception of African diasporas who reject the metanarratives and the generalized experiences that others seek to impose on them (Eze, 2014). Many African diasporan families (Kenyans included) are increasingly Afropolitan, i.e., multi-ethnic and multi-racial due to cultural and racial intermixing hence necessitating a postcolonial approach to grasp their everyday experiences (Ede, 2016; Eze, 2014).

Ultimately, online communities exhibit a new form of modernity, for which there is no precedence. Modernity, in this case, is demonstrated by the whole-hearted adoption

of technology for social interactions, thereby revolting against traditional modes of communication (Habermas, 1990). Online communities are not only a symbol of modernity, but they are also an embodiment of the public sphere as theorized by Jürgen Habermas. A public sphere is a place where people are allowed to speak, interact, take collective action and challenge hegemonic structures, i.e., systems that serve to privilege some while marginalizing others (Calhoun, 1992; Goode, 2005; Habermas, 1990). A recent study on the online engagement of South-Sudanese women indicated that virtual communities gave voice to the views of individuals who were not in authoritative positions, thereby reduce inequalities among participants in the virtual public sphere (Bashri, 2017; Bernal 2005). Similarly, a study of the online activities of the Nigerian diaspora indicated that virtual communities molded a public sphere from which arose a politically conscious and engaged diaspora who were outspoken against Nigeria's corruption and societal vices (Kperogi, 2019). The Republic of Burundi has had a history of animosity between two ethnic communities, the Hutu and the Tutsi, that degenerated into two recorded genocides in 1972 and 1993. Fortunately, online communities facilitate positive and fruitful interactions between Hutus and Tutsis, residing in the diaspora (Kadende-Kaiser, 2000). The bringing together of two historically rival groups to engage in productive discourse on contemporary Burundian issues are an indication that online communities are indeed a veritable public sphere.

Ordinarily, online communities are assumed to be egalitarian spaces where collective decisions are made without microaggressions (Goode, 2005). However, some critics of the Habermasian public sphere argue that such spaces are inherently elitist because they can be easily co-opted by those in authority to exert their influence on

others (Calhoun, 1992; Goode, 2005). Online communities can create social hierarchies that (re)produce power, as explained by Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2005) and Antonio Gramsci's position on cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 2005). Bourdieu claimed that cultural capital, exhibited through language use, values, tastes, and experiences, is used to distinguish people, affirm their differences, and assign them a specific cadre in society (Bourdieu, 2005). In the author's view, cultural capital is apparent in online communities when one examines the patterns of associations and relationships among members. In other words, online participants can reproduce offline power relationships by using intentionally coded language, engaging some participants, and choosing to ignore others, to name a few (Kendall, 1999).

Similarly, cultural hegemony, i.e., the ability of some people to influence the values, norms, ideas, expectations, and worldview of others (Gramsci, 2005), is present in online communities when a select few dominate the discourse. Online communities are prone to domination by influencers. By definition, influencers are members who have a broad appeal, command a large following, and can persuade others into taking action (Rouse, 2016). Many times, influencers use their clouts towards self-interest, but there have been instances where influencers have used their sway to achieve positive results. For example, Bashri (2017) found that influencers shed light on aspects of the conflict and humanitarian crisis in South Sudan were underreported by mainstream media. Therefore, cultural capital and cultural hegemony are demonstrable instruments used to create and exercise power within virtual environments.

A review of the literature indicates that there were some consistent, some divergent, and sometimes inconclusive views regarding the association between online

participation and social isolation (Sundar et al., 2011). Whitty & Joinson (2009) indicated that socially isolated people could benefit from participating in online communities if they knew how to do so effectively. For instance, online support groups provide emotional and psychological help for a wide range of problems: medical, disability, and personal distress (Boykova, 2015; Ranieri et al., 2012). However, online support groups are potentially detrimental when people become too reliant on them, and misinformation occurred (Oh, 2016).

Available research presents contrarian positions regarding the impact of online participation in addressing social isolation. Moreover, there were contradictory views on whether online communities promoted empowerment through increased social capital or disempowered members by reinforcing social hierarchies that create social inequities. These paradoxes were investigated using a mixed-methods approach to gain better insight into the relationship of the constructs within the Kenyan diaspora context.

Chapter 3: Methods

This section outlines the rationale of the study, conceptual model, study design, research questions, data collection and data analysis procedures.

Rationale of the Study

The author posited that online participation offered a pathway for Kenyan diaspora women to curb their social isolation, attain biculturalism, and increase empowerment. The basis of this presupposition is the theoretical associations of the variables delineated in their literature review of this study. While it may be true that Kenyan diaspora women living in the U.S. belong to numerous online communities, the author conducted this virtual ethnography in two separate Facebook groups. Participants, i.e., members of these online communities, were exclusively Kenyan diaspora women living in the U.S. and Canada. Participants had diverse socio-economic, educational, occupational backgrounds, and resided throughout different states and provinces in the U.S. and Canada. The administrators of the two online communities determined whether prospective and existing members met the membership eligibility, which was: having Kenyan heritage or a Kenyan spouse and residing in the U.S. or Canada. These two online communities purported to be platforms for networking and empowering its members, as was stated on their virtual welcome page of one of the groups and as was proclaimed by some online community members on an on-going basis. Since a majority of participants belonged to both online communities and discussions centered on similar topics, the online communities were studied simultaneously.

Overview of the Study Design

The author conducted this study using a convergent-parallel mixed-methods design. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected simultaneously, analyzed them separately, and the findings merged (Creswell, 2011). The aim of analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data was to gain better insight and knowledge than would be obtained by only one type of data (Teddlie, 2009). By conducting this research as a mixed-methods study, the author was able to better understand the variable relationships in the online environment. A mixed-methods design was the ideal methodology for this study as it better illustrated the relationships of the variables and uncovered new unobserved phenomena in this novel study. This convergent parallel mixed-methods study facilitated the triangulation of findings and the identification of convergence and divergence of the qualitative and quantitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Qualitative data were collected using systematic observation and semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data were collected using an online survey administered via Qualtrics software. The author developed the online survey by modifying existing validated scales that measured acculturation, empowerment, social isolation, the intensity of participation in Facebook groups, sense of community, and opportunity role structure. The online survey also included demographic questions such as participants' age range, marital status, educational attainment, employment status, average household income, and the region of residence. Although the author remained a complete participant throughout this study, she veered away from posting or reacting to controversial, highly emotive, or divisive topics to avoid upsetting or marginalizing potential participants.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study included traditional hypothesis-generating research questions for collecting quantitative data as well as exploratory questions for collecting qualitative data. The quantitative research questions were as follows:

- Did the hypothesized relationships delineated in the conceptual model fit the data derived from the study's participants?

- Was a higher level of online participation positively associated with positive acculturation (biculturalism) among participants?

- Was a higher level of online participation positively associated with higher levels of empowerment among participants?

- Did a sense of community mediate the relationship between online participation and the exercise of empowerment among participants?

- Did the opportunity role structure mediate the relationship between online participation and empowerment among participants?

- Was there a significant positive correlation between biculturalism and empowerment?

- Was there a significant negative correlation between online participation and social isolation?

In the same way, this study explored the following qualitative research questions:

- How did participants describe their motivation for online participation?

- How did participants describe the social networks within the online community?

- How did the participants describe the benefits or drawbacks of online participation?

- How did online participation influence participants' perceptions of Kenyan and North American cultures?

- How did online participation influence participants' sense of empowerment?

- How did participants describe the connections between biculturalism and empowerment, if any?

Conceptual Model

The conceptual model in Figure 2 schematically presents the hypotheses generated from the quantitative research questions. As can be seen from the model, online participation was the independent variable that predicted biculturalism and empowerment. The author hypothesized that social isolation was negatively correlated with online participation. Subsequently, social isolation was thought to have an inverse association with the dependent variables, empowerment, and biculturalism. In the model, sense of community and opportunity role structure mediated the relationship between online participation and empowerment as well as the relationship between online participation and biculturalism.

The conceptual model was informed by acculturation theories of Berry (1997, 2005 & 2010), the empowerment theories of Christens (2012), Cheryomukhin & Peterson (2014), Christens et al. (2011), among others. Online participation served as a proxy for community participation and was conceptualized following guidelines by Christens & Lin (2014) and Speer et al. (2013). The sense of community theories, as explained by Hughey et al. (2008), Peterson et al. (2008), and opportunity role structure as described

by (Powell & Peterson, 2014), undergirded the hypothesized relationships between the

constructs in this conceptual model. Figure 2 illustrates the conceptual relationships of
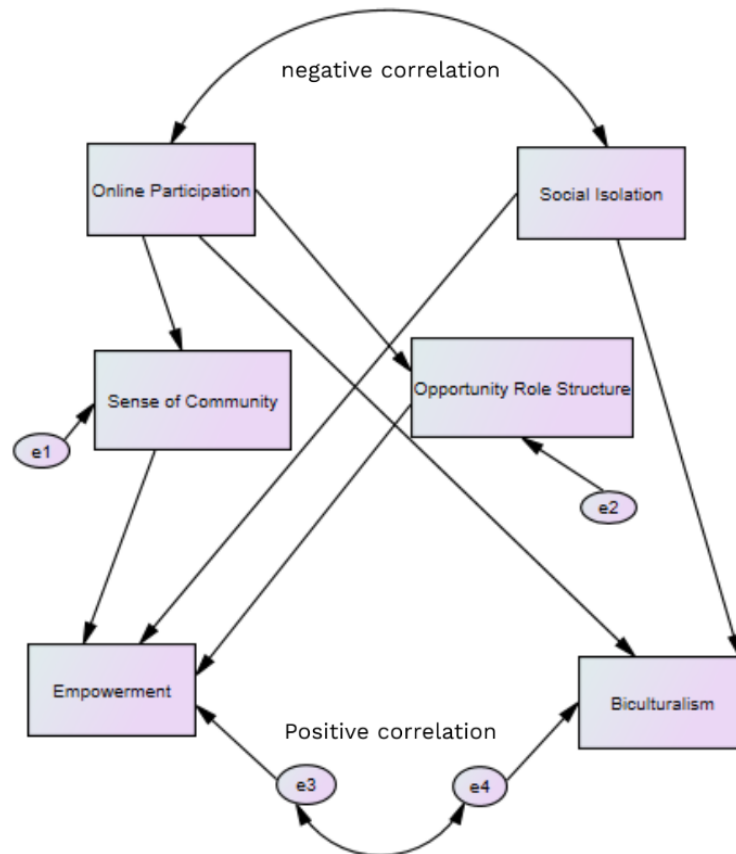
the variables.

Figure 2. The input path model (conceptual model) illustrating the hypothesized
relationships of the variables in the study.

Various Approaches for Inquiry

Reflexivity

Reflexivity involves examining the processes and contexts of knowledge

construction, paying particular attention to how the researcher affects each step of the

research process (RWJF, 2008). Reflexivity is the acknowledgment that the researcher's

aims, priorities, and experiences influence knowledge generation. The author practiced

reflexivity by describing the theoretical orientations and methodological basis of the study, and by acknowledging her membership in the online communities.

The Axiom on Reality (Ontology)

Any research undertaking aims at revealing a reality or 'truth' (Ikäheimo & Laitinen, 2011). While conducting this virtual ethnography, the author contemplated various options of measuring study variables. One approach was to use the objectivist or realist paradigm. The objectivist paradigm considers social phenomena as social facts which cannot be influenced by the author or research activities (Beuving & de Vries, 2015). One flaw of the objectivist paradigm is the awareness that the total detachment of a researcher (in this case, the author) from the participants is not possible (Ikäheimo & Laitinen, 2011; Schensul & LeCompte, 2013). Moreover, decisions made about research questions and methodology are influenced by a researcher's aims, experiences, and capability – therefore, having a genuinely objective or detached analysis in research is a fallacy (Sandelowski et al., 2006).

The author also considered using the pragmatist paradigm, which accepts social phenomena to be valid only insofar as they serve practical purposes (Goldkuhl, 2012). To explain this point further, pragmatists use Thomas Theorem's stance on social phenomena where he proclaimed, "…if men define situations as real, then they are real in their consequences…" (Thomas (1928), as cited in Merton, 1995, p. 380). Thomas' proclamation asserts that reality is anything that is claimed to be authentic by a subject, i.e., someone who experiences or perceives the phenomenon. Critics of pragmatist methodologies cite that its direction towards a single reality is challenging to ascertain in social science research.

Another option that was available for the author was the constructivism paradigm, which considers social reality as created by and dependent on social actors (Guba & Lincoln, 2000). Constructivism implies that there are multiple social realities (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Subsequently, researchers participate in co-constructing reality by having a specific focus and using certain methodologies to analyze data.

For this virtual ethnography, the author combined pragmatism and constructivism approaches. This study was pragmatic in the sense that the author used data that she deemed were useful, available, and had practical relevance to describe and explain and social realities of the online communities. The decision to conduct this virtual ethnography using a mixed-methods approach was pragmatic because the author believed it would be most appropriate in capturing multiple viewpoints, perspectives, positions, and standpoints (Schensul, & LeCompte, 2013). Using concurrent mixed methods instead of asynchronous mixed methods incorporating systematic observations, semi-structured interviews, and a construct-specific online survey was a pragmatic decision based on the availability of material resources required to conduct the virtual ethnography. Furthermore, recruiting participants using a purposeful, snowball approach in the online communities where the author had a membership and existing relationships was a pragmatic methodological decision aimed at maximizing responses. The author also used constructivist approaches to examine how social actors created meaning around the topics of research interest and how those meanings lent themselves to versions of multiple realities. Figure 3 illustrates the ontological paradigms for this study.
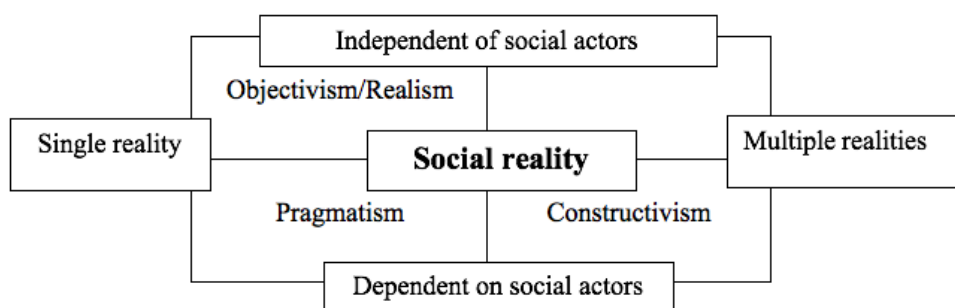
Figure 3. A representation of the ontological paradigms relevant to this study adapted from Beuving & de Vries (2014) and Ikäheimo & Laitinen (2011)

The Axiom on the Knowledge (Epistemology)

Epistemology is concerned with answering questions such as: what is knowledge, how do we acquire knowledge and, how do we measure reality? (Denzin, 1978; Lincoln, 1985). There were various possibilities of generating and measuring knowledge available to the author. The process of acquiring knowledge was a fluid, interchangeable, and overlapping process. The author used a positivist approach to test *a priori* hypotheses using quantitative data (Lincoln, 2007). The author also applied interpretive methods to qualitatively assess how participants interpreted the study constructs in their online environments. The author engaged in *verstehen*, i.e., describing phenomena from participants' perspectives (Bryman, 2016; Hammersley, 2003). Being that was a convergent parallel mixed-methods study, the author engaged in *explanation* whereby qualitative data provided additional support for quantitative data and vice-versa (Bryman, 2016). In the same vein, the data countered some existing assumptions, theories, or explanations *(falsification)* and supported some current theories *(verification*; Popper, 1959). Figure 4 illustrates the various processes of gaining knowledge about this study.
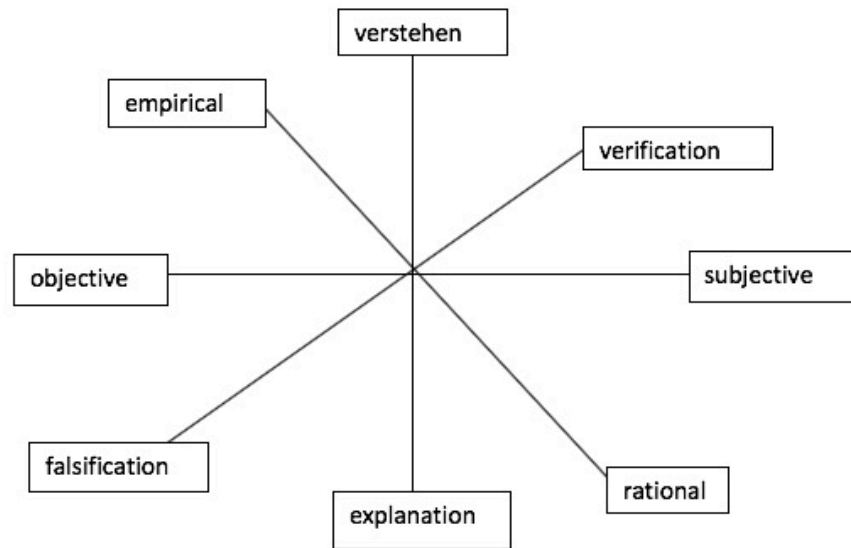
Figure 4. The various possibilities of gaining knowledge for this study (Bryman, 2016; Hammersley, 2003).

The Axiom of Values and Ethics (Axiology)

As previously stated, value-free research is non-existent because the researcher impacts the research environment and processes. Each research undertaking has explicit and implicit agendas. In this study, the author applied postcolonial frameworks to highlight the complexity and diversity of research participants. In keeping with social work values, the author strived to portray participants' experiences from a strengths-based perspective by highlighting their positive attributes instead of solely focusing on their deficits (Cox, 2001; Saleeby, 1993).

The Axiom of Generalization

The author acknowledges that in a study such as this one, only time-bound and context-bound understandings are possible (Lincoln, 2007). Therefore, this study's findings are not generalizable to another population because the online environments

were continually changing. But, the findings from this study could provide clues into the social realities of similar demographic groups interacting in virtual communities.

The Axiom of Causal Linkages

The author was well aware of the fact that in research, it is sometimes impossible to distinguish between cause and effect. All entities and constructs could influence each other simultaneously. The author worked within the conceptual frame that online participation was negatively correlated with social isolation and predicted biculturalism and empowerment. Nevertheless, the author recognized that the data analysis could reveal reciprocal, reverse, inverse, or even mutual exclusivity relationships between constructs that hitherto were not considered. Thus, the author was prepared to report any unexpected findings.

<p align="center">**Ethical Considerations in this Study**</p>

Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria for participant in this research was membership in at least one of the two online communities previously described. As previously stated, the online community administrators scrutinized prospective members' profiles to ensure that were indeed adult Kenyan women residing in the U.S. or Canada. The author also included interview data from a few adult Kenyan diasporan women in North America (n = 6) who were former members of the online communities in the study or had never joined the online communities. The author interviewed these six participants who did not belong to the online communities to gain their divergent viewpoints. This process of seeking out participants who could offer different perspectives is called discrepant case sampling.

The author was motivated to include the discrepant case sample following conversations with nonmembers of the online communities who explained that they felt that they had meaningful information to share about why they exited or chose not to join the online communities. The author purposefully recruited participants for the discrepant case sample from her diaspora networks using WhatsApp, a popular messaging and social networking platform or referrals.

To recruit the discrepant sample, the author announced the study in a WhatsApp group comprised of about one hundred and twenty Kenyan diasporans residing in the same county as the author and asked interested nonmembers of the online communities to contact her to schedule interviews. Additionally, the author asked some interviewees to recommend nonmembers of the online communities who might be willing to be interviewed. Altogether, from the discrepant sample, three participants responded to the recruitment announcement in the WhatsApp group, while three participants were referred by their friends who had participated in the interviews. Data from the discrepant cases proved the trustworthiness of the data, which strengthened theory (Hackett, 2015), as explained in chapter 5. To sum up, all participants in this study identified as adult Kenyan women residing in the U.S. or Canada, and the data included in this study were from members of the online community and the selected discrepant sample. Subsequently, all participants who did not meet the criteria mentioned above were excluded from the study.

Participant Recruitment and Informed Consent

While designing this study, the author had been a member of the online communities for three years. The author joined group A in July 2015 and group B in January 2016. During data collection, group A had over 13,000 members, and group B

had over 5,000 members. The author joined the groups as a participating member without intentions of researching the online communities. Nevertheless, in December 2017, the author realized the research potential within the communities. Since then, and before getting the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the author observed, albeit in a perfunctory way, the critical events, patterns of interaction, and discussions within the online communities. During that duration and for the months that followed, the author started developing field relationships by 'friending' other online community members, 'liking' their posts, reaching out to some prospective key informants and asking them informally about their interest in participating in the study. To the author's delight, many of those contacted expressed willingness to be research participants.

The author sought expedited review approval from the Rutgers University IRB since the study posed minimal risks to participants. After getting IRB approval for the study, the author began recruiting participants by posting a brief video in the online communities. In the recruitment video, the author outlined the research goals, provided a summary of the informed consent procedures, then invited the interested participants to complete the anonymous questionnaire or contact the author to schedule an interview. By clicking on a link, participants could access and complete the online survey either on a computer, tablet, or mobile telephone. An overview of the research goals and the informed consent information appeared first on the participants' user-end, allowing them to make an informed decision of whether or not to complete the questionnaire. Clicking on the "OK" button indicated consent to participate in the study.

After posting the recruitment video, the author posted a weekly reminder in the form of a written or video about the research in the online communities for four weeks. In

the weekly reminder, the author encouraged participants to contact the author if they were willing to be interviewed. The author recruited survey participants for four weeks following recommendations by Buchanan & Ess (2009), Krishnamurthy (2004), Peden & Flashinski 2004 and Sveningsson, (2004) who assert that numerous solicitations for survey completion over an extended period are tantamount to spamming – an ethical violation in Internet research. During this four-week duration, the author applied snowballing techniques, leveraging her acquaintances in the online communities, asking them to encourage other online participants to complete the survey or volunteer to be interviewed.

Preserving Participants' Anonymity and Confidentiality

Generally, Internet researchers agree that when conducting a virtual ethnography, it is best to be as minimally disruptive as possible by strategically seeking informed consent (Baker, 2013; Kleinman, 2004; Luka et al., 2017; Matzner & Ochs, 2017). In some instances, researchers chose not to seek informed consent with ethical justification (Baker, 2013; Hine, 2005; Jankowski & van Selm, 2005; Macgregor, 2007; Sanders, 2005). The notion of protecting the privacy and anonymity of participants that is a common thread among all Internet research (Biedermann, 2018; Bruckman, 2002a, 2002b, 2004; Ess, 2011; Guimarães, 2005; Johns et al., 2004; Kleinman, 2004; LeBesco, 2004; Postill & Pink, 2012; Sharf, 1999). Notwithstanding, algorithmic advancements make it possible for online texts to be traced back to the source (Robson, 2017). Therefore, following the recommendations by Segerstad et al. (2017), the author strived to maintain participant's anonymity through aggressive suppression of identifiers such as

generalizing and aggregating data, paraphrasing texts, and describing observed posts in a composite way (Segerstad et al., 2017).

Insider Perspective and the Waiver of Consent

The author adopted the role of a complete participant while conducting systematic observations and throughout this research process. Doing systematic observations as a complete participant was a methodological decision aimed at garnering "authentic" data while minimizing researcher reactivity (Beddows, 2008; Best, 2007; Bruckman, 2002b; Ess & Jones, 2004; Lawson, 2004; Schrum, 1995; Whitty, 2004). The author aimed at collecting qualitative data with minimum disruption to the natural online environment and a commitment to participants' viewpoints to generate an in-depth understanding of participants' lived realities (Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

Despite careful observations, there existed the possibility that participants would modify their behavior when they knew that they were under scrutiny. This phenomenon is known as the "Hawthrone Effect" (Patton, 2002). For this reason, the author obtained a waiver of consent for observations from the Rutgers University IRB, which allowed her to observe the participants unobtrusively. However, the author obtained informed consent for the online survey and the semi-structured interviews.

Previous virtual ethnographers have conducted online observations either overtly (with informed consent) or covertly (without informed consent; Miller & Slater, 2000; Parthasarathy, 2008; Sterne, 1999). In reality, some virtual ethnographers recommend covert observations (lurking) as a starting point for studying online communities (Bruckman, 2004; Guimarães, 2005; Jones, 2004; Mackay, 2005). Lurking is the practice of observing posts in online communities to understand the topics and tone of exchanges

before offering input (Sharf, 1999; Thomas, 2004). Lurking assists a researcher to better

understand the culture of the online community under investigation (Chen et al., 2005).

Moreover, lurking is considered a prerequisite for online research and typically

complements other data collection methods. Nonetheless, observation without

participation in the online communities can be considered unethical because it borders on

voyeurism, which is exploitative (Chen et al., 2005; Clegg Smith, 2004; Joinson, 2005;

Sveningsson, 2004). Also, observation without participation could lead to misinformation

because one may fail to grasp the meanings of the virtual interactions fully.

Modifications to the Research Design

The author was aware of the demands for flexibility while researching a rapidly

changing social environment, such as the online communities. After developing the

research design, the author made three significant modifications to the data collection

procedures to maximize data collection. In the first modification, the author aimed to

minimize participants' response burden by replacing longer scales with scales that were

brief and simplifying the language to suit the sample population. In the second

modification, the author changed the item-wording to include participants from Canada in

the research. The second modification also included a provision to distribute the online

survey link via text message and the WhatsApp messaging. The author changed the

wording "American" to "North American" in the survey and recruitment material

following an online conversation Facebook messenger (private messaging service by

Facebook) between author and author's high school friend, also a participant in the online

communities. The author's friend indicated that the item-wording "America" in the study

meant that participants residing in Canada were ineligible to complete the survey. The

author also received two other separate inquiries from other interested respondents asking

whether Canadians could complete the survey. Subsequently, the author requested a

study modification to change all references of America to North America and add Canada

as a region of residence in the demographic section of the survey to ensure that

participants residing in Canada explicitly understood that they were eligible respondents.

In the second modification, the author also introduced the option to disseminate the

online survey link via text message and WhatsApp after some participants complained

that they had difficulties accessing the online survey using the Facebook application. The

author observed that distributing the online survey link via text message or WhatsApp

helped to reach more participants than merely disseminating the online survey through

Facebook.

The author initiated a third IRB modification to allow her to collect interview data

from Kenyan diaspora women who were not members of the online communities

(discrepant case sampling) and extended the observation completion date from April

2019 to September 2019. The discrepant case sampling increased the author's

understanding of participants' motivations for joining or not joining online communities

and tested the plausibility of theoretical framework (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). The

extension of the duration of observations allowed the author to include the most recent

social phenomena at that time and incorporate a greater diversity of views than before.

It is important to note that there was a pause in data collection for a combined

duration of seven weeks owing to pending the IRB decisions on study modifications.

Overall, the online survey was available for completion for a total of six weeks, but the

author actively recruited participants for four weeks. A table showing the timeline of all

research activities is in Appendix D.

Challenges in Recruiting Participants

As previously mentioned, the author joined the groups as a participating member

without the intention of researching the online communities. But, after deciding to

investigate the groups, the author started developing field relationships and informally

asking prospective participants about their interest in participating in the study. At that

point, many of those who were contacted by the author expressed willingness to be

research participants.

However, while recruiting interview participants, the author noticed an odd

pattern among a segment of influencers, particularly those in group A. Some participants

gave misleading indications that they would participate after responses about the

intentions of the research. Although the author provided detailed responses to their

inquiries, many previously 'interested interviewees' either declined or chose to ignore the

author's efforts to schedule an interview. One 'interested interviewee' went as far as to

request the interview protocol as a condition for consenting to be interviewed. Even after

getting the interview protocol and responses to her numerous questions, the participant

ignored the author's correspondence about setting a time to speak. From the feigned

interest in participating in the interviews, the author got these sense that many

participants were distrustful of the research aims.

Similarly, recruiting participants for the online survey was a tenuous process. In

the early days after rolling out the survey, the uptake of responses was quite a little slow,

averaging about eight responses per day. Initially, the author had wrongly estimated that

she could reach potentially receive 300 responses within a few days. After all, some posts in the online community had generated over 500 comments or reactions within an hour! But, after having about 80 responses within the first week, the author felt discouraged and commiserated with a friend regarding the low survey response. The author's friend pointed out a crucial point; nobody enjoys filling out surveys. The author's friend also implied out that she only completed the questionnaire because she valued her friendship with the author.

Following the low uptake of the online survey, the author casually asked some interview participants to share their candid views on the research process. Almost all participants stated that they thought that this study was an essential research undertaking since many Kenyan diasporans belong to online communities. The interviewees were not surprised when the author intimated that she was experiencing a lower uptake of in survey completion and interest in being interviewed than previously anticipated. Some participants offered various statements indicating that they believed other participants were suspicious of the research aims, i.e., had little faith in the confidentiality of their interview data, were uncertain of the anonymity of the survey; thus chose not to participate rather than risk ostracization because of their responses in the survey or the interview.

In the absence of incentives or without the clout of an influencer, the author understood that she needed to leverage her contacts within the online communities to recruit more respondents using a snowball approach. Some of the authors' contacts helped to bring attention to the author's recruitment video by tagging their friends in the

online communities, asking their friends to view the video, or forwarding the recruitment video to their contacts in the online communities.

To increase the visibility of the study, the author also asked the groups' administrators to help her publicize the research by commenting on the recruitment video post. Two administrators from group B posted about the study and encouraged group members to complete the online survey. The author did not receive any assistance to publicize the research from the administrators in group A. In fact, none of group A's administrators responded to the author's posts or direct messages requesting assistance to publicize the study. The lack of cooperation or help from the administrators of group A was disheartening, mainly because the administrators yield so much influence, and in the author's opinion, their expressed support would have resulted in a prompt and high response rate.

Procedures for Data Protection

The author endeavored to protect research data and participants' identities. The online survey was anonymous, and Internet Protocol addresses were not collected. Interviewees had the option of face-to-face or telephone interview. The author stored interview transcripts and observations under pseudonyms and suppressed any identifying information. All research data were stored on a password-protected computer and in password-protected files. As outlined in the research protocol, research data will be kept for three years as per federal regulations, after which they will be destroyed by deleting from the computer hard drive. Only the researcher, academic advisor, and the Rutgers Institutional Review Board (IRB) will have access to research data.

Coercion or Undue Influence

The author offered no incentives or punishments for participation to minimize the possibility of coercion or undue influence. Research participants had the option of skipping survey questions or exiting the online survey whenever they wished to do so. Also, the author informed interviewees that they could choose not to answer any questions that they were not comfortable with or stop the interview at any time without adverse repercussions.

Sample Size Justifications for the Online Survey

Quantitative data were analyzed using path analysis, a form of structural equation modeling (SEM). Generally, SEM sample size requirements vary on a case-by-case basis. Guidelines by Jackson (2003) state that researchers should determine the sample size from the number of indicators per latent variable ($N = q$) whereby a minimum of 20 participants per latent variable is considered sufficient (Jackson, 2003). However, Wolf et al. (2013) found that models based on less than 200 respondents were unstable (Wolf et al., 2013). Therefore, the author targeted a minimum of 200 participants for the survey as this is deemed as a sufficient sample size to model relationships using structural equation modeling (SEM) techniques. Also, the author set the maximum sample size to 300 participants to allow the author to analyze data and conclude the study promptly.

Measures for Quantitative Procedures

In this study, the quantitative measure (online survey) comprised of validated scales and demographic questions. The validated scales were modified to contextualize them to this study and compiled into an anonymous online survey to measure online participation, acculturation, social isolation, sense of empowerment, and opportunity role

structure. Table 12 presents the modified validated items for each scale, their mean, standard deviations, reliability coefficients, skewness, and kurtosis. The demographic data collected were participants' age range, the region of residence, marital status, occupation, income range, employment status, citizenship status, desire to vote in Kenyan elections from the diaspora, and proclivity to seek out Kenyan news and current affairs. Table 13 presents the demographic characteristics of the sample.

Social Isolation

Social isolation is the subjective experience of a shortfall in one's social resources, such as companionship and support from significant others (Cornwell & Waite, 2009). The author hypothesized that online participation provided greater access to participants' social networks, emotional closeness, and support which mitigated social isolation. Past social isolation measures evoked response resistance or denial because of their length and negative tone (Hawthorne, 2006). Consequently, the author adapted Cornwell & Waite's (2009) validated scale of subjective or perceived isolation (Cronbach α =.70) to measure social isolation.

The author extracted and revised the social support and loneliness subscales to make up the modified social isolation scale that queried about perceptions of the supportiveness, closeness, adequacy, and companionship provided by one's social relationships. The author revised the wordings of these subscales to ascertain they were contextualized to this study and had an external referent, i.e., measured how participants' online participation influenced their desire for emotional closeness and social connectedness with the significant others in their everyday lives.

Subsequently, the modified social isolation scale comprised of five items. Of these, four questions were obtained from the social support subscale, and one question was derived from the loneliness subscale. The social support subscale used a five-point Likert response format ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree* while the loneliness subscale used a five-point Likert response format ranging from 1 = *never* to 5 = *always.* Altogether, the modified social isolation score was computed as a mean of all items, and a high score of 5 indicated a high level of social isolation while lower scores indicated lower social isolation. Table 1 displays the modified social isolation scale, the response options, and the corresponding ratings for each item.

Table 1

The Modified Social Isolation Scale

Item wording	Response options and the corresponding scores
Since joining [this online community], I am more open to discussing issues with my family	Strongly Agree = 5; Somewhat Agree = 4; Neutral = 3; Somewhat Disagree = 2; Strongly Disagree = 1.
*Since joining [this online community], I am more open to discussing issues with my friends	Strongly Agree = 5; Somewhat Agree = 4; Neutral = 3; Somewhat Disagree = 2; Strongly Disagree = 1.
*Since joining [this online community], I rely on my family for emotional support	Strongly Agree = 5; Somewhat Agree = 4; Neutral = 3; Somewhat Disagree = 2; Strongly Disagree = 1.
*Since joining [this online community], I rely on my friends for emotional support	Strongly Agree=5; Somewhat Agree=4; Neutral=3; Somewhat Disagree=2; Strongly Disagree=1.
I joined [online community] because I feel that I lack companionship from my family and friends	Always = 5, very often = 4, sometimes = 3, rarely= 2, never = 1

Note. * denotes that the response options for this item were inverted in the survey to minimize acquiescence bias

Online Participation

In this study, online participation, i.e., engagement in online communities was measured using the Intensity of Facebook Groups scale adapted from a survey by Valenzuela et al. 2009; Cronbach's α = .82, M = .19, SD = .14) because it was brief and showed excellent reliability. Ellison et al. (2007) investigated how much time people spent on a social networking site and found that, on average, people spent about 3 hours a day in online communities. Olufadi (2016) found that categorical measures of time elicited social desirability bias because respondents were unlikely to pick an extreme category but usually picked a response that would make them appear normal or average.

Based on the above, the author modified the item asking about time spent on online communities by replacing the categorical response option with ordinal response options and placing the 3-hour response option at an approximate midpoint section in the response options. Nonetheless, participants generally underreport the duration of time they spend in online communities, mainly when they have accessed online communities on multiple devices such as mobile telephones, computers, and tablets (Olufadi, 2016). Therefore, it is likely that the reported time spent online was not entirely accurate. Scores of each item in this scale were computed on a scale of 1 to 5. A score of 1 represented a low intensity or engagement, and a score of 5 represented a high intensity or engagement in the Facebook group (online community). Table 2 displays the modified Intensity of Facebook Groups Scale, the item wording, response options, and the corresponding scores for each item.

Table 2

The Modified Intensity of Facebook Groups Scale

Item	Response options and corresponding scores
On a typical day, about how much time do you spend reading and posting (combined) messages on the profiles of [the online community]?	• 1 hour or less =1 • 2 hours = 2 • 3 hours = 3 • 4 hours = 4 • 5–6 hours = 5 • more than 6 hours = 5
In the past week, how often have reacted or responded to a post on [the online community]?	• Never = 1 • Once a week = 2 • 2-3 times a week = 3 • 4-6 times a week = 4 • Daily = 5
In the past week, how often have you started new discussion topics on [the online community]?	• Never = 1 • Once a week =2 • 2-3 times a week = 3 • 4-6 times a week = 4 • Daily = 5
Which one of the following best describes your participation on [the online community]?	• rarely logs on [the online community] = 1 • views posts on [the online community] = 2 • mostly views posts and sometimes posts on [the online community] = 3 • usually views posts and typically posts on [the online community] = 4 • views, posts and starts new discussions on [the online community] = 4

Sense of Community

Many studies have shown a strong link between sense of community (SOC) and

empowerment (Hughey et al., 2008; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Nowell & Boyd, 2014;

Peterson et al., 2008; Speer et al., 2013). In this study, SOC was measured using a

modified version of the Brief Sense of Community Scale (BSCS), which was previously

validated by Peterson et al. (2007; Cronbach's α = .92)**.** The author selected the BSCS

measure because it is brief, parsimonious, and measures multiple dimensions of SOC.

The BSCS scale is comprised of eight positively worded items assessing four dimensions:

needs fulfillment, group membership, influence, and emotional connectedness. The

author modified the BSCS by selecting only four questions, two of which measured the

perception of group membership and the other two measured emotional connection to the

group. The author also modified the scale by replacing the wording "neighborhood" with

the "online community" to make the scale relevant to this study.

The modified BSCS had an internal referent and probed on participants'

perceptions of various aspects of the online communities in the study. Like the original

BSCS, the modified version used a five-point Likert response format ranging from 1

= *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. The BSCS score of participants was calculated

by averaging scores on the scale. A high score, i.e., a score of 5, was indicative of a high

perception of SOC while a lower score pointed to a lower discernment of SOC. Table 3

shows the modified BSCS, the response options, and the corresponding ratings for each

item.

Table 3

The Modified Brief Sense of Community Scale

Item wording	Response options and the corresponding scores
I feel like a member of [online community]	Strongly Agree = 5; Somewhat Agree = 4; Neutral = 3; Somewhat Disagree = 2; Strongly Disagree = 1.

I belong in [online community]	Strongly Agree = 5; Somewhat Agree = 4; Neutral = 3; Somewhat Disagree = 2; Strongly Disagree = 1.
I feel connected to [online community]	Strongly Agree = 5; Somewhat Agree = 4; Neutral = 3; Somewhat Disagree = 2; Strongly Disagree = 1.
I have a good bond with others in [online community]	Strongly Agree = 5; Somewhat Agree = 4; Neutral = 3; Somewhat Disagree = 2; Strongly Disagree = 1.

Opportunity Role Structure

Opportunity role structure (ORS) is a construct that is related to empowerment (Peterson et al., 2014). ORS measures at the extent to which an organization or community provides opportunities for its members to use their skills and resources to develop their aptitudes and participate meaningfully (Forenza, 2016; Maton & Salem, 1995; Powell et al., 2017). The author adapted the ORS scale from a study by Powell & Peterson (2014; Cronbach's α =.88), which examined the extent to which community members felt encouraged to assume a variety of formal positions or roles within the community and exercise control or leadership over various aspects of group functioning. The ORS scale had three items and used a five-point Likert response format with response options ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. The ORS score was computed as a mean of all items, and a high score of 5 indicated a high level of ORS, while lower scores indicated lower levels of ORS (Powell & Peterson, 2014).

The author modified the ORS score by changing the wording to contextualize it to the study. Further, the author modified the text to give it an internal referent consisting of

three items measuring participants' perceptions about the availability of opportunities for

online community members to use their talents within the online community. Table 4

shows the modified ORS scale, the response options, and the corresponding scores for

each item.

Table 4

The Modified Opportunity Role Structure Scale

Item wording	Response options and the corresponding scores
*[This online community] uses the talents of different people to accomplish tasks.	Strongly Agree = 5; Somewhat Agree = 4; Neutral = 3; Somewhat Disagree = 2; Strongly Disagree = 1.
*If a member desires, she can take on responsibility for some tasks within [this online community].	Strongly Agree = 5; Somewhat Agree = 4; Neutral = 3; Somewhat Disagree = 2; Strongly Disagree = 1.
*Positions of responsibility are spread among [online community] members	Strongly Agree = 5; Somewhat Agree = 4; Neutral = 3; Somewhat Disagree = 2; Strongly Disagree = 1.

Note. * denotes that the response options for this item were inverted in the survey to
minimize acquiescence bias

Biculturalism

As previously stated, biculturalism (integration) is considered the ideal form of

acculturation. A biculturalized person assumes fluidity in identity, moving from the

cultural identity of ones' heritage to that of the mainstream society (Cohen, 2011; Mana

et al., 2009; Ward, 2008; Ward & Kus, 2012). Measures of biculturalism often comprise

scales that use proficiency, frequency or endorsement types of questions to probe on

cultural facets such as attitudes toward ethnic and mainstream cultures, affiliation with

cultural groups, preferences concerning food, music, activities, and media, cultural

practices or activities, language use, and proficiency. Several researchers have developed

measures of biculturalism, such as Birman et al. (2002), Félix-Ortiz et al. (1994), Ward & Rana-Deuba (1999), to name a few. However, some of these acculturation scales have proven problematic because they elicit systematic errors, as will be explained shortly.

A systematic review comparing acculturation scales by Kang (2006) found that scales which use frequency-format questions did not show the orthogonality because of the conceptual dependence of their items whereby a positive response signaled the negation of the other. For example, when inquiring about language use among a population of Chinese Americans, a scale that uses the frequency-format framed a question as: "how much do you speak English" or "how much do you speak Chinese?" A frequency-format scale such as this one requires responses on a predetermined scale ranging from *not at all* to *very much.* The answers to these questions mentioned above cannot be independent of each other because the time spent speaking one language is the inverse of the time spent speaking another language (Kang, 2006). Frequency-format questions are also problematic because they assume that a specific event or action has taken place and could thus prime a respondent to a response bias. Schaeffer and Presser (2003) and Schwarz and Oyserman (2001) also found that frequency-format measures elicited socially desirable bias.

Conversely, scales that utilize the endorsement-format questions demonstrate that one behavior is independent of the others resulting in orthogonality, an indicator of construct validity. An example of an endorsement format item could be a probe for cultural practices such as "*at home, I speak English*" or "*I celebrate Chinese holidays,*" which would then require a response rated on a scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* (Kang, 2006).

Previous studies indicated that language use is often an indicator of acculturation (Brunton & Jeffrey, 2014; Cabassa, 2003; Cila & Lalonde, 2015; Li & Tsai, 2015; López & Contreras, 2005; Mana et al., 2009; Reid et al., 2009; Schwartz et al., 2010; Zea et al., 2003). However, Kang (2006) found that there were other acculturation markers worth examining besides language use. In this study, many of the participants in this study were proficient in English. Thus, language proficiency was not an essential determinant of acculturation in this study. Nevertheless, the author measured participants' attitudes towards the use of the English language as a proxy of measuring affinity towards their heritage or host culture.

Following the arguments above, the author adapted the Non-Dominant Group Version of the Acculturation Attitudes and Expectations Scale (AAES) by Berry (2010). This 16-item scale examines four domains of cultural experience and identity in everyday life, including the use of cultural adaptations/retentions, language, social activities, and choice of friends. The AAES uses statement questions that have relatively less response bias (Fowler, 1995) and conceptual independence. Generally, statement questions are considered to be judgment-free when compared to items that begin with interrogative pronouns or adverbs such as "how, when, who, why, etc." which prime participants to make tacit assumptions about researcher expectations leading to social desirability bias. Additionally, the AAES used endorsement-response format, which, as previously explained, produce relatively fewer measurement errors as compared to frequency-format questions. The author extrapolated the AAES from the Mutual Intercultural Relations in Plural Societies (MIRIPS) questionnaire (Berry, 2010). In Berry's study, AAES was comprised of four subscales, Integration, Separation or Segregation, Assimilation, and

Marginalization. Each sub-scale had four items, were scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1= *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree.* In a previous study by Schmitz & Berry (2011), AAES showed good reliability within individual subscales: Integration Cronbach's α =.70); Assimilation (Cronbach's α =.78); Separation (Cronbach's α =.72) and Marginalization Cronbach's α =.62.

In the original AAES scale, the assimilation score was the average of responses from the items indicating affinity towards mainstream culture at the exclusion of the heritage culture, e.g., "I feel that [ethnic group] should adopt the [national] cultural traditions and not maintain those of our own." The marginalization score was the average of responses from items indicating an aversion to both heritage and mainstream cultures, e.g., "I feel that it is not important for [ethnic group] either to maintain their cultural traditions or to adopt those of [national]." The integration score was the average of responses from items indicating a desire to incorporate both heritage and mainstream cultures, e.g., "It is important to me to be fluent in both [national language] and in [ethnic language]]." The separation score was the average of responses from items indicating an affinity for heritage culture at the exclusion of mainstream culture, e.g., "I prefer social activities which involve [ethnic group] members only."

In this study, the author modified AAES to measure whether there were changes to acculturation attitudes and expectations following their participation in the online communities. The author changed the response format by offering the forms of acculturation (assimilation, integration, marginalization, and integration) as the response options, thereby effectively shortening the 16-item scale to a four-item scale. Just like the original AAES, this modified version tested respondents on four domains of cultural

experience and identity in everyday life, including the use of cultural adaptations or

retentions, social activities and, the choice of friends. The modified AAES had an

external referent as it sought to measure participants' attitudes and behaviors in everyday

life that were attributed to their online participation. In this modified AAES, the scoring

of each item was as follows: *biculturalism* (*integration)* was the scored the highest, i.e., 5

followed by *assimilation,* which was scored as 4, then *separation*, which was scored as

3. *Marginalization* was tallied as two, and *none of the above* was scored as 1. An average

score of 5 was indicative of biculturalism or integration. Table 5 presents the modified

AAES, response options, and the corresponding scores for each item.

Table 5

The Modified Acculturation Attitudes and Expectations Scale

Item	Response options and corresponding scores
* Since joining [this online community], I feel that it is important to	- be fluent in both American-English and in Kenyan Languages such as Kiswahili = 5 - be fluent only in American English = 4 - be fluent only in Kenyan languages such as Kiswahili = 3 - NOT be fluent in either American-English or Kenyan Languages such as Kiswahili = 2 - none of the above = 1
Since joining [this online community], I prefer to participate in social activities that involve	- both Americans and Kenyans = 5 - only Americans = 4 - Only Kenyans = 3 - NEITHER Americans nor Kenyans = 2 - none of the above = 1
Since joining [this online community], I prefer to	adapt American cultures and retain Kenyan traditions = 5

- only adapt and practice American traditions = 4

- only retain and practice Kenyan traditions = 3

- NOT adopt American traditions or retain Kenyan traditions = 2

- none of the above = 1

Since joining [this online community], I prefer to spend time with	- both American and Kenyan friends = 5
	- only American friends = 4
	- Only Kenyan friends = 2
	- NEITHER American nor Kenyan friends = 1
	- none of the above = 1

Note. * denotes that the response options for this item were inverted in the survey to minimize acquiescence bias

Empowerment

Although there were many validated measures of empowerment, this study utilized the empowerment scale as developed by Holden et al. (2005). The author selected this scale because it measured attributes of empowerment that were relevant to online participation. This scale measured such aspects as the perceived ability to participate in and contribute to the operations of the group or organization, the awareness of the existence of and channels for acquiring resources to support goals, and the ability to express one's opinions without violating the personal rights of others. Importantly, the author opted to use this scale because of its external referent. The original scale measured the extent to which participants' action or attitudes influenced their perception of empowerment.

The modified empowerment scale probed respondents' perceptions of empowerment in their everyday life resulting from participating in online communities. In effect, the author wanted to know how online participation influenced participants' perceptions of empowerment in their offline everyday life. Responses were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. Participants' empowerment score was the mean score of all items. A high score signaled a higher perception of empowerment, and lower scores indicated lower feelings of empowerment. Table 6 presents the modified empowerment scale, the response options, and the corresponding ratings for each item.

Table 6

The Modified Empowerment Scale

Item wording	Response options and the corresponding scores
Since joining [this online community], I feel confident that I can convince people around me to join a cause that I care about.	Strongly Agree = 5; Somewhat Agree = 4; Neutral = 3; Somewhat Disagree = 2; Strongly Disagree = 1.
Since joining [this online community], I enjoy participating in my community because I want to have as much say in what goes on.	Strongly Agree = 5; Somewhat Agree = 4; Neutral = 3; Somewhat Disagree = 2; Strongly Disagree = 1.
Since joining [this online community], I feel more confident working with people in my community to get things done.	Strongly Agree = 5; Somewhat Agree = 4; Neutral = 3; Somewhat Disagree = 2; Strongly Disagree = 1.
Since joining [this online community], I feel I can influence the decisions in my community.	Strongly Agree = 5; Somewhat Agree = 4; Neutral = 3; Somewhat Disagree = 2; Strongly Disagree = 1.
Since joining [this online community], am more knowledgeable about the resources that I have available in my community to assist me in solving problems.	Strongly Agree = 5; Somewhat Agree = 4; Neutral = 3; Somewhat Disagree = 2; Strongly Disagree = 1.

Quantitative Data Analysis

The author used, IBM SPSS AMOS 24 software to perform the path analysis and IBM SPSS Statistics 24 software to conduct descriptive statistics. Path analysis is a causal modeling technique that uses a path diagram to provide statistical output for the theorized relationships and variations among variables (Byrne, 2016). Path analysis was useful in theory testing because it produced a model that illustrated the causal pathways through which the independent variables produced direct and indirect effects on dependent variables while simultaneously factoring in measurement error (Crossman, 2019). The path analysis tested the input model (conceptual model) to ascertain the hypothesized variable relationships. The author assessed the fit of the model to the data using some of the widely accepted and robust measures of fit. These include the Chi-square, the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Normal Fit Index (NFI), the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), and the Root Mean Square of Error Approximation (RMSEA; Byrne, 2016). To determine whether the hypothesized conceptual model was an excellent fit to the data and to provide further evidence for structural validity of our modified scale, the author adopted Hu & Bentler's (1999) widely-adopted criteria for fit indices including RMSEA <.06, CFI > .95, NFI >.95 and Tucker TLI > .95.

Overview of Qualitative Data Collection Procedures

Presently, there are no set guidelines for conducting a virtual ethnography. The online field research required to produce the virtual ethnography includes a wide range of tasks, working within overlapping perspectives, paradigms, techniques, and applying a degree of interpretivism (Denzin, 2005). The online communities in this study had high traffic, i.e., numerous between-member interactions, thereby a lot of data for analysis, making it is impractical to collect and analyze all the existing data in the online

community. Subsequently, the author considered approaches that combined various strategies used by previous researchers who conducted virtual ethnographies. These included Kleinman (2004), who asserted that systematic observation with stepwise thematic coding (manifest context, categorizing, and latent) supported by key informant feedback creates a credible virtual ethnography with construct validity. Pigozzi (2017) concurred, arguing that a systematic observation, multiple participant interviews, repeated rounds of qualitative coding with thematic analysis are legitimate approaches to producing a virtual ethnography. Since online environments tend to have a lot of data, LeBesco (2004) advised a virtual ethnographer to establish a set of criteria at the onset to determine which information paths to follow as the research unfolds. However, LeBesco cautioned that the set standards should be malleable to allow one to pursue interesting angles that might not have occurred at the onset of the study.

The author also considered strategies proffered by Postill and Pink (2012) and built upon by Mare (2017). Both researchers viewed the offline and online lives of virtual community participants as intrinsically connected. Mare (2017) conducted a virtual ethnography using traditional participant observation of classical anthropologists and algorithmically 'occurring' data to generate rich information about the everyday lives of the participants. Mare proposed a seven-stage criterion for conducting virtual ethnography on Facebook. The stages include background listening, friending or liking, interacting, observing, catching up, exploring, and archiving.

For this study, the author adopted some of the steps proposed by past virtual ethnographers in a modified manner. For example, the author engaged participants by 'friending' and 'liking' their posts to initiate and sustain online relationships. Friending

involved requesting access to a participants' Facebook profile and network while liking

involved responding positively to participants' posts using the 'like' button and positive

emojis to elicit some modicum of trust and likeability (Mare, 2017). The author believes

that the trust generated through author's online interactions (friending and liking) with

some participants made them amenable to being interviewed. The author also established

flexible criteria of the data to observed as per LeBesco's (2004) recommendation and

used Kleinman's (2004) systematic observation guidelines as will be explained in the

subsequent segment.

<div align="center">**Qualitative Data Collection Approaches**</div>

Planning the Systematic Observations

It was impossible to observe all events and participants in highly interactive online

communities, such as the two groups in this study. Having an information overload is a

challenge for conducting a virtual ethnography necessitating the collection and analysis

of data that is related to the research question (Kozinets, 2002). Fortunately, online

communities on Facebook have a filter feature that allows one to search for, bookmark,

and archive posts using keywords and phrases. The author selected and bookmarked

posts to be analyzed using keywords such as: 'empowerment,' 'acculturation,' and 'social

isolation' and other words related to these three keywords, as done by Postill & Pink

(2012). To facilitate archiving, the author created an index of words and phrases (see

Table 7) related to the keywords mentioned above. The author developed the index after

seeking the input of 15 of her acquaintances who are Kenyan diaspora women by asking

them to respond to three questions via text message:

- What words/phrases come to mind when you think of acculturation?

- What words/phrases come to mind when you think of empowerment?

- What words/phrases come to mind when you think of social isolation?

Afterward, the author used the index mentioned above to filter and archive posts to be analyzed. The author archived data from January 2016 to September 2019 containing the keywords in the index. The author opted to observe data beginning from January 2016 because that was when she became a member of both online groups. The author arbitrarily chose to end data collection in September 2019 to allow for analysis to be completed by November 2019. Finally, the archived observations were examined using discourse analysis to identify socially contextualized connections, patterns, and themes (Mare, 2017). Table 7 presents the index of words and phrases related to study variables.

Table 7

An Index of Words and Phrases Related to the Variables of the Study

Key word	Related terms
Acculturation	Biculturalism, integration, assimilation, becoming American, participation, thriving, take in fully a different culture
Empowerment	getting skills, enabling, helping, opportunity, education, growth, achievements, recognition, self-actualization, encouraging someone, controlling one's decisions, having control, being in control, having dominance
Social isolation	loneliness, lacking support, depression, disconnection, disconnection, weird, delusional, lacking contact with people, being dissociated from society

Conducting Systematic Observations

Every week, the author spent 32 hours, rotating daytime and nighttime hours for ten weeks, archiving posts for examination, writing field notes, and analytic memos. While conducting observations, the author identified participants whose posts are related

to the variables of interest to this virtual ethnography and invited them to participate in

the interviews. Also, the author trained her memory to observe things that would need to

be recalled, described, and then analyzed. The author understood that for observations to

be meaningful, it was vital to approach the data with a degree of astonishment and

naivety (Hammersley, 2007; Kawulich, 2005). To this end, the author avoided

inattentional blindness (Drew et al., 2013) by treating the observations if they are new

even though she had seen them before. Fending off inattentional blindness required the

author to mentally navigate between various degrees of attachment (participation) and

detachment (observation) at different times as recommended by Gold (1958) and Junker

(1960) and illustrated schematically in Figure 5. In other words, the author employed

analytic imagination and abduction to try and provide explanations of observed

phenomena from both the "insider" and "outsider" perspectives, while weaving

connections and highlight divergent points.
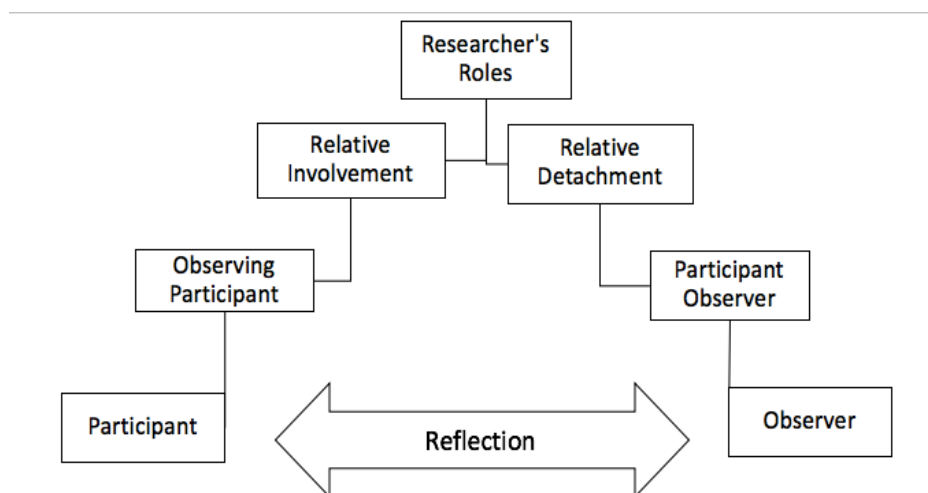
Figure 5: The varying degrees of participation and observation applied while collecting and analyzing data (Gold 1968; Junker, 1960).

Analyzing Systematic Observations using Discourse Analysis

The author converted all archived posts into a text to facilitate analysis, i.e., all worded archived posts were assembled, and the selected videos were transcribed. While aggregating the texts, the author removed or changed identifying information to ensure participants remained anonymous to readers who are non-members of the online communities.

Next, the author analyzed the text line-by-line coding using NVivo 12 software. The author opted to utilize line-by-line coding because past researchers have found the technique useful for investigating under-researched phenomena while also controlling for researcher assumptions (Drukiwow, 2019).

Lastly, the author used discourse analysis to organize and interpret data from systematic observations. Discourse analysis is an approach of analyzing language use beyond the obvious meaning of words and sentences to portray how they affect or are perceived in a social context (Salkind, 2010). Discourse analysis revealed the layered contextual implications of participants' interactions and subsequent shifts in social relations in online communities (Crang, 2001). In essence, discourse analysis revealed meanings that sometimes escaped the awareness of the participants themselves (Walstrom, 2004). Also, the discourse analysis highlighted participants' daily experiences and how the virtual interactions (re)created social order (Silverman, 2006).

Conducting Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews formed an integral data source for the virtual ethnography (Murthy, 2008). The author selected initial interviewees from a purposeful sample, who were willing to participate. To maximize recruitment opportunities, the author employed

snowballing by asking interviewees for assistance with recruiting other participants for interviews. The author anticipated that some participants would be apprehensive about the research aims and the confidentiality of the discussions. To that end, the author chose not to record the conversations to improve the perception of privacy and to encourage the participants to share more information.

The author sought informed consent from each interview participant. All participants were assigned a pseudonym to keep their identity private. The duration of the interviews was set for one hour to three hours. The interviews were either face-to-face, over telephone or video call at a location, date, and time of participant's choosing. During each interview, the author jotted down notes and paraphrased quotes that are related to the constructs of interest in this study.

The author conducted all interviews at a time and place that was convenient for participants. The author made various accommodations in her schedule to conduct the interviews. These accommodations included staying up late, waking up early, and reorganizing personal schedule to interview participants living in different time zones and varying schedules. The author interviewed two participants (on the phone) as they were driving to work as that was the only time that they could be available for the interviews. One participant was only available to be interviewed while at her son's soccer practice. Therefore, during that interview, there were brief moments of interruptions caused by cheering on the players. The interviews were conducted in English, as all participants were proficient in the English language. The author read aloud he informed consent and obtained verbal consent before starting the interviews. The author generated interview

transcripts by typing up notes during the interviews and promptly after each interview to fill in any missing details.

While conducting interviews, the author noted participants' convergent and divergent views regarding the relationships between the constructs in the study. The author recruited participants using a snowball approach until attaining data saturation. To ascertain whether data saturation, the author followed the recommendations set by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Glaser and Strauss asserted that "the criterion for judging when to stop sampling the different groups pertinent to a category is the category's theoretical saturation. Saturation means that no additional data were being found whereby the sociologist can develop properties of the category" (p.61). Put differently, the author reached data saturation after getting data from participants that fill all the theoretical categories shown in Table 8, and no new data were obtained from subsequent participants.

Table 8

Categories of the Attitudinal Characteristics of Interview Participants.

	High Participation (Active participants)	Low Participation (Marginal participants)
Participation reduces isolation		
Participation increases isolation		
Biculturalism and Empowerment correlated		
Biculturalism and Empowerment not correlated		

Note. Participation = Online Participation.

Throughout the study, the author contacted 99 participants asking them to participate in an interview. Most of those invited to participate in the interviews did not respond after three or four attempts. In total, the author conducted 39 interviews. The author believed that she attained saturation after conducting 39 interviews because she had interviewed participants from all the theoretical categories of the study. Further, the author did not gain any new information after speaking with at least three participants from each group. Table 9 displays the theoretical categories and pseudonyms of participants in the corresponding groups after completing the interviews.

Table 9

Pseudonyms of Participants and Theoretical Categories

	High Participation (Active participants)	Low Participation (Marginal participants)
Participation reduces isolation	Audrey Gabriella Grace Njeri Waithera	Druscilla Neema Nellie Tina
Participation increases isolation	Jemima Olivia Oriole Wendy	Crystal Kimberly Rosa Salome
Biculturalism and Empowerment correlated	Audrey Brianna Charlotte Jessica Kelly Njeri	Charlotte Maria Nellie Racquel
Biculturalism and Empowerment not correlated	Antoinette Janica Leila Michaela Oriole Wendy	Christine Jewel Rosa Salome

Note. The author sampled interview participants fitting each category until data saturation was attained.

Of those interviewed, nine belonged solely to group A, six exclusively belonged to group B, 18 belonged to both group A and group B, and six, the discrepant sample, did not belong to either group A or B. The duration of the interviews ranged between 10 minutes and 75 minutes, therefore averaging at about 35 minutes for each interview. The author conducted five interviews in-person and 34 interviews over the telephone. Of the interview participants, 15 were the author's Facebook friends and formed the initial pool of interviewees. Fifteen participants were recruited through a snowball technique by initial the interviewees, and nine participants responded to the recruitment post in the online communities despite having no prior relationship with the author.

Analyzing Interviews using Thematic Analysis

Interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, the process of identifying mutually exclusive patterns or themes within qualitative data to uncover meanings that are bound in a specific social context (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The author conducted a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts that was both deductive and inductive. The author was primarily concerned with addressing specific deductive research questions and related concepts but also drew on an inductive analysis of emergent themes.

The author used the Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for doing a deductive thematic analysis of interview transcripts, as explained in Maguire & Delahunt (2017). The first step of the six-phase structure was to become familiar with the data. The author familiarized herself with the data by reading interview transcripts and field notes of early impressions. The second step was to generate initial codes to organize data in a

meaningful and systematic way. The author developed an initial codebook with themes of acculturation, empowerment, and social isolation because these were the predictor and outcome variables of the study. In addition to using a deductive thematic analysis approach, the author kept an open mind and practiced flexibility to report unexpected findings or any other themes that did not fit the previously established categories.

As the author collected data and analyzed data, more themes emerged, which she promptly added to the codebook. At that point, any data that did not fit into the established codes were also categorized. The third step was searching for patterns that capture something significant about the data or research questions. The fourth step was reviewing the themes to see if the data supported the mutual exclusivity of the ideas, i.e., to ascertain that topics did not overlap. The fifth step was defining the themes and subthemes, verifying their relationship with each other. The sixth and final step was compiling the write-up of the analysis (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The author used NVivo 12 software to organize the themes and subthemes for conciseness and parsimony.

Often, there is a conflation between content analysis and thematic analysis because they are both commonly used in analyzing text and similar types of data. Content analysis involves measuring the frequency of different categories with the aim of reporting of common issues mentioned in data (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). On the other hand, thematic analysis involves the search for and identification of common threads that extend across the data by providing a detailed account of the data (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Since online interactions are often nuanced, the stand-alone text as a unit of analysis, as used in the content analysis, was deficient in conveying meaning. In other

words, a content analysis was inadequate to uncover the depths of meaning in virtual

interactions (Kendall, 1999, 2004).

Field Notes

The systematic observations and interviews generated field notes. The field notes

were a detailed record of observations, interviews, the significance of events, and a

description of the social context (Bailey, 2018; Patton, 2002). Included in the field notes

were the author's reactions to observed phenomena and personal reflections about the

significance of the observations and interviews. The field notes served as an evolving

data repository for interpretations and working hypotheses about events and their

relevance (Shkedi & Harel, 2004).

The author used recommendations by Schensul & LeCompte (2013) to organize

and consolidate field notes. Accordingly, the first step in developing field notes was an

inscription, whereby the author recorded quick truncated summaries of notable

occurrences, actors, and event sequences. The second step was providing detailed

descriptions of events, bracketing the author's thoughts and insights regarding the

described incidents (Shkedi & Harel, 2004). The third step was to transcribe the

phenomena and observations. Transcriptions involved writing out what was narrated by

participants in interviews or observed posts (Schensul & LeCompte, 2013). Transcription

included the author's descriptions about field setting, the participants, and any

information that provided more detail about the context of the event (Schensul &

LeCompte, 2013). Finally, the author translated the data. Translation involved organizing

the author's comments, annotations and, methodological reflections to help clarify the

categories or taxonomies generated (Carlin, 2003). The field notes were referenced when

analyzing interviews and served as an audit trail for this study. Some sections of the field notes are included in the qualitative findings and discussion section. Table 10 outlines the steps in writing field notes.

Table 10

Steps in Writing Field Notes

Event/Happening/Occurrences	Notes
Inscription (date and time, social context, actors, activity, event, reactions, feeling)	
Description (provide more detail about the inscription)	
Transcription (How did participant(s) describe the occurrence? What did author perceive with her senses?	
Translation (author's comments about transcriptions, author's thoughts about observations and theory, author's reflections about relationship between methodology and observation)	

Interpreting Qualitative Results

Interpreting qualitative results required the application of interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenology (Bailey, 2018). As a complete participant of the online communities under study, the author felt qualified to conduct hermeneutics, which involved describing concepts of observed phenomena and explaining the social context (Reiners, 2012).

Interpretations of qualitative data followed a strengths-based perspective focusing on illuminating abilities, talents, and resources rather than pathologies and deficits (Saleeby, 1993). The author also used a postcolonial framework to challenge dominant assumptions (metanarratives) and provide a more comprehensive perspective for this segment of African women, a group that is typically studied but seldom get to write about themselves (Bhambra, 2007).

Ascertaining Rigor and Quality of the Qualitative Procedures

The author made a concerted effort to maintain rigor in the research design to ascertain the quality of the virtual ethnography. Detailed field notes were kept and referred to throughout the study as part of the audit trail and to provide data for triangulation and verification of analyses. In general, qualitative researchers emphasize that spending sufficient (a long time) time in the field helps one to gather rich data. However, there is no stipulation of what is considered adequate time in the field.

For a virtual ethnography, two years is considered an adequate duration for lurking; to understand nuances of community, to gain trust with participants, and reduce research reactivity (Kendall, 1999). In response to the question of how much time a researcher should spend in the field, Patton (2002) rejoins: "fieldwork should last long enough to get the job done, to answer the research questions being asked and fulfill the purpose of the study" (p. 275). Following this rationale, the author, who at the time of the study, had spent over three years participating in the online communities perceived that she had spent sufficient time to allow her to understand the intricacies of the interactions in the online communities. The author had been a member of one of the communities since July 2015 and the other since January 2016. The author did not join the community as a researcher but as a participating member. Being a complete participant in this virtual ethnography provided the author with the unique opportunity to richly draw on both linguistic and emotional resources to capture meanings emerging from the online interactions (Walstrom, 2004).

The author felt competent to provide an insider's perspective of the online communities because of her prolonged engagement in the field. Furthermore, the author

had training in qualitative research and applied strategies such as reflexivity to recognize that her positionality, i.e., that her cultural, political social, and ideological perspectives influenced the research processes and findings (Bailey, 2018; Beddows, 2008; Maczewski et al., 2004; Manning, 2016; Patton, 2002). Practicing reflexivity throughout the research process ensured that the author did not take certain practices, events, and discourses for granted.

As the author went through the iterative process of collecting and analyzing data, the author sought feedback from participants to get their perspectives on the author's interpretations, a process referred to as member checking (Creswell, 2017). Since participants' realities were complex and diverse, there were bound to be some divergent views on some issues. To capture varied viewpoints, the author reached out to those displaying deviating perspectives from the majority to try and understand the observed phenomena from their perspectives. This process is known as negative case analysis in qualitative studies (Salkind, 2010), and it serves to improve the quality of qualitative research (Patton, 2002).

Furthermore, the author engaged in discrepant case sampling, i.e., incorporated interview data from Kenyan diaspora women who did not belong to the online communities to gain further insights about motivations for joining and participating in virtual communities (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Lastly, the author employed iterative questioning strategies during the semi-structured interviews to ascertain the reliability of the information shared by the key actors.

Chapter 4: Quantitative Results

I think people feel braver and people speak up more in [online communities]

compared to face-to-face interactions. Therefore, it can get disrespectful because of more

bravado of being behind the keyboard…. Overall, they're a good forum to vent, make

jokes on things that only Kenyans would understand. [Charlotte (online participant),

2019].

This chapter presents the quantitative findings of the study. Since this is a convergent parallel mixed-methods study, quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed separately. Afterward, the author identified overlapping or contradictory findings from qualitative and quantitative data.

Quantitative Data

Data Screening and Cleaning

The quantitative analysis tested the variable relationships portrayed in the conceptual model (see Figure 6), which hypothesized that increased online participation was negatively correlated with social isolation and positively associated with (positive acculturation) biculturalism and increased empowerment through the mediators; SOC and ORS.

Data from the online were exported from Qualtrics software into SPSS version 26. There were 136 responses from group A and 151 responses from group B, which totaled 287 responses (n = 287). Data were assessed for possible data entry errors to verify whether: 1) data were correctly entered, and 2) variables were coded correctly. The

author reversed the scores for items that had been inversely coded. Afterward, the author created variables by averaging the scores of the items of the scales.
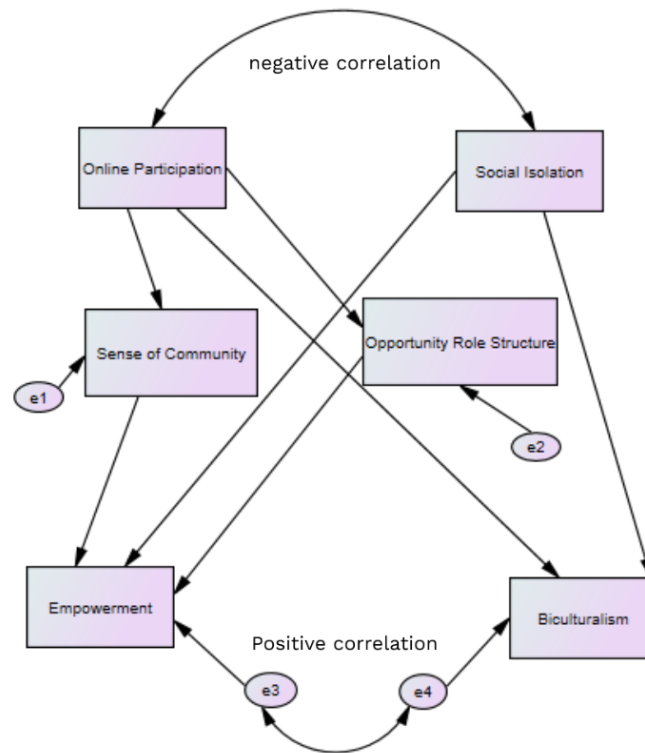
Figure 6. The conceptual framework showing hypothesized relationships at the onset of this study.

Next, the author considered how to deal with missing data. Addressing missing data was contingent on the patterns and the number of cases with missing values (Abu-Bader, 2010). From visually inspecting the dataset, there were missing data from the nonresponse of questions. The percentages of missing data on the variables were as follows: 33% on empowerment, 30% on biculturalism, 26% on ORS, 24% on SOC, 24% on social isolation, and 20% on online participation. To understand the pattern of missing data, the author conducted Little's Missingness Completely at Random (MCAR) test. The results showed that data were missing completely at random $X2(143) = 137.5$, $p = .61$. Listwise deletion of cases was not necessary when data were MCAR because

missing cases are not different than non-missing cases (Wayman, 2003). Moreover,

listwise deletion would have reduced the sample size to n = 121, which is not ideal for the

analyses required in this study. Following a recommendation by Bhaskaran & Smeeth

(2014), the author conducted multiple imputation to achieve complete cases dataset.

Multiple imputation is an effective way to deal with nonresponse bias, i.e., when people

fail to respond to a survey.

Afterward, the author conducted independent t-tests using the imputed data to

ascertain whether there were differences between group A and group B as well as the

differences between original data and the imputed data. The results of the independent t-

tests showed that there were no statistically significant differences between the means of

groups A and B on the variables of interest from the original data. Similarly, there were

no statistically significant differences between the means of groups A and B on the

variables of interest from the pooled data.

Imputing data and merging the data did not much affect the significance of the data,

therefore justifying running the path analysis with the imputed data from the combined

data set. Table 11 shows the results of the means differences and their statistical

significance of the merged data (with missing cases) and the imputed data.

Table 11

Mean Differences between the Samples

Role	Variable	Original data mean difference	P value original	Pooled mean difference	P value pooled
Predictor	OP	-.49	.21	-.53	.17
Predictor	SI	.28	.65	.21	.73
Mediator	SOC	-.28	.63	-.49	.46
Mediator	ORS	-.23	.54	-.27	.45
Outcome	BIC	-.57	.50	-.52	.48

| Outcome | EMP | | | -.57 | .21 | -.57 | .21 |

Note. OP = Online Participation, SI = Social Isolation, SOC = Sense of Community, ORS = Opportunity Role Structure, BIC = Biculturalism, EMP = Empowerment

Eventually, the author assessed the reliability of each measure, computing the Cronbach alpha (α) statistics. The general rule of thumb is that a Cronbach's alpha of .70 and above is considered acceptable, .80 and above is good, and .90 and above is excellent (Abu-Bader, 2016). The Cronbach's α online participation scale was acceptable, Cronbach's α for social isolation, acculturation, and ORS were good. The Cronbach's α for SOC was excellent. Table 12 shows the Cronbach's alpha for each of the measures, along with their means and measures of normality.

Table 12

Reliability Coefficients and Measures of Normality

Concept	Item	M	SD	Cronbach's α	Skewness	Kurtosis
SI	IS1	3.24	1.3	.83	-0.35	-1.04
	IS2*	3.1	1.25		-0.23	-1.02
	IS3*	2.32	1.21		.0.48	-0.76
	IS4*	1.96	1.07		0.86	-0.11
	IS5	3.0	1.22		2.12	4.06
AC	AC1*	3.19	1.9	.83	1.90	-1.90
	AC2	3.76	1.8		1.75	-1.21
	AC3	3.6	1.84		1.84	-1.53
	AC4	3.82	1.8		1.77	-1.13
EM	EM1	3.22	2.26	.91	1.17	-0.50
	EM2	3.22	1.12		1.16	-0.65

	EM3	3.49	1.18		1.12	-0.47
	EM4	3.23	1.17		1.18	-0.06
SOC	SC1	3.56	1.30	.93	1.23	-0.17
	SC2	3.58	1.17		1.17	0.14
	SC3	3.4	1.23		1.23	-0.41
	SC4	3.21	1.16		1.16	-0.53
PP	PP1	1.51	.95	.74	0.95	4.054
	PP2	2.71	1.29		1.30	-0.80
	PP3	1.28	.65		0.65	10.44
	PP4	2.53	.93		0.93	0.78
ORS	OR1*	3.7	1.05	.81	-1.04	0.753
	OR2*	3.54	1.10		-0.56	-0.342
	OR3*	3.21	1.12		-0.31	-0.615

Note. SD = Standard Deviation, SI = Social Isolation, AC = Acculturation, EM = Empowerment, PP = Online Participation, SOC = Sense of Community, ORS = Opportunity Role Structure. *Denotes a reversed score.

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

As for the age of the respondents, 1% were between 18-24 years, 14% were between 25-34 years of age, 36% were between 35-44 years, and 14% were between 45-54 years 1% were between 55 – 64 years, 1% were between 65 – 74 years and about 33% of the participants did not report their age. Among the respondents, 37% resided in Northeast region of the U.S., 9% lived in Southeast region of the U.S, 6% lived in Midwest region of the U.S, 7% resided in Southwest region of the U.S, 5% lived in the Western part of the U.S, 1% lived in Canada, and 35% did not report their province of

residence. The respondents reported various levels of education. Regarding college, 17% had some college or associate degree, 19% had a bachelor's degree, 24% had a master's degree, and 7% had a doctorate or a professional degree, and 33% did not report their level of education.

When asked to check a box corresponding to their income range, 10% of respondents selected an annual income of less than $50,000, 28% reported a yearly salary of $50,000 to $99,000 or more, 21% reported an annual income of over $100,000, 7% preferred not to say while 34% did not report their income. An estimated 50% of respondents worked fulltime, and of those employed, a majority (37%) reported working in healthcare or social services. As for citizenship, 29% of respondents were dual citizens or U.S. and Kenya or Canada, and Kenya, 1% percent of respondents had dual citizenship of U.S. or Canada with another county, 9% had singular citizenship, or either U.S. or Canada. In comparison, 17% of respondents were singularly Kenyan citizens, 11% preferred not to say, and 33% did not report their citizenship status.

Of the respondents, 38% were married, 1% were widowed, 14% were divorced or separated, 13% were never married, and 34% did not report their marital status. When asked about the age at which they emigrated to America, 1% of respondents said that they were born in North America, 4% of respondents emigrated to North America when they were aged 0-12 years, 24% emigrated at 13-20 years, 21% emigrated at 21-27 years, 15% emigrated after the age of 27 years, and 35% did not report their age at emigration to the U.S. of Canada. On the issue of voting in Kenyan elections from North America, 50% of respondents indicated that they would participate in voting if, given the opportunity, 7% were unsure if they would vote, 9% indicated that they would not vote and 34% of

respondents did not respond on the issue of voting. Lastly, all but 4% of respondents follow the news and current events in Kenya. Additional information reported about the sample is presented in Table 13.

Table 13

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Characteristic		Percentage	Missing %
Age	18-24	1	
	25-34	14	
	35-44	36	
	45-54	14	
	55-64	1	
	65-74	1	33
Region of residence	Northeast (U.S.)	37	
	Southeast (U.S.)	9	
	Midwest (U.S.)	6	
	Southwest (U.S.)	7	
	West (U.S.)	5	
	Canada	1	35
Educational attainment	Some college or Associates degree	17	
	Bachelor's degree	19	
	Master's degree	24	
	Doctorate or professional degree (JD, MD etc.)	7	33
Household annual income (in US Dollars)	Less than 50,000	10	
	50,000 - 99,000	28	
	100,000 or more	21	
	Prefer not to say	7	34
Employment status	Fulltime	51	
	Part-time	8	
	Unemployed, looking for work	2	
	Unemployed, not looking for work	1	
	Student	2	35
Occupation/Industry	Healthcare or social services	37	

	Scientific or technical services	6	
	Educational Services	5	
	Finance or Insurance	5	
	Corporate Management or administration	2	
	Information Technology	2	
	Retain, recreation or food services	2	
	Other industry	7	34
Citizenship Status	Dual North America (U.S./Canada) and Kenya	29	
	Dual North American (U.S./Canada) and other country	1	
	Only North American (U.S./Canada)	9	
	Only Kenyan	17	
	Prefer not to say	11	33
Marital Status	Married	38	
	Widowed	1	
	Divorced or separated	14	
	Never married	13	34
Age of emigration	Born in the U.S.	1	
	0-12 years	4	
	13-20years	24	
	20-27years	21	
	After 27 years	15	35
Would vote in Kenyan elections from North America	Yes	50	
	No	9	
	Unsure	7	34
Seeks out Kenyan news from Newspapers, websites and social media	Yes	61	
	Not interested in Kenya news	4	35

Correlations

A bivariate correlation analysis revealed significant correlations between the variables of interest. As seen in Table 14, all variables except online participation and SOC were statistically significantly correlated with each other.

Table 14

Bivariate Correlations of the Study Variables

	OP	SI	SOC	ORS	BIC	EMP
OP	1	.43**	0.11	.14*	.34**	.21**
SI	.43**	1	.23**	.50**	.53**	.48**
SOC	0.11	.23**	1	.22**	.28**	.42**
ORS	.14*	.51**	.22**	1	.39**	.36**
BIC	.34**	.53**	.28**	.39**	1	.50**
EMP	.21**	.48**	.42**	.36**	.50**	1

Note. *indicates p<.05; ** *indicates p<.01; n=287. OP = Online Participation, SI= Social Isolation, SOC = Sense of Community, ORS = Opportunity Role Structure, BIC = Biculturalism, EMP = Empowerment.

Path Analysis

The author conducted a path analysis using maximum likelihood estimation procedures by AMOS version 26. Initially, the author had created an input path diagram (conceptual model) whereby online participation was inversely correlated with social isolation and was a direct and indirect predictor of biculturalism and empowerment with SOC and ORS serving as mediators. Contrary to the expectations, the input path diagram (conceptual model) illustrated in Figure 6 was not a good fit for data. The conceptual model had a X^2 value of 116.39 with 6 degrees of freedom and a probability level of .00. The fit indices for the conceptual model were CFI = .731, NFI = .727, TLI = .328, with a RMSEA of .254 thereby indicating a poor fit for data.

After initial path modelling, the author constructed an output path diagram, which was the best fit for data. The output path diagram shows that social isolation was a significant predictor of biculturalism, empowerment, and SOC. The mediators in the output path model were online participation and ORS. The output path model had a X^2 value of 4.53 with 3 degrees of freedom, and a probability level of .21, thereby suggesting that the model was an excellent fit to the data. Bryne (2010) provides guidelines for the interpretation of goodness-of-fit statistics (baseline comparisons) that include CFI, NFI, and TLI. The values for CFI, NFI, and TLI range from zero to 1.00, whereby a value of >.95 is considered an excellent fit. The fit indices in the output model were CFI = .997, NFI = .987, TLI =.981, thus indicating a good fitting model. The root means square error of approximation (RMSEA) was assessed on guidelines proposed by Browne and Cudeck (1992). Accordingly, a RMSEA statistic of <.05 indicates a good fit; .05 to.08 indicates acceptable fit; .08 to.10 is indicative of a marginal fit, and>.10 signals a poor fit. The RMSEA value of our output model is .035, which is indicative of a good fitting model. The pathways in the model were all statistically significant at the p <.05 level. The model accounted for 108% of the variability in ORS, 32% of the variability in biculturalism, 32% of the variability in empowerment, 18% of the variability in online participation, and 8% of the variability in SOC.
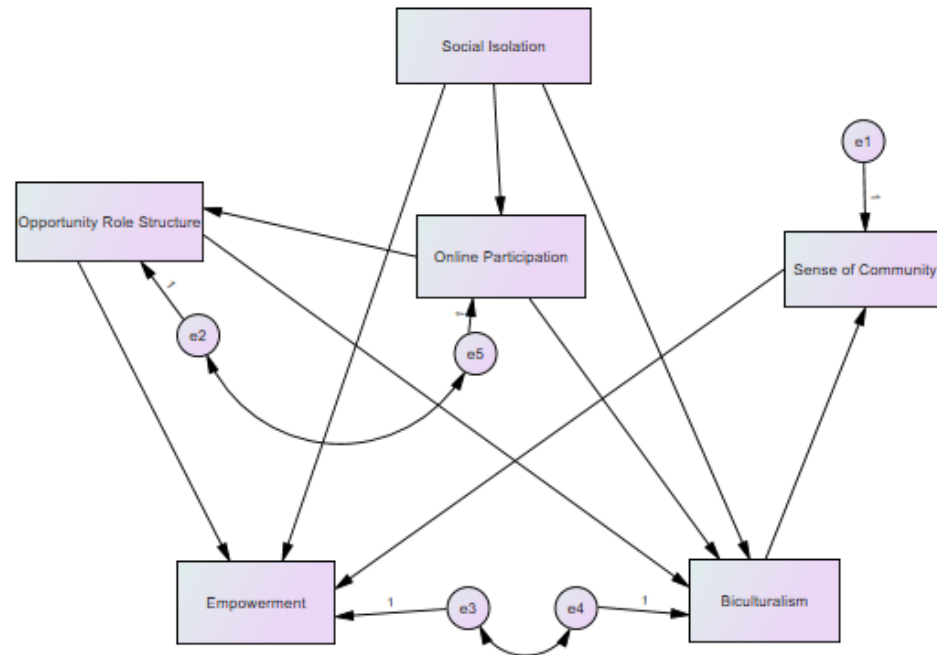
Figure 7: The final output path model of the study illustrating the hypothesized relations between the variables. The independent variable was Isolation. The dependent variables were Biculturalism, Empowerment and Community. Opportunity and Participation were mediators. Fit indices for the model: $X^2(4) = 5.42$, p = .25; CFI = .997; NFI = .987; TLI = *.987;* RMSEA = *.035.* All paths shown were statistically significant standardized regression weights with *p* < .05.

The decomposition of effects explains the magnitude of the direct, indirect, and total effects in a path model (Alwin & Hauser, 1975). The ratio of a variable's indirect effect on its total effect represents the proportion of an independent variable's overall impact on the dependent variable mediated through another variable (Preacher & Kelley, 2011). As can be seen in Table 15, social isolation was found to have a relatively strong total effect on biculturalism. The ratio of the standardized indirect effect of .21 to the standardized total effect of .54 indicates that 39% of the overall impact of the social isolation on biculturalism was indirect through online participation. This outcome suggests that most of the overall effect of social isolation on biculturalism was direct. That is to say, participants' acknowledgment of their social isolation encouraged their biculturalism i.e., the desire to retain heritage cultures and adopt useful North American

cultures. Additionally, participants' recognition of their social isolation encouraged them to participate in the online communities, and online participation offered a pathway for biculturalism.

Secondly, 33% of the overall effect of social isolation on SOC was indirect through ORS, and 67% of the overall impact of social isolation on SOC was indirect through online participation. In other words, online participation and ORS mediated the effect of social isolation on SOC. Therefore, participants' awareness of their social isolation led them to participate in the online community and, in turn, their perceived impactful participation led to their sense of community.

Lastly, 2% of the overall effect of social isolation on empowerment was indirect through opportunity role structure, and 37% of the overall impact of social isolation on empowerment was indirect through online participation. Hence, social isolation had a relatively strong effect (61%) on empowerment. The interpretation of this finding is that participants' cognizance of their social isolation predicted their empowerment through participating in the online communities, which provided them with the opportunity to use their talents and skills and, in turn, they felt empowered. Table 15 shows the ratios and magnitudes of the direct and indirect effects.

Table 15

Decomposition of Effects in the Path Model

Criterion	Predictor Variable	Total Effect *	Indirect Effect ∗ via		Ratio of Indirect Effect to Total Effect	
			ORS	OP	ORS	OP
BIC	SI	.54	-	.21	-	.39

SOC	SI	.15	.05	.10	.33	.67
EMP	SI	.46	.01	.17	.02	.37

Note. Social Isolation predicted Biculturalism, Sense of Community and Empowerment. Opportunity Role Structure and Online Participation acted as mediators in the model. OP = Online Participation, SI = Social Isolation, SOC = Sense of Community, ORS = Opportunity Role Structure, BIC = Biculturalism, EMP = Empowerment.

Chapter 5: Qualitative Findings

Being in [online community] has made me realize that many of us have had similar life experiences despite having grown up in different homes (Crystal [online participant], 2019)

In this chapter, the author presents the qualitative findings of the study. Qualitative data were collected through systematic observations and semi-structured interviews and analyzed using discourse analysis and thematic analysis, respectively. Lastly, the author highlights areas of intersection of the conclusions from the systematic observations and the interviews.

Findings from Systematic observations

The Nature of Online Interactions

At the time of the study, the research setting, groups A and B, were private Facebook groups that could only be accessed by members. Each prospective member was vetted and approved by group administrators after establishing that she met the membership eligibility, i.e., identified as an adult woman residing in the U.S. or Canada and having Kenyan nationality, a Kenyan spouse or a Kenyan parent. The group administrators examined the profiles of aspiring members, their social networks, and the profile of the member who added them to the group to see if those provided clues that that would-be member met the criteria. In the past, there were instances whereby men masquerading as women infiltrated the groups to 'spy' on members. Other times, some members have added their pseudo accounts to the groups to veil themselves as they launched attacks on other members. Thankfully, once discovered, the group

administrators promptly remove these 'unwanted' accounts to ensure that only real women are interacting with each other.

One of the online communities in the study, group B, was an offshoot of a larger community, group A. Group B was purportedly formed by former members of group A who, after having differences with the administrators of group A, exited the group or were ejected. Nevertheless, membership in one group did not preclude one from joining the other. In fact, many participants belonged to both groups. Previously expelled members of group A were not allowed to rejoin unless they made amends or rectified the situation that caused their expulsion. Group A had more stringent guidelines whereby posts that were viewed as an affront to participants or administrators were promptly deleted, and the posting member was sanctioned or removed from the community. Group B, on the other hand, prided itself as being a tolerant zone where members were free to post anything. As a result, posts in group B generally had more extreme opinions, untethered humor, and any attempts to rein in members were discouraged.

Certain outspoken members of group B did not shy away from openly criticizing the administrators and nature of interactions in group A, signaling a degree of resentment towards them. Since joining both groups, the author observed fewer references to group B from group A. In contrast, references to group A from Group B were more frequent and comprised of disparaging comments. Typically, the administrators of group A were caricatured as dictatorial and intolerant of opposition by some members of group B. Some members of group B alleged that most members of group A quietly disagreed with the purported 'ruthlessness' of the administrators but chose not to voice their discontentment because dissent resulted in expulsion. In their defense, group A

administrators, on numerous occasions, claimed that their actions of monitoring posts, deleting posts, sanctioning, and expelling members were necessary actions towards ensuring a safe environment where members interacted without experiencing cyberbullying. Criticisms notwithstanding, members of both groups frequently expressed their praise towards the online communities for providing a space for Kenyan diaspora women to share their experiences and discuss issues pertinent to their community.

The Online Environment

The landing page of groups A and B showed a profile picture selected by administrators and a brief description of the groups' aims and purposes. Group A's expressed mission was to provide a space for members to network, seek support, and empower each other. On the other hand, group B's stated purpose was to provide a free space where everyone's opinions were welcome. Despite the differences in their explicit goals, both groups drew membership from the same demographic group. In fact, many participants (including the author) belonged to both groups. On the landing page of both groups, there was a tab that, when clicked, displays a snapshot of the group's administrators and moderators. Another tab provided a list of the group members and indicated to a member which of her Facebook friends belonged to that group and provided an option to add one's friends to the group. There is also a tab for announcements that directed a user to previously highlighted notices. In both groups, there was also a tab for discussions that led a member into the posts. Sometimes the groups' administrators pinned (highlighted) an announcement on the landing page, and in those instances, the pinned announcement appeared first.

Under the pinned announcements were the most recent and active posts. Whenever a participant shared a post, other participants could view and chose to either ignore the post, react with emoji, or respond with text or graphics. From the author's observation, posts that elicited many reactions and responses were usually those that are either emotionally provocative or those that were posted by influencers in the group.

In the online communities, whenever there was no pinned announcement, then the most active post appeared first, followed by other 'later' posts in a chronological sequence. An active post was one which, at that particular moment, evoked many reactions and responses. If several posts were made within minutes of each other, then the post that appeared first was the one with elicited the highest number of interactions from other group members within that time frame. In the author's estimation, the post that was displayed first on the landing page garnered more attention and was more likely to stimulate more interaction, thereby compounding its prominence. In some instances, some posts were prominent for several days because they have attracted and sustained numerous reactions and responses.

Below the most current and active posts were other posts made by members. It is not entirely clear to the author what algorithm Facebook used to organize the order of the visibility posts in the groups. Still, from her observations, posts in Facebook groups are arranged chronologically with the most active and recent post showing up first. Even so, more active new posts frequently appear before other 'newer' less active posts, therefore, indicating that in Facebook groups, the intensity of interaction that a post generates is more important than its chronology.

The online communities in this study had many members and frequent between-members' interactions. Since it was not possible to analyze every interaction, the author conducted systematic observations of archived posts, as explained in chapter 3. The systematic observations revealed that participants engaged in different topics. Sometimes discussions were initiated as 'hide my identity' (HMI) posts, and sometimes group members posted openly. Other times participants appealed for help from the group leading to group solidarity and a direction of efforts towards joint action (digital organizing). Participants' interactions were around various topics, including acculturation, domestic violence, dating, marriage romance, parenting, race tensions, and social isolation, and a sense of community. The author expounds on these topics in the sections below.

Hide My Identity (HMI)

The author observed that HMI posts were the primary mechanisms through which participants interacted on difficult or taboo topics. These issues included financial woes, substance abuse, immigration problems, marital strife, relationship difficulties, domestic violence, sexual matters, etc. Through HMIs, participants asked questions anonymously and sought advice from the online community. Many times, referrals for expert assistance were shared publicly so that others in similar situations could gain more information to resolve the matter. HMIs were tremendously useful in providing vital information to participants on how to exit abusive relationships. Notably, many participants candidly shared their experiences with domestic violence and offered support to others in similar situations; therefore, making it less of a taboo topic.

The author presupposed that online participation facilitated relationship building because one could conveniently share as much or as little as they liked with other participating members. In the two online communities of this study, members typically initiated discussions on various topics, asked questions, and responded to posts openly or anonymously. For example, whenever a community member wished to ask a question anonymously, she typically requested another community member to post on her behalf. These anonymous posts came to be known as "hide my identity" (HMI) posts. Consequently, it was not unusual for the online communities to have several HMI questions or scenarios whereby other members responded by offering support, validation, or criticism. Issues raised under HMI included immigration problems, marital discord, domestic abuse, sexual violence, familial strife, financial troubles, legal complications, ongoing conflict with other members of the online community, among others. These HMI issues were often taboo topics in Kenyan communities hence the tendency to seek advice anonymously through the HMI posts. In some instances, persons who initially presented their problem as HMI revealed their identity to receive direct assistance from members or even report on the progress of the situation – usually after receiving much support from the online community or after self-disclosure of other community members who had faced similar problems. In this way, online communities provided culturally relevant assistance to Kenyan diaspora women for deeply personal issues.

Digital Organizing

In group settings, an emotional connection usually facilitates collective action (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Nowell & Boyd, 2014). Within online communities, emotional connection and a sense of community are mutually reinforcing (Ellison et al.,

2007) and often led to digital organizing to help those in crisis. An example illustrating how emotional connections led to collective action occurred in one of the online communities in July 2017. Mary (pseudonym), a Kenyan diaspora woman living in the U.S., put up an impassioned plea as an HMI post in group A asking for assistance. Mary explained that she had recently traveled to Kenya with her husband and three children. While in Kenya, Mary's husband confiscated all their identification documents (including passports) and promptly returned to the U.S, leaving Mary and their children stranded in Kenya. Without proper identification and testimonials from her husband, Mary could not return to the U.S. and was unable to prove to the U.S. embassy in Kenya that she and her children were legal residents of the U.S. Within hours of sharing her plight, group A retained an attorney to work on Mary's case and began fundraising to pay for the costs associated with her case. Within two days, group A had raised an estimated $15,000 to assist Mary to find her way back to the U.S. At some point, Mary revealed her identity to some group members who tracked down her husband in the U.S. and served him legal papers charging him with violating her civil rights. Two weeks after sharing her predicament on Facebook, Mary was repatriated to the U.S. Mary was also offered additional material support from the group members in the event she decided to separate from her husband. It is important to note that in this specific example, as with many other cases of collective action in online communities, members helped other members – regardless of preexisting relationships because they developed an emotional connection to their plight.

Cultural Adaptations and Retentions

The author observed that participants interacted a great deal on the issue of

acculturation, particularly about how to successfully incorporate their heritage (Kenyan)

culture and mainstream North American cultures in their everyday lives. One participant

shared a video post on this topic. In the video, the participant narrated her experiences as

a racial minority in a new country and shared advice to help other Kenyan diaspora

women who are struggling to fit in North American cultures as seen in the condensed

video transcript below:

> Some things make a huge difference in how well you adjust to life in a new
> environment. One of them is your attitude. If you're an upbeat, outgoing, accepting
> person you will find that being in a new culture and people embracing you will happen
> a lot faster. But if you're the kind of person who is reserved, you will find that for the
> most part, people will also be the same with you - and you might also feel lonely...you
> might feel the culture shock aspect a little more! The other part is trying to learn the
> language - you don't have to be perfect. But people feel touched when you try to learn
> their language. Another thing keep in mind is that no matter where you go, if you are a
> racial minority, people will stare at you. They will want to touch you, ask about your
> hair - it is just curiosity. It's taken me a while to know whenever you are away from
> home you will experience this...

As the author conducted observations, she noticed that participants frequently

opined on their subjective experiences living as minorities in North America.

Specifically, some participants shared about the adjustments they have had to make in

their mannerisms to fit in and avoid drawing attention to their status as "foreigners" as

witnessed from a participant's comment on a post about assimilation:

> My accent at work is not the same as my accent outside of work. I can switch back
> and forth. I have to communicate, and hate being interrupted with "say what" and stuff
> when I am explaining something important to a patient or client, so I have to adjust.
> The "R" s and "T" s have to be rolled. And I do plan on buying that app that teaches
> pronunciations…

The author observed an online interaction whereby a participant expressed her firm intent on retaining some uniquely Kenyan practices such as the ritual of circumcising boys at puberty. In most Kenyan ethnic groups, male circumcision is considered a rite of passage, and boys typically undergo circumcision at puberty. In the ethnic communities that practice circumcision, an uncircumcised man is deemed immature and undeserving of the privileges of manhood. While many participants settled for circumcising their boys at birth, some participants sent their boys to Kenya in their teenage years to undergo the rite. In the post below, the participants sought advice about circumcising her son:

> My son is 10 years and we relocated [to North America] when he was 4 years old. I'm now considering taking him through circumcision. His doctor termed it a cosmetic surgery and said that insurance will not cover the procedure. The cost is about $10,000. I don't have that kind of money. I didn't circumcise him as a baby because I wanted him to understand the transition. I know times have changed and most circumcisions are done at birth. I was trying to keep some tradition. Any word of advice? Has anyone gone through this? Do we plan a trip to Kenya to get it done?

The responses to the post above were varied. Some participants disagreed with circumcision, arguing that it is an outdated practice and a form of genital mutilation hence a human rights violation. Participants who supported the ritual shared advice such as consulting a Jewish doctor who they claimed might know how to conduct the procedure and navigate medical insurance bureaucracies since circumcision was an accepted Jewish practice in North American cultures.

Domestic Violence

In the author's estimation, one of the significant contributions of the online communities was creating a platform where members could freely share about deeply personal problems such as domestic violence and seek help. Many Kenyans come from

backgrounds where it was taboo to speak out boldly against domestic violence. In many

instances of domestic violence, the woman who was usually the victim was blamed and

considered to be deserving of the violence meted upon her. Over time, many participants

of the online communities shared their personal stories of domestic violence either

directly (through text or video posts) or anonymously through the HMI posts. In one

observed post, a participant shared the following scenario from her life experience:

> The first time a man slapped me I was stunned! Then it happened many times. But he apologized over and over, and bought flowers, lunch, dinner etc. I stayed even though I knew it was wrong. One time, he put a knife over my naked body until I begged for my life. I prayed to God and Jesus and I survived. Many times, I went to work with bruises and told them that I bumped into the bathroom door…The second time, it was with a different man. I remember running out of the door barefoot in the dark night. After that, I made a vow never ever to let any man lay a hand on me. I have cried watching these brave women coming to do live videos. One day I will share my story.

Fortunately, survivors of domestic violence received compassion, advice, and

referrals for services to help them in recovery from other group members. One participant

posted a video speaking about her experience and offered insightful information about

available services for survivors of domestic abuse. Her remarks were transcribed and

summarized in the excerpt below:

> If you are a victim of domestic violence and have had to go to a shelter, trust the shelter people. The shelter people know how to deal with domestic violence issues and can help you. Let go and begin to heal. Most women have the voice of their husband, mother, community resounding louder in their head and that's how they end up going back to the abuser. For some perpetrators of domestic violence, being abusive is they only way they know how to express anger and frustration. The perpetrators also need help, but it is not up to the victim to help them. Until the perpetrator is cleared by a professional, don't go back. Some perpetrators may think they are ok or pretend may to be ok but once their abused victim refuses to return or puts a protective order, they become aggressive - that is an indication that they are not healed. These aggressions and controlling behavior can escalate. It's better to go far away as possible. Always trust your instincts. Don't wait until it is abuse gets physical, because then it could be fatal. Don't let someone abuse you because you're hoping to get legal papers through them - there are laws that protect you.

From observing posts, it was evident that some participants who were victimized by an intimate partner had directly benefited from the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), which provided them with a pathway for legal residency and eventual citizenship in the United States. Discussions on WAVA featured prominently on posts about domestic violence since many victimized participants stayed in an abusive relationship because their partners threaten to withdraw support for filing their green card (legal permanent residency) if they terminated their relationship.

In other posts about domestic violence, some participants revealed that they benefitted greatly from the expertise of group members who are immigration lawyers and survivors of domestic violence. These group members encouraged victims to exit the abusive relationship and file for legal residency and protection through the VAWA provisions. To demonstrate this fact, one interview participant commented that:

> [Online community] is empowering because it has given me access to information that I did not know. For example, we have immigration lawyers in here. And once you have that information, you are empowered, and you know your rights. I didn't know about VAWA but once I did, I was able to leave an abusive relationship, and still get my papers.

Discussions on Dating, Marriage and Romance

At the time of conducting this study, marriage was considered the pinnacle of social accomplishment among a subsect of Kenyans. Within those groups, a married woman was generally deemed as industrious, respectable, and virtuous. Because of the centrality of marriage in the social life of some Kenyans, the author observed that some participants aspired for marriage. Indeed, finding a spouse was often a conversation topic wherever there were unmarried women and featured prominently in prayer meetings and sermons at Kenyan churches. Unmarried Kenyan women cited that, in Kenyan social

circles, all their accomplishments were overshadowed by their unmarried status. One

observed post captured this perspective is shown below:

> Why is it that married women think that because you're not married but in steady
> relationship, they're better than you?
> Responses
>   - Because unfortunately some or most Kenyans measure a woman's success by
>   her ability or inability to keep a man.
>   - Two different married women have commented on my profile today. One told
>   me to "look for" a child and another said, in not so direct ways, that I should
>   now get married. All these in response to a post I made celebrating an
>   academic milestone I have achieved. I'm so annoyed... I haven't responded
>   because I don't want to spoil my celebratory mood

The author observed that in the online communities, discussions on dating and

romance covered various topics such as interracial relationships, long-distance

relationships, terminating unhappy unions, to name a few. Participants typically

presented questions or different dilemmas and received responses from other participants.

Many reactions on the issues of dating and romance tend to be light and comical, thereby

adding to the barrage of entertainment inherent in some online interactions. The excerpt

below is from an observed post on dating and courtship:

> Who can give me advice on dating a White guy? When I came this country, I was told
> that White guys fetishize us, and this spooked me out. I know this was a broad
> stereotype and I don't need a lecture on this. Right now, I have given up on Kenyan
> men, I am ready to cross over to the other side.
> > Responses:
> >   - I am married to a White man. I dated him for two years and we have been
> >   married for three years. Let me grab some popcorn and read comments
> >   while I laugh. In the meantime, welcome to the swirl world family.
> >   Sandman forever! I love this life
> >   - Also speaking from experience, for them [White men], making a
> >   connection (chemistry) and compatibility is very important. They want to
> >   know if you share common interests because for them a relationship is not
> >   just about bonding but sharing experiences and making memories. They
> >   remember even the slightest comment or gesture you make because they
> >   are very attentive. They will remember your favorite flower, color, food,
> >   your birthday etc. and they equally remember things that irk you too to
> >   avoid them. They are a whole different breed I tell you and very

spontaneous too! If he really likes you, he's going to cross oceans for you. Just try, you never know!

- You will need to remember every response you gave to his questions. Because these dudes [White men] do not forget anything! Write down all your answers lol!

Support for Parenting Problems

The author witnessed that for Kenyan diaspora women, the online communities provided information and guidance on how to raise children who are 'in-between' cultures. Many participants were raising Black children in North America and cited that their children had faced discrimination at some point in their lives. Hence the online community served as a platform for participants to seek culturally relevant support to address these complicated parenting issues that their parents did not have to encounter. The observed post below shows how participants generally supported the notion of parents being present in their children's lives. It also indicated participants' awareness of the prejudice that Black children may face in schools:

My 8th grade son has not been in the country very long, but he finds himself in trouble at school. The school calls, emails and sends letters to notify me of the wrong behaviors he been involved in. The behaviors happen mostly in hallways, study halls or while at lunch. Behaviors like pushing, patting other students on their back, cell phone misuse in class (note: I took the phone from him). Just today I had a meeting with his teachers to discuss his academic performance. My son is an "A" student, but his behaviors are worrying to me and to his teachers. Two hours after the meeting, I got a call from the principal that he was inciting other kids to fight and one of them was hurt but the principal said he will be OK. My son has had 5 detentions (lunch detention and Saturday detention) in the past few weeks. He got himself in bad company of kids at his school and this is worrying. Now, it has come to a point am thinking about sending him back home [to Kenya] to finish schooling there. I don't want to wait until something major happens and he is expelled from school. I need advice on what I can do, especially from those that have had similar experiences with their kids

Response:

Is he one of the few Black boys in school? Teachers are more likely to discipline Black kids. The school to prison pipeline is very real. Taking him back to Kenya is not the solution. The days of colonized discipline are over. You need to figure out the fine line between teachers and his acting

out. Remember it's a huge transition for him as well. I'd encourage
counseling and enrolling him in a sport as an outlet. Good luck
Some participants who were raising children in multiracial or with multiethnic

families which also presented their unique set of challenges as can be seen in the excerpt

below:

> Hello ladies, so my 9-year-old daughter attends a private, 99% White, girls' only
> school. I thank God that she/we haven't experienced any discrimination. My daughter
> loves her school and she's thriving. My daughter loves to sing and for about 2 years
> the school has been nagging us to let her listen to different artists. She sings in church
> and only realized today that her father has been letting her listen to secular music. To
> add to that, my daughter tells told her teacher today she loves Ariana Grande and
> Justin Bieber!!! This caused a lot of drama because my husband feels that sheltering
> her is more harmful than beneficial - that she should learn the bad and ugly before
> college! But this goes against everything I believe in. To mothers with biracial kids,
> how do you deal with the cultural differences when it comes to raising children? Keep
> in mind that my child spends most of her time in White people culture than mine,
> hence the feeling of me against them.

Colorism

Many Kenyans who occupy racially homogenous spaces may not have

experienced racism. But, like all other people of color, they are not immune to the ills of

colorism. Colorism is prejudice against people who have a darker skin tone or the

preferential treatment of those who are of the same race but lighter-skinned (BBC News,

2019). In a recent interview with the leading news outlet, Lupita Nyong'o, an Oscar

award-winning actress pronounced that "colorism is the daughter of racism" to indicate

that colorism and racism have the same negative impact on non-White people. In the

online communities, the author observed overt and more often subliminal colorism

whereby the famous group members were usually 'lighter-skinned' than the general

population. The author also noted that as members became more influential, they

mastered ways of presenting themselves (in pictures and videos) as having a lighter

complexion through the application of makeup and careful positioning of lighting. In the

online communities, whenever a participant announced that she had found a skin cream

that brightens skin tone, many participants indicated that they would purchase it. Other

participants offered better or less inexpensive alternatives for skin brightening. Some

participants have profited from the skin brightening frenzy by developing homemade face

creams and found a ready market within the online communities.

Interestingly, many participants understood that skin-bleaching was a health

hazard but had no qualms brightening their skin, arguing that unlike bleaching, skin

brightening doesn't alter the skin tone but only enhances one's complexion. The quotes

below are extracted from a post initiated by a participant defending Vera Sidika, a

Kenyan socialite, who proudly admitted to bleaching her skin and undergoing cosmetic

surgery to enhance her bosom and behind on a Kenyan national television show. Sidika's

proclamations provoked ire from a segment of Kenyans who viewed her lifestyle as

promoting sexual immorality. Moreover, Sidika unabashed admissions stirred up a heated

national discussion on colorism. These debates eventually found their way into the online

communities. And as seen from the excerpt below, participants have divergent views on

the topic:

> When we talk about self-improvement, we urge one another to keep working on
> ourselves, not to let ourselves go. We should keep upgrading ourselves until we attain
> the best version of ourselves! Why are we so harsh on ourselves and other women?
> Why are we so judgmental of others and their choices? We have seen women like us
> descend on the likes of Vera Sidika and delivered so much venom because how dared
> to lighten her skin, enhance her boobs and upgrade her tush!
>> Responses:
>> - My jaw was on the floor when I saw some women believe it's ok to bleach
>>   and compared it to other things like wearing a wig and piercing ears.
>>   People need to understand the depth of this issue and stop saying it is just
>>   a choice because it's not. The choice was made for you a long time ago.
>>   You were taught to discriminate against yourself and your own people. It's
>>   a hard pill to swallow but the reality is its one form of MENTAL
>>   SLAVERY and SELF HATE. You can use excuses as much as you want

such as self-empowerment, it's my choice, and it's the in thing. But ultimately, it's a psychological issue period. The psychological trauma was felt by our ancestors and passed on to us. I can't believe how backwards we are going instead of forward.

- Personally, I'd never bleach. It's just not my thing. But I'd never get offended by anyone who bleaches or even ask them or look at them quizzically waiting for that conversation.... all for the simple reason that it's none of my business. Now if everyone would mind their business and not question them, wouldn't the world be a better place for those who bleach?. I don't believe that it's always a case of self-hate. Sometimes we read too much into a situation.

The author perceived that colorism was an emotive issue, particularly for participants with multiracial families. Others portrayed participants with White husbands and biracial children as despising their race and attempting to 'whitewash their Blackness' by procreating with a White man. Nevertheless, participants who married White men defended their decisions and families, explaining that their choice of spouse was not racially motivated. These observed posts below capture these tensions:

Do our Black women married to White men love their husband and kids more? I see them posting their husbands and light-skinned babies more than our sisters married to black men with black babies?

Responses:

- …When I'm talking about my kids or husband I'm not usually sharing with the mindset "let me share my biracial kids or White husband." We are just like any other moms and wives. Interracial marriages don't make us who we are.
- Sometimes people make comments that I act (or don't act) like the wife of a White man and it baffles me. Apparently, there are stereotypes of how wife of a White man should or shouldn't act.
- Why do women think White men are gods or special? I can tell you from experience that they are just humans with all the weaknesses that men have.
- I'm not triggered, just sharing. You give back what you receive. Most White men are not afraid to display your pictures on their social media and they are proud of you. Unlike our Black brothers who hide you so that he can lie that he is not married so that he can get to play girls out there.

A Sense of Community

At the time of the study and throughout the study, the author was a complete participant of the two Facebook groups. Throughout that time, the author witnessed how online facilitated the creation of friendships, mentorship relationships, and sharing of information about opportunities or services, discussions on American cultural practices, and so forth. In the context of rising anti-immigrant sentiments, the author observed Kenyan diaspora women using online communities to share and access information to protect their rights and support people who are facing deportation or other immigration-related issues. The author observed that for many diaspora women, the online communities were a source of emotional, social, and financial support. Therefore, it was plausible to claim that online participation offered pathways to achieving positive acculturation and empowerment.

Previous studies have shown that members of a group distinguish themselves from nonmembers by having their own unique culture to boost group cohesion (Cicognani et al., 2008; Nowell & Boyd, 2014; Raj, 2012). In the same manner, the author categorized groups A and B as communities because members shared language and rituals that were unique to themselves. Group members often express themselves using words and phrases seemed semantically absurd but was understood intuitively within the community. Table 16 shows these coded words and phrases and their corresponding meanings.

Table 16

Commonly used Words and Phrases in the Virtual Community

Coded Phrase	Meaning
Call your neighbors	Tag your friends and let them know that critical information will be shared shortly.
Comments Reader Association (CRA)	By claiming to be a member of CRA, a participant was openly declaring that they would not respond or react to a post to avoid self-incrimination.
Following	An acknowledgment of interest in the posted information.
Vuta stool (pull a chair)	Participants used this phrase when they were about to post something salacious to get the audience's attention and solicit reactions or comments.
Is it Friday yet?	A question that prefaced sensational posts and solicited members' participation. Typically, Fridays were considered ideal days to share scandalous posts since it is assumed that participants have more time to be engaged in the online community over the weekend
Let me be thinned by mine	A public declaration of choosing to be stay out of others' affairs
Sips tea	An expression that indicated disapproval or contempt akin to giving 'side-eye'
Tupa mawe (Throw stones)	Passing harsh judgement
Taking Panadol for someone else's headache	Being preoccupied with someone's else problems despite the 'suffering' party showing apathy to their own problems
This is hard small	A monumental dilemma
Twa twa twa	A memorable sexual encounter
Vitu kwa ground ni different (Things on the ground are different)	Pointing out that people often put up appearances, and that things were not always be what they seemed to be

Members of the online community created an atmosphere of a sense of community by ensuring that participants felt cared for and by making efforts to meet their needs. Going through grief or mental illness can make someone feel distressed and alone. Fortunately, in groups A and B, whenever a member shared news of bereavement,

sickness, or loss, other members sent encouraging messages, offered material support or referrals. In the author's estimation, expressing care and concern for other members advanced the sense of community in the groups. The perceived caring environment resulted in candid disclosures, such as the one in the observed post below:

> I was recently diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Because I have few friends, I like to stay active on Facebook. I shared my struggles on Facebook but when my boyfriend found out, he got really mad at me and it affected our relationship. Recently, my illness became really bad. I took an overdose because I was ready to die and just be at peace in my grave. I went to the hospital was detained in a mental facility until I proved to them that I was of sound mind. Keep praying for me as I am on the recovery journey.

Navigating Systems in North America

The author observed that posts in online communities provided valuable lessons to participants on navigating educational systems, getting into lucrative careers, financial advice, investing in real estate, venture capitalism, etc. In an observed video post, titled "Getting the Most Out of a U.S. education," one participant shared advice on preparing children for college. Participants lauded this video post as containing vital information that was either unknown or taken for granted. Below is a condensed transcript of the video post:

> Grades 9 to 11 are the most important years for building up your GPA. The essay is very important... You need to make sure that you articulate your story. The fact that you're here in the U.S. and have had to adapt, that is already a unique experience - that is already something that makes your application to stand out. Talk about how your experience ties in with the philosophy of the school. Other ethnic groups do this to get into college. Apply to many schools: hard to get into, state schools, all kinds of schools. Take advantage of programs such as Upward Bound which is targeted for those children who are first generation college students… If your parents didn't go to college in America, you still qualify as a first-generation college student. Go to the guidance counselors and tell them you know nothing and let them guide you through all the resources that are available for you. Being that we are people of color, minorities and underrepresented, go and seek those opportunities… Take AP classes. If you pass AP classes, you get college credit. When you go to university, go where there is money. Do not get into debt because of your bachelor's degree. Get a full ride

if you can. Even if it is a small school. When you get a rejection letter, you have the option to request an appeal. If you still don't get into a desired prestigious institution, get into a feeder school that feeds into a prestigious school and your degree will read that you attended that prestigious institution. For example, Oxford College is an "easy to get into school" that feeds into Emory. When getting recommendations, get recommendations from that teacher who knows you and can speak to your abilities. And keep in mind that if your child doesn't get into the university, they desire at first, they can still get in the graduate school level.

Findings from Semi-Structured Interviews

The author conducted 39 semi-structured interviews, which were analyzed using thematic analysis. Descriptive categories and themes included acculturation, benefits, and drawbacks of participation, cyberbullying, and disempowerment. Other issues that emerged from participants were dating and romantic relationships, the various motivations for joining groups, marriage, parenting, race relations, social isolation, etc. A codebook with a description of the codes is provided in Appendix C. Presented below are categories and themes derived from interviews with the discrepant sample, i.e., nonmembers of the online groups and those from online participants.

Interview Findings from Nonmembers of Online Communities

Disincentive for Belonging to the Groups

As previously mentioned, the author interviewed some selected participants who were not members of the online community (discrepant sample) to see how different their experiences were from those who were members of the online community. The discrepant sample consisted of members who were either former members of the online community or had never joined to the online communities. The discrepant sample provided various reasons for not belonging to the online groups. Equivocally, the discrepant sample cited that they felt that the relationships in the online community were disingenuous and preferred to keep their social networks smaller, whereby in their view,

genuine and intimate relationships were more probable. In an interview, one participant

cited:

> I think Facebook is a waste of time. People on Facebook just log on to brag. People just post fake things. Not their struggles. Once you start reading and engaging so it's hard to get out. I just log in once in a while - like on my birthday.

Echoing a similar sentiment, another participant in her interview stated that:

> I am not on Facebook. I am not on these social media platforms. I only do WhatsApp. I find more meaning in interacting with people face to face. For you to benefit [from online communities], you have to spend a lot of time on social media. I don't see the value of that. I would rather pick up the phone and talk to someone. I prefer the personal touch. I will gauge how you are really feeling by talking to you.

Another participant asserted that because she was a clergyperson in her church,

belonging to the online communities, which in her view were perceived as controversial

by the general Kenyan diaspora, would compromise her standing in her congregation.

When I probed further about how she keeps abreast about happenings in her community,

being that she was not a member of the online communities, she responded by saying

that:

> If something important is going on, someone is bound to share on WhatsApp. I really don't get into Facebook much. I like to make my own judgements and don't want to be influenced by anybody. I want to be neutral and not wanting to be unduly influenced with others… I don't think I miss anything from these groups. My cousin told me that it's just a place for gossip.

Reasons for Leaving Online Community

Some members of the discrepant sample left the online communities because they

had little faith in the legitimacy of the social relations in the online community. To

elucidate this stance, one participant in her interview shared that:

> I was [in online community] but I left. I feel like that some stories are exaggerated. I think they're some things that are genuine and useful information. I am on Instagram only, but I feel like it's the same thing. So, I am just on WhatsApp.

The perceived benefits and drawbacks for online participation provided by the discrepant sample were similar to those of the primary sample, i.e., members of the online communities, as will be explained shortly.

Interview Findings from Members of Online Communities

Motivations for Joining Online Community

From analyzing the interviews, the author learned that there were many reasons for joining online communities. Some participants reported that they were added to the groups by existing members. Two interview participants requested to join the online communities after hearing positive reviews of the group from their friends. Participants' reasons for wanting to join the groups were universal and included the desire to be in a group with women of similar background; curiosity; to be entertained to and keep abreast of Kenyan pop culture and wanting to support other Kenyan women.

Most participants were not hesitant to join the groups because they found out about the groups from people they trusted. Those who were initially reluctant stated that their concerns were primarily issues of privacy, which they were later able to forestall by lurking before posting or reacting to posts in the groups. The author asked participants their reasons for staying in the group. In response, participants cited the benefits of the online communities, which the author has outlined in the section below.

Perceived Benefits of the Groups

During interviews, participants reported that they stayed in the online communities because of the perceived benefits of the groups, such as alleviating boredom and entertainment. In an interview, one participant described how the online community helped to occupy her at some point in her life:

I joined when I was a new mother and it helped pass the time. I would sit on the couch with my son and get entertained. There were many topics about relationships, businesses, work, education, etc.

Other participants remained in the groups because they saw it as an essential platform for digital organizing and social justice efforts. Digital organizing refers to the idea of using social media platforms to rally the public's support on an issue (Sarcevic et al., 2012). These participants remained in the group because, in their view, the groups provided a pathway for directing actions towards helping others in their communities. Within online communities, digital organizing was seen in the fundraising and resource mapping efforts, as explained in the interview comment below:

They [online communities] help members struggling with issues domestic violence immigration issues, and bereavement. They help to identify and raise money for lawyers, find a safe place for someone to live and also money to bury members or their loved ones.

The online communities connected Kenyan diaspora women, helping them to form friendships, seek emotional support, and offer help to those in crisis. In the interviews, many participants cited that the groups served as a safety net for its members because people shared and received different types of support. In an interview, one participant remarked:

Moral support, emotional support, and financial support. There seems to be educational and professional support as well. People who have had grief and loss have found support. Childcare support - people needing advice or looking for childcare. Parents experiencing challenges with parenting.

From the interviews, the author learned that the online communities served as a news outlet to keep Kenyan diasporans informed on the economy, politics, and social issues in North America and Kenya. Not only did participants receive news generated by media houses, but they also got to know how current events impact their community from

other group members' comments and reactions to the news reports.

Another advantage of belonging to the groups was having access to a repository of information on various things. Participants had over the years shared information on topics such as career choices, education, finances, to name a few. Within the groups, there were also step-by-step instructional videos on how to cook various dishes, exercise, and learn many skills. One participant explained this phenomenon in an interview, and below is a brief passage from her remarks:

> A wealth of information - a lot of information is shared. Someone shared about how to share complex math to her 2-year-old. She shared the methods she was using. People also share life hacks or kitchen hacks. This information varies from recipes to legal help.

The online communities also provided a ready market for entrepreneurial members. Subsequently, some members have managed to raise their income by transforming fellow group members into a customer base.

Acculturation

Kenyans are not a homogenous population. Within Kenya, there are over 45 recognized ethnic groups each with its own unique culture. All major towns and cities in Kenya are cosmopolitan with people from various ethnic groups, religious backgrounds, etc. Many Kenyans in rural communities typically live in ethnically "pure" communities, where most people belong to more or less similar religious institutions. Some participants who grew up in rural Kenya revealed that they had little or no exposure to Kenyans from other ethnic groups while residing in Kenya. Some participants who grew up in rural Kenya stated that their initial exposure to Kenyans from other ethnic groups occurred when they moved away from home to attend boarding school, college, or seek

employment. Nonetheless, many participants had prior exposure to Kenyans from other ethnic groups.

One of the interview questions asked participants to share their opinion on how online communities have influenced their understanding of North American or Kenyan cultures. Participants had different views on this issue. About 65 percent (n = 26) of interview participants stated that online participation did not have an impact on their perception of cultures. Participants' whose attitudes were unchanged cited among their reasons being:

> If the community existed when I first came to America, it might have taught me something about the American culture but now I feel like I know everything that I need to know to survive and thrive.

One participant whose perception of Kenyan cultures was influenced by online participation shared the following remarks in her interview:

> [The online community] has helped me understand my people [Kenyans]. I came to this country when I was 19 years, so I had a limited view of Kenyans. I have learned a lot about other Kenyan cultures and how to raise kids with our [Kenyan] values... I got to learn about sexuality - because people [participants] speak up about marital issues and bedroom affairs from their various cultural perspectives.

When asked whether it is more beneficial to adopt North American cultures or retain Kenyan culture, most participants preferred to have a balance of both cultures. Only a few interview participants (about 35%, n = 13) felt strongly for wholeheartedly embracing either North American or Kenyan cultures. One participant felt that she thrived in North America because she adopted American cultures and, to the extent possible, presents herself as an American. In her interview, this participant commented that:

> You really have to adopt America culture to be successful. I had to change how I pronounce words to communicate effectively. I had to learn how to dress for success.

I also had to look at people in the eye. I learned to be punctual. I had to adopt speaking up. But in Kenya, speaking up was only when you were asked a question - it was not seen as correct or seen as rude. There is a popular saying that goes something like "a closed mouth is not fed." This, to me, means that you have to open your mouth and ask for what you want. You have to ask for the opportunity because no one will bring it to you.

Few participants held extreme negative views about North American cultures and stated that their lifestyle reflected Kenyan values. Most participants supported a balance between both North American and Kenyan cultures, whereby, in public (usually professional settings), they were 'American,' but in private, they were 'Kenyan.' This notion evidenced by the following comment from an interview:

I don't think you need to be fully American to succeed. But I feel that there has to be a balance. When I go to work, I act differently from how I act at home. But I maintain my individuality. I usually pack a lunch of Kenyan food to take to work. And when people [at work] are ordering pizza, sometimes I will eat pizza with them but most times, I will still eat my Kenyan food. I don't think I have to fully conform to fit in.

It is worth noting that many participants put considerable effort into negotiating their (American) public versus their (Kenyan) private identities to ensure the distinctions are not blurred. One approach that participants used to demarcate their private and public persona was to allow their public conduct to be guided by professional ethics in their field of work. One participant explained this phenomenon in her interview by stating that:

I think anyone who is stuck between two cultures just has to be professional. This means doing things the way you are expected to do them. For example, I am personally I am anti-gay, but my profession does not allow me to act that way because it would be considered discrimination. In the same way, if a robber comes into my clinic with a gunshot wound, I will still have to treat them even if I don't stand for robbery.

Empowerment

One of the qualitative research questions in this study investigated participants' perceptions of the online communities' role in shaping their own empowering. Before

delving into the subject, the author asked the participants to describe the concept of empowerment in their own words. Participants offered various definitions of empowerment, including having the right resources to achieve your dreams and goals, having the power to create a thriving environment for yourself through reading and interacting with others, becoming a better version of yourself, and supporting women to build themselves.

Participants had varied opinions regarding whether the online communities were empowering or not. Those who believed that the online communities were empowering attributed the empowerment to the sense of community they created, the opportunities for members to promote their businesses, the emotional support provided to members going through crises, among others. Some participants disagreed with the notion that online communities are empowering entities. Nonetheless, there was unanimity on the issue that the groups served as a directory for candid information on educational opportunities, job openings, career outlook of various industries, raising children, supports for domestic violence survivors, product reviews, etc. Thus, having access to the wealth of information was universally considered an empowering feature of the online communities. In her interview remarks, one participant shared how the online community has proved dependable by providing accurate information which facilitated sound decision-making:

> I think these online communities are empowering. I have gotten information that I feel is empowering. For example, people have talked about which credit cards are good, which ones get more deals, points or cash back. I feel like this is empowering information. Teachers tell people how to stay involved in your children's education. I have received information on how to best support my children's education and navigating these systems. As a single parent, this has been encouraging and useful. It is encouraging to have a pool of women who have been there.

Another participant reported having received credible information about re-entering a professional field that provided possibilities for upward social and professional mobility. The participant stated that:

[The online community] has affected my perception of life in America. It has educated me in a lot of ways. It helped me understand that it is just not me going through certain struggles. Typically, Kenyan diasporans say that you can't translate your skills from Kenya to here. They insist that you can only do some things that are marketable in America such as nursing. But I learned from [the online community] that it is not necessarily true. So, I decided to look for a job in my field, even if it wasn't at a management level - and all this I learned through [the online community]. Two years later, I got a promotion. And even if it's not management, I still feel like I am on my way there. My degree from Kenya counted for something.

Another participant made an important point; information shared by other participants was typically from their first-hand experience, thereby making it trustworthy. Because of their diaspora status, many participants felt that their life course was different from Kenyans in Kenya or other Americans who did not understand their everyday life challenges. Thus, participants felt comfortable acting on information that has already been vouched for by a Kenyan diaspora woman like themselves, because they believed it would have similar outcomes as it did for the originator of the information. One participant shared this perspective in her interview comments:

I think [the online community] is empowering because of the type of information you get. I mean you could google but you can't get that kind of first-hand experience. I see people posting jobs and how they got into that field…. Recently, there was a woman asking about what happens to property when getting a divorce...The woman got information from lawyers and women who had experienced the same thing…this is empowering.

Participants shared stories of overcoming insurmountable challenges in their daily lives. These tales of triumph encouraged other participants to take deliberate actions to resolve the unsavory situations in their lives. This phenomenon was captured in a participant's interview when she stated that:

> To some extent, I would say that [the online communities] are empowering because when people give career advice or stories of surviving difficult situations, it shows you know that you don't have to accept certain measures – you don't have to settle. This empowering!

Some participants felt that the online communities provided opportunities for other members to improve their confidence and exercise leadership, i.e., ORS, which is a component of empowerment. In an interview, one participant remarked:

> Doing live videos helps members to practice public speaking. People who are brave enough to share their expertise enough such as prayer ministry, business, cooking, workouts etc. have opportunity to create a following and this is a way of exercising leadership.

One participant pointed out that just the mere fact of residing in North America was empowering because, in her view, aspects of the Kenyan patriarchy had a limited reach:

> Just being in America alone is empowering. When I look at the news, it is empowering knowing that I have more opportunities than the women in Kenya. I can walk out of a bad marriage, seek a better job, this is something that Kenyan women can't have. This kind of empowerment comes from being away from the oppression in some Kenyan cultures.

Marriage and Intimate Relationships

On the issue of marriage, there were stark differences in how married and unmarried view intimate relationships. Whenever participants presented marital or relationship problems (usually anonymously through HMI) and sought advice, married women typically respond differently from unmarried women. In an interview, one participant offered the following commentary:

> Now I am learning about the culture of married or partnered versus single or divorced women. These women react differently, especially when it comes to infidelity. One woman presented her problem where she thought her husband was a narcissist. Most respondents who were single advised her to leave the man, but the married respondents were encouraging her to work on her marriage. Single women saw no point in working on a marriage with a narcissist, but married women felt it was more important to keep the marriage intact.

Within the broader Kenyan diaspora in the U.S. and Canada, groups A and B gained notoriety for encouraging women to leave unfulfilling relationships. Kenyan diaspora men have complained in other forums that these online communities were responsible for the disintegration of their family unit. Subsequently, some participants viewed the online communities as contributing to 'breaking up' families because of 'misleading advice,' as evidenced by the comments from two interviews below. One participant remarked that:

> These groups are breaking homes. They intend to build families but contribute to breaking up homes because the men are not being involved. Also, the advice given tends to be biased because they are only getting it from one side.

Another participant bemoaned the purported negative influence of the online community by explaining that:

> There are women [in the groups] that are so influential, and people follow them without thinking. For example, in domestic disagreements, these women will tell you to run [leave your husband]. It's not in all instances that you have to run. Some of them tell the women to leave their husbands because they are jealous, and they want you to be in similar bad situation [singlehood] as they are.

Race Relations

Participants had various views about Kenyan diaspora women who entered unions with White men. Discussions of interracial marriages often provoked heated debates on racism, internalized racism, and colorism. During one interview, a participant informed the author that within Kenya diaspora circles, there were distinctions between how women who married White men and women who married other Africans conducted themselves at social events and by extension within the online communities. In an interview, one participant stated:

> …within these online communities there are many divisions such as wives of White men. At Kenyan events, and even online, these wives of White men act like

they're are special. There are also groupings of those who are married to West Africans because they also feel like they are special…

Disempowerment and Drawbacks

Some participants felt that the online communities were disempowering because they curtailed freedom of expression. After all, participants strived to fit in with everyone else. Some participants concealed their accomplishments and struggles because they did not want to seem different from other community members. In an interview, one participant remarked:

> I think there are many HMIs in the forums because we are in a collective culture…People don't want to admit that they have problems. For example, it is difficult for women to say that they are struggling in their marriage because they are afraid to look vulnerable, be attached and judged. We come from a judgmental culture…In the same way, we try to downplay our successes or failures so that we can be like everyone else. Americans strive for exceptionalism hence they compete a lot. But because of our collective cultures we are able to cooperate more which sometimes could be a good thing.

Interviewed participants stated that they were apprehensive about making posts because saying the wrong thing had dire consequences or exposed someone to cyber violence. Group A was known for sanctioning or expelling members who offended group members or administrators. One participant highlighted the notion that within the online communities, participants tend to cluster together and take out collective action against a perceived transgressor in the interview excerpt below:

> I hate the herd mentality. Sometimes if someone doesn't like you, then their entire clique decides that they don't like you. And people can really get mean and personal. You also don't have any control of the information you post in these groups. An admin can wake up one day and remove you and then you will have no access to your posts. I think by far the negatives outweigh the benefits.

In the interviews, some participants stated that cyberbullying was rife in the online communities. One participant described cyberbullying as the amplified negative

responses to someone's posts. This participant raised a crucial point; that someone can cyberbully others unintentionally by just making remarks that are perceived to be hurtful by the recipient:

> This doesn't affect me necessarily. However, I see other people being bullied. Once you expose yourself, then people can comment, and they might not even know that they are bullying you because they are just responding to something. This can cause people to be depressed since that they don't get the good feeling that they were hoping for. Bullying is perception. Someone can say something to you that feels like bullying…People can bully others unknowingly…

Some participants recognized that online interactions predisposed one to cyber-bullying. For that reason, many participants said that they chose to be passive members in the online community, quietly observing events from a distance as stated by one participant in her interview:

> So far, I am laid back. I just follow and observe what is happening. Sometimes I see people being attacked and that makes me want to just stay on the sidelines. I don't see the necessity of being active and outspoken. I just follow the HMIs. I am even hesitant to even post an HMI because I don't want people digging into my life.

In other instances, participants described what they believed was insidious tone policing and fear of sanctions in group A that made them apprehensive about participating freely in the online communities. One participant provided the basis for this viewpoint by stating that:

> [Online community] has thousands of women and a majority of women do not speak up, don't share their ideas and are not active. But there are other smaller [Facebook] groups that have a majority of the members being active. Those who participate are those who idolize the Admins. So, it begs the question, does the group benefit all these women? I think most of the women are quiet because what they are afraid of being kicked out. How is a platform beneficial if only a handful participate? Admins threaten to remove inactive members so as to get people to speak up. But I think if they want people to participate, then they should allow freedom of speech and give people something to be engaged about.

One of the broad perspectives held by participants was that group members related to each other depending on the clique (social grouping) they belonged to. Some participants noted that whenever influencers made a post, they got favourable responses from the online community as compared to other members without clout. Participants also pointed out that there was favouritism within the communities leading to skewed benefits of membership. The following interview comments lend credence to this assertion:

> Within [online community] there are people who have some advantages and they can get away with things. There are also those who don't matter - the kind that will post something and no one will view or comment. For some reason, I am afforded some form of privilege because when I post something, many people will respond to it…

After lamenting about the disproportionate nature of social relations in the online community, one participant offered more details stating that the inequities are a more recent phenomenon. In her interview, she argued that in the earlier days, the online community that she belonged to was a more egalitarian environment:

> At the onset, it was about empowerment, and helping people. But now, it [online community] has taken a more political angle, sidelining people who disagree with Admins and [influencers] promoting businesses of a few.

Integrated Findings from Interviews and Observations

This section below provides additional insights beyond the stated research questions about the everyday realities of the social interactions in the online communities. These revelations arose from an examination of the author's field notes and supported by evidence from observations and interviews. These presented findings provide an enhanced understanding of the research environment and variables that were studied.

Trends in Online Participation

Participants typically joined online communities with enthusiasm because of the positive reviews from their peers regarding the wealth of information, camaraderie, and never-ending entertainment. Once participants joined the group(s), they gained access to all past and future posts. Group members participated on varying levels. Some chose to lurk (observe) without reacting to any posts. Some members commented or responded with an emoji from time to time. Others frequently responded to others' posts and introduced topics for discussion. Participants cited varying degrees of online participation. Some participants were intensely engaged, while others participated marginally. It was challenging to objectively measure participants' intensity of involvement because just the mere act of logging into a group to view posts could be considered as participation. At the same time, creating and sharing posts could also be considered as participation. Thus, in Facebook groups, engagement could occur even without interaction with other group members.

On Facebook, it was challenging to get a record of the frequency and the duration of time spent by a participant in an online community without delving into complicated Internet protocol analytics. To a degree, Facebook group administrators could access the frequency of participants' actual interactions (posts, likes, comments) within the group. However, merely knowing the frequency of visible exchanges was deficient in providing details of passive participation, such as only viewing. In the online communities under study, most members were inactive members who viewed posts but seldom reacted or commented. Many of these passive members cited that they did not introduce posts or

comments for fear of adverse reactions from other members. However, there were a few participants, the influencers, who generated a substantial amount of the group's content.

At the time when the author conceptualized this research, the environments in group A and group B were quite different from what they are today. The membership in both groups was relatively smaller, there were fewer posts, and the influencers were not quite established. Group A was a space where innovation and originality were encouraged - community members affirmed each other and expressed overt support for any individual who posted in the group. However, within about two years, the landscape in group A completely transformed. Influencers emerged and began setting the tone of discussions in the community. Traffic within the group also increased ten-fold. The author attributes the increased interactions in group A to the administrators' efforts to purge the group of inactive members. From time to time, the administrators of community A issued ultimatums to members to actively participate or else face expunction from the group. Consequently, during the ultimatum period and the weeks that followed, there were many posts from several people that it was challenging to keep up with daily posts.

Posts by non-influencers in the online communities were typically not viewed hence ignored or quickly forgotten. In group A, many posts from non-influencers did not gain much traction unless they are highly emotive or controversial. As previously explained, in Facebook groups, posts that were recent and elicited more responses (active posts) were usually displayed first, which reinforced their prominence. Since many group members tended to ignore inactive posts by ordinary members, posts by non-influencers had little or no impact in the online communities. Therefore, ordinary members used

different strategies to make their posts in online communities more visible. These strategies included asking an influencer to create a post on their behalf or tagging influencers on a post. In Facebook groups, whenever a person interacted with a post, i.e., created a post, was tagged on a post, or commented on a post, their Facebook friends and followers in that group were notified. Thus, tagging influencers, who typically had many friends and followers, ensured greater visibility of the posts and guaranteed higher chances of having an active post. It is important to note that the visibility of a user's interaction on a post was also dependent on the privacy settings selected by the user. Some users had no privacy barriers, which allowed everyone in their network to be notified of their interactions with posts. Other users approved certain users, such as "specific friends," to view their interaction with posts. Still, other users had strict privacy settings that did not allow anyone but themselves to their interaction with posts. Nevertheless, as explained earlier, 'inactive posts' were more easily eclipsed by active posts, therefore, influencers played a crucial role in setting the agenda of discussions in online communities.

The author observed that in the online communities, becoming an influencer required unrelenting determination. A group member who desired to be an influencer needed to first create an online persona by describing themselves using various posts at different times. Next, the aspiring influencer identified an area of expertise and created content. Many influencers gained popularity by sharing live videos on cooking demonstrations, discussing entrepreneurial ventures, or sharing stories of personal struggles, etc. as demonstrated by this remark shared by an interview participant:

> [Being an influencer] is like being a celebrity in the Kenyan community. When a celebrity posts something meaningless, people respond to them. I think I got this

privilege because I connect with a lot of women. I have shared my struggle with childhood trauma and weight loss. And people can relate to me.

Influencers also created other diverse posts and reacted or responded to other members' posts to prompt reciprocity. Once a participant achieved influencer status, they engaged in various efforts to sustain their audience's interest. To sustain the attention of online community members, influencers engaged in various forms of emotional management. Influencers initiated emotional management by creating emotional bonds with other group members through sharing personal stories, displaying apathy or emotional openness at appropriate times, and supporting others in crisis. Emotions were the currency in online communities, and influencers had mastered the art of wielding them towards an intended goal. The emotional connections that influencers created with some group members over time morphed into a form of loyalty. The loyalty that influencers commanded was so pronounced that when an influencer claimed to have been offended, their 'loyal followers' came to the influencer's defense by flaming, responding to the purported offender in markedly aggressive tones, and clamoring to say positive things about the influencer. From time to time, influencers came under scrutiny for their actions or utterances, but the brandished loyalty of their supporters was impenetrable. One participant in her interview made the following remark:

> There are people who are loyal to [influencers] and they will always agree with them no matter how crazy it is. For example, when [influencer] puts out something, nobody will challenge it. It is impossible for all of us to agree. That is not a natural thing. I think that is fake… It's nauseating how people just grovel at [influencer]. It could be because they have a history with [influencer]...And it could also be that people are feeling protective of her because of external attacks from other forums.

Hilsen & Helvik (2004) state that the anticipation of reciprocity motivates participation and the author believes that this is true of what she observed in these online

communities. In online communities in this study, most of the influencers were also entrepreneurs. These entrepreneurial influencers frequently volunteered advice and material support. Nonetheless, they benefitted greatly from the online community as compared to the ordinary members because they had a larger audience to whom they could advertise products or services, as well as solicit donations and volunteers for their charitable efforts.

The influencers introduced HMI topics, asked general questions, or shared gossip and humor – and influencers also used the online communities to market their products, services, or organizations. Therefore, influencers' engagement with the online communities was not purely altruistic but was based upon the expectation that their visibility and broad reach would translate into publicity for their products, services, or philanthropic activities. In an interview, one participant commented on the perceived skewed benefits for members as a disempowering feature of online communities by stating that:

> [Online communities] have destroyed what real empowerment is. [Influencers] see empowerment as "how do I get someone else to fund my *&%* [expletive]". They look at online engagement as financial transactions. Most [influencers] use the platforms for financial benefit or favors.

In the author's estimation, the mere existence of influencers was an indication of social hierarchies in the online communities. Influencers possessed cultural capital that they harnessed to influence the attitudes and psyche of other participants. Fortunately, some influencers used their power (cultural hegemony) towards positive endeavors such as organizing to help those in crisis and fundraising for charities in Kenya.

From observing the online communities, the author surmises that, to be an influencer in the online communities, one required to disclose a high degree of personal

information and display emotional vulnerability to facilitate the creation of emotional

bonds with other members. However, being emotionally exposed predisposed a

participant, regardless of influencer status, to cyberbullying and gossip in online and

offline settings. Case in point, some posts from the online communities have been shared

in other forums to denigrate or ridicule the originator of the post. In an interview, one

participant described her experience with cyberbullying that occurred due to her public

activism on women's rights. Although this said participants did not experience the

cyberbullying within the online communities in the study, the participant mentioned that

she sees the potential for cyberbullying of that magnitude happening to any one of the

members of groups A and B. The participant stated that:

> … I have kept quiet in the online communities because I didn't want to be bullied. The bullying I experienced was harsh and incessant…When you block them [bullies] on social media, these women join together to amplify their voices so that they get across to you by any means necessary…Bullies are ready and prepared to break a person, so they go to any lengths to do that…When I started talking about my mental health journey, they bullied me saying that "I am playing victim". I never responded to these women since 2014. I never responded because how do you respond to over 200,000 people… Bullies get pissed off, really mad when you are not rattled or ignoring them. This year, I confronted the bullies because they talked about my children. It was also time to do it. I was ready to come out. I was prepared to handle the emotions. My advice for anyone is that if you're not able to handle cyber violence then limit your interactions with others online.

Participant Profiles in the Online Communities

In synthesizing data from observations, interviews, and field notes, the author

discovered that participants generally displayed various characteristics or typologies

which have been organized and expounded upon in the section below.

Finding [or Founding] your Tribe

As previously mentioned, participants joined online communities with the

anticipation of connecting with Kenyan diaspora women whom they perceived as having

had similar experiences and life outlook as their own. Shortly after joining, many participants discovered that influencers dominated the nature and tone of online interactions. Subsequently, some participants made the conscious choice of being passive members. The author observed that participants who wished to assert their influence typically found an influencer to rally around or strived to become an influencer themselves. Therefore finding [or founding] one's tribe was the perpetual [re]alignment of allegiances among online participants that aimed at asserting or maintain some degree of influence in the online community. This reality of negotiating a modicum of influence in the online community was expressed by a participant in an interview when she stated that:

> In [online communities], there are cultures within cultures. There are cliques. The admins are always telling people to "find your tribe." This is another way of saying that you need to find people who have similar interests such as yours. So, what has ended up happening is that within these groups there are many subgroups.

Married and Unmarried. In online communities, there were various 'tribes' that were apparent only after a prolonged engagement. The author defines 'tribes' as the conglomerations of participants with similar attitudes, behaviors, and peculiarly aligned responses on specific issues. Some of the salient tribes included the married tribe and the unmarried (single or divorced) tribes, who usually held differing viewpoints regarding intimate relationships. Whenever participants posted about difficulties in an intimate relationship, the married tribe typically encouraged the participants to 'persevere' through the challenges — conversely, the unmarried tribe supported (even encouraged) participants to exit bad relationships. As a result, there are often tensions between the married and the unmarried tribes.

The unmarried tribe expressed feeling scandalized by the married tribe because sustaining a marriage was seen as the apex of social accomplishment among most Kenyans. The unmarried tribe also felt that many married women stayed in unfulfilling relationships because of the social stigma of being unmarried in the Kenyan community. The diversities in opinions and experiences between the married and unmarried tribe gleaned from interviews are exemplified by the comments from one participant:

> From online communities, I feel more empowered to be a single mother because I don't feel the pressure to run to a man to feel whole. You meet other single mothers who are doing it. It is sort of a support group.

Moreover, participants discussed the social stigma associated with divorce. One participant from the unmarried tribe offered encouragement to another member going through a divorce by giving the following advice in this post:

> I divorced once…people talked about me and how I couldn't hold on to marriage because of 'my prostitution'. When you're divorced, some ladies avoid you because they think you are going to sleep with or take their men. Girl, hold your head straight and focus on you…When they go low, we go high.

Married conservative and married liberal. The author noticed that, among the married women, there were divergent views on how to treat husbands. Some took a conservative approach whereby they regarded the husband as the head of the family and the woman as serving a subordinate role in family matters. Married conservatives believed that in marital conflict (within heterogeneous unions), the woman played a crucial role as the pacifist and resolver of marital problems through fervent prayer, submissive acts, keeping herself 'attractive' for her husband. These conservative opinions were shared in many posts and live videos. Married conservatives would typically agree with this opinion shared in a post by one of their own that places the responsibility of holding together a marriage on the woman:

…when the lady is very aggressive and pushy, the man gives in for her to lead. But he ends up looking for somewhere else to take "his leadership" elsewhere, start drinking or find another woman, etc.

In contrast, the married women who had liberal views believed that other factors, e.g., psycho-social, emotional, or structural issues, played a role in keeping the family unit intact. Married women with liberal views encouraged women with marital problems to seek expert advice and put the onus of a successful marriage both partners.

Feminists. From observing the online communities and interviewing participants, another tribe that became apparent were the Feminists. The Feminists are members of the online communities who, in daily interactions, challenged patriarchy and affirmed women's rights. Also, Feminists tended to castigate the married tribe for suppressing their own needs over those of their husbands or partners. In an interview, one feminist opined:

> After joining [online community], I noticed that conversations veered to other topics. I am passionate about educating women to love themselves more and not rely on men to make themselves feel whole. I realized the conversations in [online community] were not for me because I saw women valued relationships with men more than they valued themselves. The conversations that women would have would be hinged around responsibilities to their husbands. There were many references to "rushing home to cook for one's husband" and I would respond with "doesn't your man have hands, so why do you have to rush home to cook?" I found it bizarre how women were preoccupied with serving men and when I pointed it out, it put me at odds with members. I didn't expect women in the diaspora to speak like this, especially in a Westernized world where women have rights.

The Feminist tribe were a growing constituency who were dispelling taboos and judgment around issues of women looking after their interests. Moreover, feminists did not shy away from controversy and advocated for stances that prioritized the needs of women. An example of these feminist attitudes was captured in a participant's post that stated:

I support dating financially stable men because it ensures comfort and happiness if it's a violence-free union. I'm not hating on anyone dating a poor man. I'm just hoping they can see the challenges that comes with these unions…Feminism is freedom and freedom from poverty…

Woke and Apologists. The author also saw that feminists and other Woke (politically conscious) participants expressed their dismay at how many participants failed to harness their political power to effect real change in the Kenyan diaspora. According to the Woke tribe, most participants logged into the online communities to 'hang out' without a real political purpose, making it akin to a sorority as explained by a participant in an interview:

> I first joined [group A] to network. I liked the group's purpose. Afterwards, I didn't feel like the group was beneficial to me. While they were addressing some things, it felt like a sorority. I left and joined [group B], and after a while I felt the same. [Group B] is just a group of defectors… I now run my organization [effecting real changes] so I am too busy to be keeping up them.

The Woke tribe frequently expressed their disappointment with what they believed was participants' apathy towards empowering themselves or others. Some members of the Woke tribe pointed out that influencers were exploiting other members. The Woke tribe also pointed out that non-influencers stayed in the groups because they expected that their loyalty to the influencers would be rewarded by future assistance whenever they faced problems. In an interview, one participant pointed out this phenomenon, labeling the anticipation of reciprocation as a toxic relationship between the influencers and non-influencers:

> [Influencers] in these groups ask members to nominate them for various awards and vote for them. And women do these because they feel that if they don't do the leaders' bidding, then they will fall out of favor with their leaders and their foot soldiers. These women are scared of falling out with the leaders because they feel that, should they have a problem then no one will help them. They are afraid of losing favor with the leaders who have the ability to mobilize resources on their behalf. It is because these groups serve as a social-safety net. There is a sense of safety in

numbers and many of these women want to belong to something. This is probably the case for people who do not have strong social networks, and people who are either undocumented or undergoing immigration issues financial or medical difficulties. Therefore, you see people are being held at ransom…It's a toxic culture. These are behaviors that are hindrances to growth.

In the author's estimation, the Apologists tribe is the antithesis of the Woke tribe. The Apologists viewed the online communities as an essential resource for aiding Kenyan diasporans. Apologists underscored how regrettable it was that some Kenyan diasporans failed to support Kenyan ventures until they need help from the Kenyan community. In an interview, one Apologist commented that: "we have seen Kenyans who just dissociate from Kenyans until they hit hard times."

The author observed that the Apologists were quick to defend the online communities' leadership or members whenever they were criticized or challenged on their practices. One Apologist created the post below after a member complained that one of the influencers was using her influence to persuade other participants to purchase items from the cosmetics line owned the influencer. This post by one apologist swiftly generated responses from other apologists as seen in the excerpt below:

Some people join [online community], get famous within a few days for all the wrong reasons and then think that they run the show.... I must applaud you [influencer] for having a thick skin... The job you do is not for the faint hearted!!!.... I don't know you, but I thank God for giving you this vision. Like they say, we are our own enemies. Carry the vision…

Responses:

- Absolutely! I saw it coming so am not surprised. Keep your head high… and by the way nobody is forced to buy your face cream, I personally bought it out of my own will and I absolutely love it. Women, we are our own enemies.
- I don't know what the issue is. I haven't bought the face cream yet, but when I need to restock will definitely do it. We have to support our own. We don't have a problem going to MAC [cosmetic franchise], yet we cannot patronage our own? We should learn from Jewish people, they came here with nothing, yet now they are very wealthy. They help each other, they stick together and help each other succeed. God help us to support each other.

- An eagle soaring above the thunderstorm is never worried about the chickens that are scratching on the ground. I just wonder why people can't leave as quietly as they came.

In a separate instance, one influencer defended her stance of initiating the expulsion of non-conformists (usually from the Woke tribe) who she claimed were courting trouble (drama) by posting the following:

At this time, people are going through so much emotional stress and uncertainty. This is not the time to start drama in this group about who did what or who left. People are free to leave this group as they please...We are trying to move forward, No one is glued here so keep your drama out of this group. Those who value this group sure do not have time for drama…. For the women chasing drama, there are so many groups out there to join.

The scenario above provides evidence that within the online communities, there is a low tolerance for opposition. Specifically, in group A, challenging the influencers and administrators was particularly not allowed and often lead to counter attacks and expulsion. Members were divided over the suppression of dissent. The Apologists viewed it as a necessary measure to maintain a peaceful online environment while the Woke viewed it as a transgression of the freedom of expression.

One participant who aligns herself with the Woke tribe offered a somewhat balanced view indicating that it was perfectly fine for online communities to be either political or non-political. This particular participant compared the online communities to a gathering place where participants go to connect with their friends (or tribe members). In her interview, this participant remarked that "…in essence, [online communities] are just a pub or hangout spot whereby, even if you don't like the bartender, you still go there because your friends hang out there."

Assimilationists and Purists. The author observed that most online participants favored biculturalism because they felt that it would facilitate their success in all aspects

of their lives. There was, however, a minority that ascribed to assimilation and another

minority that preferred separation. The author considered these groups as the

Assimilationists and the Purists, respectively. The Assimilationists felt that the only way

to succeed in North America is to shed off all 'Kenyanisms' and become truly American.

The Assimilationists saw no value in associating with Kenyans; instead, they saw it as a

crutch as one participant expressed in her interview:

> I don't see [online communities] as providing specialized information that I would
> not get elsewhere… We live in America. And our experiences are not just Kenyan.
> Our experiences are with all these communities. If we are just secluding ourselves
> with Kenyans, then we are limiting ourselves. This country is so diverse - we will not
> be experiencing diversity if we limit ourselves to Kenyans only. It will give us a
> myopic view of life... I know that there are people who go there that are seeking
> Kenyan women…

Conversely, the Purists strongly advocated for the retention of Kenyan cultures,

particularly when raising children as they believed that Kenyan values solidified an

admirable character as evidenced by the interview comment below:

> I am Kenyan. I want people to maintain their own culture... I would rather stick to my
> Kenyan roots. I even speak to my children in Kiswahili and will continue to do so
> until I die. As a result, my children act like Kenyan children. For example, when
> visitors come over to my house, my children will come downstairs and greet them
> then go to their rooms. American kids may not greet adults and just sit there and
> watch TV. Even dressing, I also don't like how American teens dress so scantily
> therefore I do not let my children dress like that.

Still, some participants advocated for a more balanced adaptation of American

culture to ensure that one's children are not unfairly isolated from their American peers.

In an observed post, one criticized some Purist diasporans for 'unfairly excluding' their

children from participating in some American traditions. This participant wrote that:

> …Today, I showed up for Halloween party at my son's school… As soon as I walked
> in, I noticed kids having a good time snacking in their costumes. There was this little
> girl of color sitting under the desk reading a book but crying. I walked up to her to
> find out if she is ok. She tells me her allergies are bothering her and she does not want

to be in the party because she has no costume. I went to the teacher who tells me the girl is new to the class, she did not have a costume and her mom sent her with a note saying that she cannot eat any Halloween related candy, snacks or drinks. Poor girl is left out because of her mother's beliefs. I appreciate that our culture is different, etc. But sometimes we torture our kids. This would have been the day to pick up the kid early from school so that she doesn't have to sit around while others make merry. I made the kid a crown to wear and she put away the book and was mingling with others - allergy gone! Unfortunately, you know teachers here follow directions hence poor kid could not eat or drink anything. Long story short, don't make your child suffer due to baseless beliefs. Try to show your face [at school] occasionally. On that note, I have decided to volunteer to be the class parent to look out for our own since am the only idle Black parent in the class. Happy Halloween dearies. Let me go hunt for candy.

The author observed that exchanges between members of the various tribes within the online communities with opposing viewpoints sometimes turned personal and extended to their offline settings, ruining previously established friendships. One interview participant pointed out that one of the drawbacks of online participation was that a minor misunderstanding caused by the absence of non-verbal cues could lead to in-fighting:

A lot of people spend time reading and try to make sense of what someone posts. Many people misunderstand posts, and this causes conflict. Seventy percent of people always have conflict because they misunderstand posts.

Whenever disagreements arose, the author saw that some outspoken group members did not hesitate to flame those with opposing views and rally support from other members of their tribe for their actions. In many instances, the loyal supporters of influencers flamed those who publicly criticized an influencer. Whitty & Joinson (2009) posited that in online settings, participants used stronger language to compensate for the absence of nonverbal cues. The author agrees with this view and also thinks that those who flamed others felt emboldened because they were shielded behind a computer screen and had the backing of their 'tribe' to help them fortify their stance.

The author also observed that the expressed emotional vulnerability and enhanced self-disclosure that was typical in the groups led to intimate relationships (Annisette & Lafreniere, 2017), particularly among members of the same tribe. Inasmuch as participants of the same tribe agreed with each other on most issues, there were instances where the expectation of reciprocation of support in offline and online settings was unfulfilled, resulting in one party feeling dejected as one interview participant noted:

> Sometimes people can be delusional… People may think they have a real relationship with someone online but, when other person drops them, then they get depression. Other people have pseudo accounts and can mislead others to think that they have a connection with them when they really don't - and some people have gotten suicidal because of this.

Convergent and Divergent Mixed-Methods Findings

The qualitative data illuminated the numbers presented in the quantitative study and illustrated the complexity and greater nuance and context of concepts like empowerment, online participation, sense of community, and social isolation. The qualitative and quantitative analyses, the data provided convincing evidence that social isolation was a significant predictor of biculturalism, empowerment, and SOC. The path analysis depicted social isolation as the independent variable of the model. Generally, social isolation is the subjective experience of having few social interactions and emotional relations with significant others (Cornwell & Waite, 2009). Many participants had friends and family in North America; thus, they were not socially isolated when applying the general definition. However, participants joined and participated in online communities precisely because they felt that they were socially isolated from other Kenyan diaspora women. Qualitative data supported this assertion whereby most participants cited that their motivation for joining the online communities was because they had insufficient contact and connection with other Kenyan diaspora women, i.e.,

they were socially isolated from the Kenyan population. Participants, being Kenyan diaspora women, viewed themselves as being on a different life course from those in Kenya or other North American women. Thus, participants had a strong desire to connect with others who have had similar experiences to theirs.

By joining the online communities, participants increased their social capital by nurturing meaningful relationships, gaining access to useful information, and accessing social resources to solve their everyday problems – all precursors of empowerment, biculturalism, and SOC. In other words, the acknowledgment of one's social isolation offered a pathway to empowerment, positive acculturation, and SOC through online participation.

Results from path analysis indicated that the overall effect of social isolation on biculturalism was mostly direct. ORS mediated the impact of social isolation on biculturalism in a marginal manner. Put simply, the acknowledgment of one's social isolation led to one's online participation and, in turn, their online participation led to their positive acculturation. This finding was also supported by qualitative data, which indicated that the lack of 'sufficient contact' with the Kenyan diaspora motivated participants to want to retain Kenyan cultural practices and pragmatically adopt Northern American cultures, as seen in the following remark from an interview. In the interview, when asked whether it was beneficial to maintain Kenyan culture or embrace American customs, one participant responded in this manner:

> It depends [on the situation]. When you are raising kids, you need to adopt a Kenyan perspective. But when it comes to conducting yourself in the workforce, you have to adopt American culture. You have to balance the situation.

Overall, social isolation was a significant predictor of both biculturalism and empowerment. These findings are less surprising if we consider that in interviews, participants' perceived empowerment and their knowledge of cultures stemming from having access to useful information and the ability to pool resources together to help persons in crisis. Sharing information was an empowering feature, as one participant explained in an interview:

> Sharing information is empowering. There is informal mentoring going on. People getting career advice on career changes, their experiences. People also share freely on investments, planning for the future, insurance and health.

Within online communities, some members who were professional experts dispensed *pro bono* advice and services to group members experiencing problems. Some group members who shared their predicaments received material support from individual members or as a coordinated effort under the direction of group administrators. Nonetheless, that process was sometimes marred with controversy as one interview participant explained:

> I don't participate in [online community] fundraisers, because I don't know how they pick who is to be assisted. As far as I know, this is like a sorority, and there's nothing wrong with a sorority - but I wish they did more.

The quantitative analysis results revealed that the effects of social isolation on sense of community was mediated by online participation and opportunity role structure. In other words, group members who felt that they mattered to the group were typically those who engaged in online interactions and perceived that they served a vital function to the group functioning. This quantitative finding converged with qualitative data that the author gleaned from interviews. Participants who reported that they felt that they did

not 'belong' in the group were typically those who had neither a formal role nor influencer status.

Although biculturalism offered a significant pathway to a SOC, it did have any mediation effect. In other words, having positive acculturation was associated with the feeling that one belonged to the online community but had no impact on the variability of a SOC.

Despite the variability of the variable relationships between the conceptual model (input model) and output (final) path models, the overall findings from qualitative analysis and qualitative analyses corresponded to each other more than they differed. Besides, the qualitative data revealed intricacies of concepts such as empowerment, online participation, SOC, and social isolation as they manifested in the virtual environment.

Chapter 6: Discussion

[Online community] is empowering on a lot of different levels… women can get together with others in the same situation to advance themselves. Members are able find information that is relevant for their unique circumstances. (Francisca, [online participant], 2019).

Diasporas' Facebook Groups as Imagined Communities

Diasporas' Facebook groups (online communities) in this study are imagined communities in every sense, as postulated in Benedict Anderson's "Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism," initially published in 1983 and republished in 2016. In it, Anderson argues that nations are imagined communities because "even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (p. 39). Similarly, many members of the Facebook groups of this study had not had direct contact with many of the members, yet they viewed themselves as a unit of the larger group. The creation of virtual communities by African diasporan women in North America stems from their recognition of the centrality of a community of similar women to survive and thrive (Gueye, 2019).

As with nations, diasporas' Facebook groups are sovereign because their leaders are not a divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm, but leadership can be conferred, earned, or usurped through deliberate actions, as evidenced through the rise of influencers within the groups. Lastly, diasporas' Facebook groups, like nations, are imagined communities because, despite inequalities or exploitation, they prevail because of a deep sense of lateral comradeship amongst members, as demonstrated by the 'apologists'

defense of what 'the woke' viewed as injustices or inequities. This study and previous

virtual ethnographies found that the perceived comradeship and shared identity among

online community members stemmed from the view that the online community created a

safe space where members could share their innermost intimate details about their lives

(Lee, 2013).

The Nuanced Diaspora Identity

Related to the notion of diasporas' Facebook groups as imagined communities the

awareness that the diaspora identity is a subjective conception. In the virtual discourses,

the author captured new understandings of participants' subjectivities as tied to the

ethnic, national, transnational, and global dimensions of identification. This nuanced

nature of identity was embodied in Stuart Hall's (1990) "Cultural Identity and Diaspora"

expressed whereby he expressed that there were different ways of thinking about cultural

identity such as seeing oneself as a part of a group that shares a history and ancestry, an

imaginative rediscovery of oneself after experiencing dispersal and fragmentation and

viewing oneself from the lens of otherness (Hall, 1990). Gilroy (1993) added that the

intersection of race, culture, and political impacts diasporas' formulation of their identity,

their relationship to others in society as well as their countries of heritage. Similarly, this

study found that participants' perception of their positionality influenced their processes

of biculturalism, sense of belonging, and perceptions of empowerment within the virtual

communities.

 A Synthesis of Analyses

In this study, the author conducted various analyses, including path analysis,

discourse analysis, and thematic analysis to investigate the relationships between multiple

variables in two online communities of Kenyan diasporan women residing in the U.S. and Canada. At the onset of this study, the author hypothesized that online participation was negatively correlated with social isolation would predict biculturalism and increased empowerment with ORS and SOC as mediators in the conceptual model. This *a priori* hypothesis defined biculturalism using Berry's acculturation model (Berry, 1995; 2003), measured empowerment using Holden et al., (2015) empowerment theory, estimated social isolation using Cornwell & Waite's (2009) perceived social isolation scale and adapted findings from Powell & Peterson (2014) and Peterson et al. (2014) respectively to demonstrate how ORS and SOC influence empowerment.

Notwithstanding, the conceptual model was not a good fit for the data. The author believes that the lack-of-fit was attributed to the relatively high negative skewness of online participation, the hypothesized independent variable. The skewness was likely caused by participants' underreporting of their online engagement in Facebook groups, a well-documented phenomenon in previous studies (Ellison et al., 2007; Olufadi; 2016; Steinfield et al., 2008). Moreover, the skewed responses could also be attributed to recall bias, a systematic error that occurs when participants do not remember previous events or experiences accurately or omit details (Catalogue of Bias Collaboration et al., 2017). The results from the initial hypothesized path model yielded no statistically significant relationships between the variables.

Findings from the output model indicated that social isolation, i.e., the perceived loneliness and insufficient contact with Kenyan diasporans, was the significant predictor of biculturalism (positive acculturation), empowerment, and a sense of community. Participants' consciousness of their 'difference' from mainstream Americans and the

desire to connect with similar others was a significant predictor of biculturalism, empowerment, and a sense of community. Online participation and opportunity role structure were mediating variables in the study. Hence, exercising consequential responsibilities within the online community was responsible for a part of the relationship between social isolation and biculturalism, empowerment, and a sense of community.

Contribution to Theory and Knowledge

To the best of the author's knowledge, this virtual ethnography was the first attempt to apply a theoretical framework integrating three different theories (i.e., acculturation, empowerment, and social isolation theories) to explore the everyday realities Kenyan diaspora women in North America that participate in online communities. By conducting this virtual ethnography, the author provided an *explanation* for how social isolation manifests in the sample which is consistent with the literature indicating that social isolation is "absence of significant others someone relates with, trusts, and turns to in times of crisis" (Hawthorne, 2006, p. 521). The most compelling evidence for this notion is the revelation that acknowledging one's social isolation provided the impetus for Kenyan diasporan women to seek out social connections, with similar others (Kenyan diasporan women), consequently providing pathways for the attainment of biculturalism, increased empowerment and a sense of community.

From this study, the author learned that empowerment was perceived differently by various participants, just as delineated in a study by Holden and colleagues (2015). For participants, empowerment was understood either as an internalized attitude, as observable behavior, or both. Participants described empowerment as having

opportunities to work collaboratively with others in the online community on issues that were important to them. Also, participants felt that belonging to the online community empowered them because it gave them access to information to improve their lives as well as making it possible for them to support other members. Hence, the author *verified* existing empowerment theories by Cheryomukhin & Peterson (2014), Christens et al., (2013), Miguel et al., (2015) and Holden et al. (2015) who cite that empowerment is a process and an outcome associated with having access to resources, timely access of information, having a sense of community, and opportunities for participation.

Nevertheless, for empowerment to be attained, the empowerment facilitators such as resources, information, and opportunities to participate need to be culturally contextualized to have impact and relevance. For instance, from the study, participants cited that information about domestic violence assistance was available at any public agency in North America or through an Internet search. However, participants mentioned that they better understood information shared from 'one of their own,' i.e., another participant whose cultural awareness of participants' lives facilitated the meaningful exchange of information.

Previous theories of SOC described it as the emotional attachment to a group (McMillan and Chavis, 1986), that was positively correlated with participation (Cicognani et al., 2008) and mitigated against negative life experiences (Lardier et al., 2017). Likewise, in this study, SOC was characterized by the perception of emotional connection and mutual support arising from online participation. Much of the SOC in online communities was depicted through the coalescing of participants with similar

attributes, a process that the author described as "finding one's tribe." Understandably, participants supported members of their 'tribe' and presented a unified front against members of opposing 'tribes.' The exposition of SOC in this manner was facilitated by a phenomenological approach used to collect and analyze qualitative data. Phenomenology, expedited *verstehen,* the description of phenomena from participants' perspectives (Bryman, 2016; Hammersley, 2003) and pointed to how online participation influenced participants' SOC. In previous studies, SOC was a precursor to participation (community engagement) (Cicognani et al., 2008; Hughey et al., 1999), but in this study, the relationship was inverse.

Generally speaking, biculturalism is associated with the ability to exist between two cultures seamlessly (Berry, 2005), whereas SOC is related to a feeling of belonging (Nowell & Boyd, 2014). To effectively participate in the online communities, one needed to have some insight on the topics of interest, feel understood by others, and understand the cultural maneuverings that participants had to make daily to fit in Kenyan and North American cultures. In other words, participants had to be biculturalized to feel like they belonged in the online communities and vice versa. Hence these findings add to the existing broader knowledge on acculturation and SOC theories in the following manner; for immigrants, integrating into a new society is contingent on feeling accepted and emotionally accepted by society members. Similarly, having a sense of belonging provides an individual with the emotional security needed to explore or adopt other cultural expressions and symbols.

In this study, biculturalism was an outcome variable arising from social isolation and online participation. This phenomenon can be interpreted as the recognition of one's

social isolation motivated participants to engage with other Kenyan diasporans directly and through online participation, thus predicting the attainment of biculturalism. The existing acculturation theories (Berry 1997; 2003; 2005) seem to suggest that biculturalism (and different acculturation outcomes) are permanent attitudinal and behavioral changes. The author agrees with Berry's notion that acculturation is manifested in behaviors and attitudes. Similar to Ward (2008), the author concurs that Berry's acculturation model presented an orderly framework for examining acculturation. However, as seen in this study, there were variations in how participants exhibited these attitudes and behaviors in their everyday intercultural encounters. Participants expressed various acculturation modes at different circumstances; many participants appeared 'assimilated' at their schools or workplaces but 'separated' from mainstream culture in their private domains. This idea of fluidity in the display of acculturation was also expressed in a study by Habecker (2017). In effect, Berry's acculturation theories may not be entirely suited for some populations, such as diasporans, who, as the qualitative findings showed, generally engage in code-switching and intercultural shifts to portray the best form of themselves while in the public domain.

Lastly, the existing theories on ORS regard it as a component of and a contributor to empowerment (Forenza, 2016; Maton & Salem, 1995; Peterson et al., 2014; Powell et al., 2017). The assertion that ORS contributed to empowerment was supported by the qualitative data whereby participants described empowered members as those who exercised leadership and whose efforts influenced the online communities' functioning. In the author's estimation, online participation elevated ORS in the daily lives of Kenyan diaspora women by increasing possibilities for meaningful engagement within the

broader diaspora community by allocating tasks to members and allowing members to share information on areas of their expertise such as cuisine, entrepreneurship, financial advice, medical advice, physical exercise, real-estate guidance, etc..

From the author's perspective, by conducting this virtual ethnography, the author learned that Kenyan diasporan women are complex and diverse. In online communities, participants shared stories about their struggles and triumphs. Many participants were successful in their family life, professions. Yet, others struggled in various aspects of their lives. Participants who were striving to improve their circumstances found opportunities to connect with mentors (within online communities) to facilitate information sharing. The online communities had some weaknesses, as the author has elucidated. These drawbacks were typical of any institution that was rapidly growing and trying to address various concerns of its members. Fortunately, the online communities have shown a capacity to reform and organize efforts towards agendas that are vital to its members. Despite the shortcomings, the online communities continue to grow in membership precisely because they address the unique needs of the Kenyan diaspora women in North America, which are reducing social isolation, positive acculturation, empowerment, and promoting a sense of community with culturally relevant approaches.

In the author's view, the existence of the various 'tribes' described in chapter 5 was evidence of the heterogeneity of the Kenyan diasporan women in North America whose experiences and trajectories cannot be generalized using metanarratives (Lyon, 2005). Kenyan diasporan women in North America in the online communities had varied aspirations, worldviews, and lived experiences but they all aspired to highlight their

'desired attributes' and feel accepted by others thereby lending credence to Adler's and Roger's theories of perfection and unconditional positive regard respectively.

The existence of the 'tribes' heralded participants' exercise of cultural capital through coalescing with members having similar viewpoints as their own. Cultural hegemony was demonstrated through the fact that influencers yielded more considerable influence over others in any online community. For instance, posts by influencers usually receive more positive responses, are shared more widely, and other community members act on their ideas as compared to non-influencers.

Furthermore, the contestation between the various tribes indicates that online communities provided a public sphere where participants interacted, initiated collective action, and challenged hegemonic structures (Calhoun, 1992; Goode, 2005; Habermas, 1990). The heterogeneity of the study population and their capacity to overcome challenges in their everyday lives underscored the idea that the Kenyan diaspora women are endowed with various attributes and resources, which, if properly harnessed, could be applied towards positive endeavors for other North American and Kenyan communities.

The Future of Online Communities

From the literature review and data analyses about diasporans, the author deduced that many Kenyan women diaspora in North America were striving lot, who are continually looking for ways to improve their lives and chart a better future for their families. This striving reality explains why many participants chose to focus on the benefits and overlook the drawbacks of online communities even when they are apparent – participants were just too busy handling more pressing matters in their lives.

The data also show that online communities served a functional role in the lives of Kenyan diaspora women. Despite complaints about curtailed freedom of expression, many participants believed that compared to other Kenyan diaspora groups, group A had the potential for longevity owing to their ability to limit internal conflict and reinvent itself to meet the needs of its members. For instance, to maintain relevance, group A ventured into asset investment and table banking. These efforts pooled monies from members and helped them to purchase real estate in Kenya. Moreover, group A initiated a welfare fund whereby subscribing members accessed financial aid to offset funeral expenses for family members or to offer cash benefits to their surviving relatives in case of a member's demise.

Some interviewed participants felt that the online communities would not last long because there was a growing majority who felt that their voices or opinions were ignored since only influencers initiated engaging discussions. At the time of completion of this virtual ethnography, participants had the option of belonging to the larger online communities and the smaller regional chapters that were recently introduced. Other participants lauded the devolution into smaller chapters saying that it was an indication of the online communities' commitment to addressing members' local needs.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study
Strengths

First, the author conducted this virtual ethnography as a complete participant, spent sufficient time in the field, obtained naturally occurring data, and made deliberate efforts to minimize research reactivity. Taking up the role of a complete participant provided the author with the ability to perceive systematic patterns occurring and the emotional meanings evoked through the interaction. By being a complete participant, the

author also drew on linguistic and emotional resources to capture meanings emerging between participants and act as a cultural interpreter.

Secondly, this study utilized a path model, a procedure used to explore hypothesized direction, magnitude and significance relationships between various observed variables constructs. According to (Byrne, 2016), a significant benefit of using path analysis over multiple regression models was the ability to test whether the overall fit of the proposed model and author's theory were consistent with the data. The path model also provided the possibilities for model improvements, which strengthened the author's theories (Byrne, 2010).

Thirdly, using a multi-modal, mixed-methods approach helped to achieve the thoroughness of the research. The various data sources were useful in triangulating findings. The consistencies between qualitative findings and the quantitative results indicate that this study was conceptualized on a sound theoretical basis. Moreover, the relationships between the variables namely empowerment, ORS and SOC found in the study corresponded with those found in existing studies. The unanticipated finding of social isolation being a predictor variable was verified both qualitative and quantitative data. This surprising finding also provides directions/ pathway for conducting more studies on social isolation with other diaspora groups

Lastly, this virtual ethnography demonstrated that recognizing a problem is the first step towards finding a lasting solution. For instance, in this study, it can be interpreted that participants' acknowledgment of their social isolation motivated them to take action, such as join online communities, which provided a pathway to empowerment

Limitations

Conducting this study as a complete participant may have introduced Hawthorne effect within the online community. Although this may be true, the author's observations included posts that were made prior to the announcement of the study which could be viewed as free from research reactivity.

This study used non-probability (purposeful and snowball) sampling, which has restrictions on generalizability and representativeness (Rubin & Babbie, 2013). However, transferability is possible. Concepts from this study's findings, such as a sense of community, camaraderie, digital activism, and so forth, could apply to other contexts, situations, times, and populations. The intention of this study was not to generalize findings but to generate knowledge on the everyday realities of Kenyan diaspora women in North America as it pertains to the constructs of interest. Since the author did not seek participants' informed consent for systematic observations (a measure to minimize research reactivity), there is a likelihood that some participants may be unhappy upon the publication of this dissertation, knowing that they were observed without consent. To forestall potential negative feelings of exposure, the author has excluded or modified individual identifiers of participants' posts, paraphrased interview comments, and described observations in a composite way.

Another limitation of this study was that the modified scales relied on self-reports which are susceptible to social desirability bias (Gordon, 1987; Gravdal & Sandal, 2006; Miller, 2012; Robert DeVellis, 2017). To minimize social desirability, the author utilized statement format items, and also provided an introductory statement at the beginning of

the questionnaire asking the respondents to answer truthfully and reminding participants that there were no "right or wrong" answers.

The author faced various difficulties in recruitment, resulting in a relatively low response to population size. To increase sample size, the participant made three study modifications and relied heavily on a snowball approach, which could have led so some selection bias.

This study was a self-funded project, and incentives for participation were not offered because the author lacked funding to disburse to participants. Some monetary rewards for participation may likely have incentivized more participants to complete the survey; however, this was not an option for the author. In a conversation with another researcher, the author learned that the researcher who was researching a Facebook group paid the Facebook administrators to get the administrators' assistance in recruiting participants. The researcher said that co-opting the administrators was an effective strategy since participants generally trust group administrators and will do their bidding. Nevertheless, conducting this virtual ethnography gave the author a more in-depth insight into the power dynamics in online communities and fortified her position that offering direct incentives to administrators to recruit is coercion and contravenes research ethics.

The author used a path analysis to measure the magnitudes and directions of observed variables using quantitative data. Nonetheless, the qualitative data revealed other observed variables such as participant status i.e. whether a participant was an influencer or not that could have affected the outcomes of the study. Therefore, a full SEM model incorporating latent and observed variables would have provided more

comprehensive results SEM incorporates the effects of latent variables and also accounts for measurement error.

Ultimately, this study was cross-sectional, which makes it challenging to prove causality. Despite the demonstration of relationships between variables and temporal sequence, the ability to rule out rival explanations for the observed associations in the model is difficult, therefore, posing a challenge to causal inference (Abu-Bader, 2010).

Implications of the Study

Practical Implications for Social Work

This study addressed two Grand Challenges for Social Work identified by the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare, namely: eradicating social isolation and harnessing technology for social good (Fong et al., 2018). The author posited that online participation was a viable way of using technology to address social isolation. Thereby, by investigating whether and how technology in the form of (virtual communities) could reduce social isolation among Kenyan diaspora women, the author was tackling two of the Grand Challenges for Social Work. Furthermore, the author expected that the study findings would provide more in-depth insight into how online participation could reduce social isolation and contribute to biculturalism (integration) and empowerment. The empowerment of client populations is a core tenet of the Social work profession. The preamble to the NASW (2008) Code of Ethics states explicitly that:

> The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty (p. 1).

The author anticipated that findings from this study would improve the cultural competencies of social workers working with clients who participate in online

communities. Currently, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), stipulates that all social workers are required to display and exercise cultural competence in their professional practice. Cultural competence is a core tenet of social work practice, research, and policy that helps social workers to become more attuned to the needs of their clients (NASW, 2018). Cultural competency also helps social workers to provide more relevant interventions and services. Therefore, understanding online interactions is an essential skill for present-day and future social workers because online communities are ubiquitous for many people with access to computers and mobile telephones (Andújar-vaca & Cruz-Martínez, 2017; Chew et al., 2015; Licoppe & Smoreda, 2005; Mackay, 2005).

Ultimately, Kenyan diaspora women in the U.S. and Canada need to be a priority for empowerment interventions because as with other immigrant groups, they are vulnerable to social isolation which could predispose them to or worsen substance addiction, physical and mental health disorders (Fenta et al., 2007; Rogers-Sirin, 2013). Presently, global human migration is higher than it has ever been in history. More human movement means that worldwide, diaspora communities are growing by the day. Therefore, it is crucial for service providers such as governments, local authorities, and social service agencies to understand how to reduce or eradicate social isolation among this population and whether online participation is a practical approach to attain this goal.

The results of this study yielded proof that virtual communities offered opportunities to counteract social isolation. Therefore, online participation was a two-prong approach to addressing two Grand Challenges for Social Work; eradicating social

isolation and harnessing technology for social good. The findings suggest that recognizing one's social isolation may have motivated Kenyan diaspora women to participate in virtual communities, and as a result, they were better acculturated, felt empowered and felt cared for by other members of the online community. Given that online participation offered numerous benefits to our sample of participants, Social Workers working with immigrant groups might encourage those with limited social connections from their heritage culture to join online communities where people from their cultures of origins participate as a means to increase their social capital and foster supportive relationships.

Presently, diaspora communities comprise one-fifth of the U.S. population, and their numbers are continually growing (USAID, 2017). Diasporans retain emotional, financial, and social ties to their ancestral home (Ben-Rafael, 2013), making them excellent partners in international development efforts. Presently, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is partnering with diaspora communities to use their expertise and resources in their countries of origin on various focus areas of social work, including economic empowerment, humanitarian assistance, philanthropy, volunteerism among others (USAID, 2017). From this study, the author learned that diasporans typically interact with each other and with their contacts from their heritage on social media platforms. Therefore, understanding the dynamics of online participation is a vital skill for Social Workers who choose to collaborate with or address issues that impact diaspora groups.

Implications for Social Media Engagement

As seen in this study, cyberviolence exists in online communities. Online participants perpetrated cyberviolence through sharing language and symbols that were demeaning or hurtful to others. Online participation can be beneficial when within a civil environment, i.e., and an environment that is free from cyber violence. Similarly, Antoci et al. (2019) found that participants exposed to civil Facebook interactions were significantly more trusting. Therefore, civility in online environments contributes to trust, social bonding, and social capital (Alencar, 2018), which in this study, were components of empowerment and a sense of community. To prevent cyberviolence, online community administrators should institute guidelines for civil discourse in online communities. The rules for civil engagement should be made public and accessible to all participants entering the online environment. Moreover, cyberviolence should be prohibited, and perpetrators reprimanded by barring their participation until they recompense or permanent expulsion.

<div align="center">

Directions for Future Research

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Future studies will have to explore how the modified scales could yield better validity. In this study, some items in the quantitative scales yielded high skewness and kurtosis. From the participation scale, one of the items that had a high skewness and kurtosis was worded as "on a typical day, about how much time do you spend reading and posting (combined) messages on the profiles of [the online community]? To address these normality problems, the author recommends the dichotomization of such an item so as to be able to analyze the distinctions between respondents who participate intensely and those who participate marginally. Another scale with high skewness and kurtosis was

the social isolation scale, particularly the item worded as "before joining [this online community], I lacked companionship from my friends and family." For future studies, the author recommends presenting this item as two questions; "(i)…I lacked companionship from my friends", and (ii) "... I lacked companionship from my family" as it was in the original (unmodified) social isolation scale.

Virtual ethnography as a research process deserves attention because it presents new opportunities for understanding human behavior and society (Hargittai & Sandvig, 2015). From conducting this study, the author learned that a virtual ethnography is a useful strategy for understanding the experiences of minorities or marginalized communities because it provides rich contextualized data about online participants and their daily lives. Nevertheless, virtual ethnographies should be conducted by members of the online community to minimize research reactivity and forestall feelings of exploitation by online participants. When studying online communities with a lot of participants and inter-participant interactions, the author recommends using systematic observations to focus on online interactions that were related to the topics being studied. The author also recommends using multimodal approaches to investigate phenomena, confirm, and triangulate findings. In conducting a virtual ethnography, a researcher should ask questions such as: what are participants' motivations for online participation; what are participants' perceived benefits or drawbacks from participation; and how do participants' online interactions impact the online environment? These aforementioned questions form the basis of a virtual ethnography because they are a starting point of elucidating the everyday realities of participants' in the virtual community.

Despite their inherent benefits, virtual ethnographies may take a long time to be completed because they usually require the researcher to spend sufficient time in the field and to apply multimodal approaches to data collection (Matzner & Ochs, 2017). Also, the author, like Kadende-Kaiser (2000), found herself planning, collecting, and analyzing data concurrently while conducting the virtual ethnography. Importantly, establishing trust between the virtual ethnographer and participants is crucial in completing a virtual ethnography – an undertaking that could take a long time (Robson, 2017). More people are using online communities as a means of socialization and interaction, thus making them a permanent fixture of present-day reality. Subsequently, in the future, more research investigating cultures are likely to be conducted as virtual ethnographies.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the author proposes that digital organizing be incorporated in the social work curriculum as evidence from this study demonstrates its utility in easing the flow of information and coordinating efforts towards solving social problems. Akom et al. (2016) showed how improved access of technology helps communities to visualize and validate social inequalities and then mobilize community assets towards social action. In humanitarian responses, digital organizing is vital for sharing from the grassroots, which often guides first respondents to make practical decisions that aid recovery efforts (Sarcevic et al., 2012). Much of digital organizing is storytelling, which is central to effective advocacy. When Social Workers use storytelling to narrate the story of a policy or intervention of an individual's path through a system, they can build coalitions that could benefit client systems (Sage et al., 2019).

While many studies have focused on New Media and Diaspora or Immigrant Women from Global South, particularly of South and East Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Middle East, and European origins, there are few studies on sub-Saharan African Immigrant or Diaspora women. As a result, this study can be regarded as a timely addition to the literature and a contribution fields of Africana Studies, Diaspora Studies, Social Work, New Media Studies, and Women and Gender Studies because the findings challenge stereotypical representations of African women and highlight their contributions to the heritage and host societies.

From this research, the author has also demonstrated that online communities can destabilize social hierarchies by providing opportunities for the ordinary people and previously marginalized groups to participate in public discourse by questioning authority, examining arguments, organizing collective action and introducing fresh ideas that challenge existing knowledge (Baker, 2013; Gatson & Zweerink, 2004; Kasperiuniene & Zydziunaite, 2019; Lemert, 2004; Park & Thelwall, 2005). Much of the empowerment of ordinary citizenry in online communities stems from the increased chances of digital organizing that democratize decision-making by allowing regular community members to seek support for their positions. From this study, the author shared a few examples of the impact of digital organizing, such as the repatriation of a wrongly abandoned family back to their home, empowering victims of domestic violence to leave abusive relationships, and helping the virtual community members to improve their standard of living. Still, the author believes that there exist far more significant benefits of digital organizing that could be explored in the future.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

The semi-structured interviews will begin with broad main questions. The author will then ask follow-up and clarifying questions to elicit more details if necessary. A matrix showing the interview guide is below

INTRODUCTION
Thank you for agreeing to meet with/ speak with me today. My name is Ruby. I am a PhD student at the Rutgers School of Social Work. I am interested in understanding your experiences as a member of [the online community]. I would like to ask you a few questions about your thoughts, feelings and experiences…is that ok? Before we begin, I want to make sure you have reviewed the confidentiality agreement. If you have not done so, please do this now before I start asking you some questions. Your responses will be confidential. Do you have any questions regarding this study? **[Some interview participants belong to both online communities. While interviewing them, each question will be asked twice, first for one of online communities and secondly for the other online community]

CONSTRUCT MEASURED	MAIN QUESTION	FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS	CLARIFYING QUESTIONS
Online participation	Could you tell me about your motivation for joining [the online community]? Is there anything that you were reluctant to do prior to your involvement in the online community? (if above question is affirmative) What did members of the online community do to encourage you to do what you did?	• How do you interact with others in [the online community]? • How much time in a day, would you say you spend in [the online community]? • What do you perceive to be the benefits/drawbacks of participating in [the online community]?	• Approximately how many of your connections in [the online community] would you consider to be ACTUAL friends? • Can you tell me how you interact with your friends in the online community [in the online communities]?

	How do participants describe the social relations in the online communities?		• Could you elaborate a little on this?
Biculturalism	How is your understanding of cultures influenced by participation in the online communities? What practices have you observed to be unique in the online community?	• How your interaction with others in [the online community] influenced your understanding of American culture? • How has your interaction with others in [the online community] influenced your understanding of Kenyan culture? • If you had to choose a culture to live your life by, would you pick American culture, Kenyan culture or a mix of both? Why? How has participating in the online community influenced your choice? •	• Since becoming a member of [the online community], would you say you prefer engaging more with Kenyan or American people? • Could you expound on this?
Empowerment	What benefits, if any, do members derive from participating in the online community? What are the drawbacks of participation? In your view, how do participants exercise leadership within the online community?	• If you wanted to get [online community] members to be involved in something you cared about, how would you go about doing it? • Based on your experiences so far, in what ways, if any, would you say that the [online community] provides you with opportunities to develop or enhance your leadership skills at school, home,	• Could you expound on this? • Is there any other information you would like to share on this? • Do you have specific examples that you would like to share?

	How do participants support those in the online community going through a difficult time?	neighborhood, or your workplace? • How does the [online community members] support those going through a difficult time?	
Links between biculturalism and empowerment	In your view, how would you describe the connections between biculturalism and empowerment, if any? Some people think that to be successful in America, you just need to work hard and be true to your Kenyan roots. Other people think that in order to be successful, you need to embrace American culture. What are your views on this issue?	• In what ways, if at all, has embracing American cultures helped you to be successful in your life? • In what ways, if at all, has maintaining your Kenyan culture helped you to be successful in your life?	• Can you expand a little on this? • Can you tell me anything else? • Do you have some examples that you could share?
Subjective views on group (online communities') differences	What would you say are the differences between [the two online communities]?	• How did you decide to become a member of this one or both online communities? • What do you think are the strengths of the two online communities? (If a member of both)	• If you could belong to one online community, which one would you pick, and why?

Appendix B: Interview Protocol for Additional Subjects

Former Members	
Thank you for agreeing to meet with/ speak with me today. My name is Evalyne Orwenyo. I am a PhD student at the Rutgers School of Social Work. I am interested in understanding **your experiences as a former member of** [the online community]. I would like to ask you a few questions about your thoughts, feelings and experiences…is that ok?	
Before we begin, I want to make sure you have reviewed the confidentiality agreement in the informed consent document that I shared with you. If you have not done so, please do this now before I start asking you some questions. Your responses will be confidential. Do you have any questions regarding this study?	
Never joined	
Thank you for agreeing to meet with/ speak with me today. My name is Evalyne Orwenyo. I am a PhD student at the Rutgers School of Social Work. I am interested in understanding **your reasons for not joining** [the online communities]. I would like to ask you a few questions about your thoughts, feelings and experiences…is that ok?	
Before we begin, I want to make sure you have reviewed the confidentiality agreement in the informed consent document that I shared with you. If you have not done so, please do this now before I start asking you some questions. Your responses will be confidential. Do you have any questions regarding this study?	

Construct	Former Members	Never joined
motivations	Could you tell me about your motivation for joining [the online community]?	Many Kenyan diaspora women in the U.S. and Canada have joined [the online communities]? Could you tell me why you have not joined [the online communities]?
Reflections	How was your experience like, as a member of [the online community]?	What role, do you suppose, that [the online communities] play in the lives of its members
Impact	Since exiting [the online community] how has your life changed?	In what way, do you suppose your life would be different if you were a member of [the online communities]?

Appendix C: Codebook for Thematic Analysis

Name	Description
Acculturation	Issues related to navigating heritage cultures and North American cultures
Acculturation facilitators	Reflections on the factors that facilitate adjustment into a new culture
Adapting new cultures	Participants' subjective experiences about living in a new majority culture
Assimilation	Descriptions of how participants have had to make behavioural and emotional adjustments to fit
Cultural lessons	Insights gained about either the heritage or the host culture through online participation
Cultural retentions	Illustrations of the peculiar cultural practices that persist within the Kenyan diaspora
Defining acculturation	Discussions about the experiences of the Kenya diaspora living as minorities in a new culture
American vs Kenya life	A comparison of the differences in experiences of living in North America versus living in Kenya
Positive American cultures	Participants report on what they view as positive attributes of the North American way of life
Community Benefits	Participants reveal what they perceive to be advantageous about being a member of the group(s)
Community Organizing	Highlights on how collective actions benefit members are shared
Opportunities and Resource Mapping	Participants explain how the groups have served as a repository of information to solve their everyday problems
Supporting Excellence	Descriptions of how the groups applaud participants initiatives and celebrate their successes
Community Drawbacks	Participants describe the disadvantages of membership and participation in the groups

Name	Description
Cyberbullying	Participants highlight the experiences and manifestations of cyber violence in the groups
Dating, Love, and Romance	Participants share their challenges and successes in finding an intimate partner
Exiting bad relationships	Descriptions of how participants terminated negative or unfulfilling intimate relationships
Disempowerment	Explanation of the factors that participants identify as exploitative and discouraging
Cliques and Influencers	Depictions of the social hierarchies in the groups that privilege a few and alienate others
Favouritism and unfairness	Explanations of how participants get treated differently depending on the clout they command
Oppression	Accounts of the mechanisms used to systematically suppress dissent and maintain control
Domestic Violence	Participants describe their experiences on domestic violence
Tales of Triumph	Participants who exited abusive relationships share their stories to encourage others in similar situations
Empowerment	Participants explain their views on empowerment, and whether they have witnessed empowerment within the groups
Feminism	An analysis of feminism in the Kenyan diaspora community
Self-Care	Descriptions on how participants prioritize their personal needs are highlighted
General Life Advice, Gossip and Humour	Sharing of life hacks, jokes and entertaining news
Immigration	Participants provide guidance to members with various immigration issues
Links Between Acculturation and Empowerment	Participants describe their views on whether they believe acculturation is linked to empowerment

Name	Description
Marriage	The centrality of marriage in the lives of the Kenya diaspora women is highlighted
Marital Advice	Participants share advice with members facing challenges in their marriages
Married vs Unmarried Attitudes	The differences in attitudes between married and unmarried women are discussed
Men's Perceptions of the Groups	Men's views (spouses and partners of members) of the group are highlighted
Motivations for Joining and Staying in the Groups	Participants reveal their reasons for joining and staying in the groups
Decision to Stay	A list of reasons for staying in the groups
Reluctance to Join	A summary of the reasons why some participants were reluctant to join the groups
Online vs Offline Relationships	Participant describe the differences between their offline and online relationships
Parenting in America	Participants highlight the joys and struggles of raising children in America
Race Relations	Observations on the harmony and tensions between different racial groups are debated
Colourism	Participants discuss colourism within Kenyan communities
Interracial Relationships	Participants talk about their intimate relationships with partners from other racial groups
Reasons for Not Joining the Facebook Groups	Participants who do not belong to either of the groups share their insights
Sense of Community	Participants share on the commonalities they perceive to have with other group members
Social Pressure and Taboo Topics	Issues that are not usually discussed in Kenyan settings are underscored

Name	Description
Social Isolation	Participants describe situations where they have had limited social interactions, little emotional support from others resulting in negative life outcomes
The Future of Online communities	Descriptions on the trajectory of the groups are discussed

Appendix D: A Timeline of Research Activities

Month & Year	Activity	Activity	Activity
Dec-2017	Designing the study	Perfunctory observations	Developing relationships with participants
Jan-2018	Designing the study	Perfunctory observations	Developing relationships with participants
Feb-2018	Designing the study	Perfunctory observations	Developing relationships with participants
Mar-2018	Review of the literature	Perfunctory observations	Developing relationships with participants
Apr-2018	Review of the literature	Perfunctory observations	Developing relationships with participants
May-2018	Review of the literature	Assessing qualitative approaches	Ongoing online participation
Jun-2018	Review of the literature	Assessing qualitative approaches	Ongoing online participation
Jul-2018	Review of the literature	Assessing quantitative scales	Ongoing online participation
Aug-2018	Preparing IRB application	Assessing quantitative scales	Sustaining research relationships
Sep-2018	Preparing IRB application	Selected scales	Identified qualitative approaches
Oct-2018	Submitted IRB application	Field notes	ongoing online participation
Nov-2018	Writing Dissertation proposal	Perfunctory observations	Sustaining research relationships
Dec-2018	Dissertation proposal defense	IRB study approved	ongoing online participation
Jan-2019	Revising chapter 1	Sustaining research relationships	
Feb-2019	Literature review	Ongoing online participation	
Mar-2019	Revising chapter 2	Sustaining research relationships	
Apr-2019	Revising chapter 3	Sustaining research relationships	
May-2019	Pilot data collection	Assessing qualitative approaches	Assessing quantitative scales
Jun-2019	First IRB modification requested	Field notes	
Jul-2019	Review of the literature	Field notes	

Aug-2019	First IRB modification approved	Second IRB modification requested	
Sep-2019	Second IRB modification approved	Third IRB modification requested	Data collection
Oct-2019	Third IRB modification approved	Data collection	
Nov-2019	Writing up findings	member checking	Data analysis
Dec-2019	Writing up discussion	Ongoing online participation	
Jan-2020	First round of feedback		
Feb-2020	Second round of feedback		
Mar-2020	Dissertation proposal defense	Presentation of findings to participants	Debriefing participants