

The African Diaspora, Black Identity and The Evolving Discourse of the Digital Divide

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, we examine how people of African descent are using an online discussion forum as a site for interrogating the existential question of “who am I?”. Contrary to the typical formulations of the digital divide as a measure of disparity in access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), we make a case for how and why ICTs are being effectively used to enable and advance the interests of people who have historically been marginalized and silenced. The contributions of this research extend the digital divide discourse to affirm the cultural realities of diverse Internet users.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the potential benefits of Internet use, research on Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and the African Diaspora typically starts from a digital divide thesis in which this population is viewed as lacking access and relevant skills to make use of the Internet. The digital divide was initially defined as a lack of physical access to computing devices necessary to obtain Internet access (National Telecommunications and Information Agency, 1995). The divide was subsequently formulated to include concerns related to disparities in information literacy and skills necessary to function proficiently on the Internet (Mossberger, Tolbert, & Stansbury, 2003). One consistent concern was that globally, people of African descent residing in both developing and in developed nations were on the wrong side of the divide and at risk of falling behind their online peers.

In the decade since the digital divide gained popularity, people of African descent have increasingly adopted the Internet. In African countries, Internet penetration rates increased ten-fold over the course of four years, going from 4 countries (in 1993) to 44 countries with Internet access (in 1997). By 2000 the Internet was accessible to all 54 countries and far exceeded the penetration rate of the telephone in Africa (Sonaike, 2004). Additionally, among African Americans, the percentage of households with broadband connections in the United States has increased 186% from 2005 (14%) to 2007 (40%; Horrigan, 2007). As gaps in access and use narrow, early formulations of the digital divide that framed people of African descent as deficient are challenged. This chapter is an addition to the body of literature that currently challenges this notion.

This chapter supports the objectives of this book through its exploration of the digital divide and its relationship with the Internet use of diasporic people. In this chapter, we explore this phenomenon at the individual and group level using textual analysis of discussion forum posts. We use identity theory to examine how identity is (re)constructed online in a community of indigenous and diasporic Africans. Our analysis addresses two research questions:

1. What labels are used (e.g. African American, Black, Negro) as community members negotiate their identity?
2. What social meanings are ascribed to those labels?

In the following section, we provide background information on diasporas and the digital divide. We then discuss the Internet and identity theory as a means of understanding the issues related to identity performance online. Next the research methodology and results of our textual analysis are presented. The chapter will then conclude with a brief discussion of future trends and a brief summary of the chapter's contents and purpose.

BACKGROUND

In a seminal book on identity and the Internet, Turkle (1995) suggests that identity on the Internet is more fluid and fragmented than real space because people can assume multiple identities. However, research on Chinese (Sun, 2002) and Indian (Mitra, 2001) diasporas reports that these communities use the Internet as a "cultural location" to enact identity positions online that are grounded in real life. These online diasporic people share memories of historical events of their respective nations, and reconcile their sense of displacement, multiplicity and fragmentation in real life.

Diaspora refers to categories of people such as expatriates, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants, and ethnic minorities who are dispersed from their homelands but maintain myths or memories about their country of origin (Safran, 1991). For Clifford (1994) diaspora cultures mediate, in a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering or desiring another place. While scholars such as Clifford (1994) and Safran (1991) express a sense of loss and separation from home identity, diasporas have also come to represent a postmodern experience in which home and identity have become fluid concepts. The postmodern notion of 'belonging nowhere' or 'belonging everywhere' suggests freedom and new possibilities of identity formation and notions of belonging.

Regardless of whether diasporic people express identity through the prism of loss or new possibilities, immigrants are often placed in the lower ranks of the social hierarchy in the host country. Host societies also tend to subjugate the diasporas' native cultural practices such as language and religion. Psychological and personal dislocations result from this cultural denigration experience. 'Identities' is the term that Hall (1990) gives to the various ways that diasporas are positioned as subjugated others, and the way that diasporas react to this positioning:

It is one thing to position a subject or set of peoples as the 'Other' of a dominant discourse. It is quite another thing to subject them to that 'knowledge,' not only as a matter of imposed will and domination, by the power of inner compulsion and subjective conformation to the norm. That is the lesson – the somber majesty – of Fanon's insight into the colonizing experience in *Black Skin, White Masks*. This inner expropriation of cultural identity cripples and deforms. If its silences are not resisted, they

produce, in Fanon's vivid phrase, 'individuals without an anchor, without horizon, colourless, stateless, rootless--a race of angels' (p. 52).

Tsagarousianou (2004) critiques Safran's conceptualization of diasporic groups and their relationship with a mythical version of its homeland because it plays down other important relationships and linkages that inform the diasporic condition. For diasporic Africans, for instance, many of the linkages to the homeland were severed as a result of being removed from Africa involuntarily. Thus, the link between diasporic African communities and their 'homeland', or the possibility of a return to the past, are much more precarious than usually thought. The collective identity of diasporic Africans and other displaced people and transnational communities is defined by their hybrid relationship to the homeland and the host society. For diasporic Africans, the nature of this relationship can vary from a denial of an African affiliation, to a mental connection, to an imagined Africa, to real travels to Africa.

ICTs enable diasporic discourses that construct "alternate public spheres" (Gilroy, 1987) or "forms of consciousness and solidarity that maintain identifications outside the national time/space" (Clifford, 1994, p. 51). People who have similar interests or backgrounds can form alliances in cyberspace that allow diasporic people to build a sense of belonging and commonality that was previously unavailable because of geographic separation between individuals (Mitra, 1997). Tsagarousianou (2004, p. 52) goes further to suggest that "diasporas should be seen not as given communities, a logical, albeit deterritorialized, extension of an ethnic or national group, but as imagined communities, continuously reconstructed and reinvented". Individuals can renegotiate their identities in relation to the online group as well as the offline societies in which they live. According to Mitra (2001) the process of renegotiating an identity is crucial for marginalized groups, such as diasporic Africans, for whom a persistent set of identity narratives has systematically constructed this group as the 'Other'. The construction of an African diasporic identity that resists these negative portrayals is a painful yet urgent necessity.

While an increasing number of diasporic Africans go online, the Internet remains an elite medium. In Africa, for instance, the overall Internet penetration was around 4%. Personal Computer (PC) penetration rates remain low due to the high cost of ownership. Each computer with an Internet connection supports three to four users on average. Most users access Internet services through cybercafes, kiosks, community telecentres, community phone-shops, schools and other types of public sites providing Internet access. Although access is increased through these public facilities, the Internet has had the greatest impact at the top end of business and in well-educated, wealthy families, primarily in the major urban areas (Paul Budde Communication Pty Ltd., 2007).

Thus, increased access is a necessary but insufficient remedy for the digital divide, if we are concerned about extending the beneficial outcomes of ICT use to all members of society. The decision to adopt and use ICTs is driven by the meanings, values, and experiences of individuals. Social and cognitive aspects such as power relations, identity, and ideology, as well as technical skills and material resources congeal to determine the consequences of Internet use. It is somewhat naïve to assume that access and market

forces are the sole roadblocks to expanded Internet use. Without a contextually nuanced understanding of the social and cognitive nature of Internet use, we simply perpetuate stereotyped notions about the African Diaspora as being “on the wrong side of the divide”, and propagate damaging beliefs about this group.

According to Foucault (1980, p. 131), “Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true”. Oftentimes, these ‘regimes of truth’ subjugate people of African heritage. In this chapter, the marginalization of the African Diaspora is essential in theorizing Internet use by this population. The African Diaspora has historically served as the exotic ‘Other’ in the dominant discourses and systems of knowledge and power. While diasporic Africans have been disconnected by geography and colonial history, the Internet offers a medium to foster solidarity and understanding. People of African descent who have had little knowledge of each other are no longer disconnected. The individuals who take part in these communities in cyberspace converge to create discursive communities that forge new ways of understanding both divergent and shared history, and language and culture. The identities that are constructed by the dominant groups are no longer the primary narratives of groups such as African Americans. In producing critiques of these dominant labels and envisioning alternative identities through discourse, historically oppressed people are wrenching away the locus of identity production from the regime of the dominant (Mitra, 2001).

In addition to shifting the locus of power, the Internet serves as a cultural conveyance; one that can be “read” as a text presenting information that expresses the identity of the authors and is designed to attract like-minded others (Mitra & Watts, 2002). Researchers such as (Katz & Aspden, 1997) and (Nakamura, 2002) argue that race, racial stereotypes, and associated values structure identity formation and validation. Race is always present in conversation, noticeable by either its absence or by the furor aroused by any mention of race. When race is mentioned online, the discussion often reproduces the negative attitudes and ideologies about people of African descent found within offline content (Miller & Slater, 2000). However, the Internet provides modes of resistance.

People of African descent develop creative uses of language, style, musical, artistic and religious forms, as well as an independent press to create and disseminate a self-affirming identity that draws upon both mainstream and diasporic influences (Brock, 2005). Diasporic identities are developed through the process of trying to regain what was lost during the ‘forced dispersal and reluctant scattering’ that Africans experienced as a result of experiences like slavery (Woodward, 1997). Africans, and individuals of African descent, who were once unified in both time and space, are now geographically separated; “while there are many differences among indigenous and Diaspora Africans, the cultural and political dismembering of African communities on either side of the Atlantic by Europeans constitutes a bond that transgresses geographic and temporal boundaries,” (Lake, 1995, p. 22). In efforts to close this gap, a place was sought that would allow them the freedom to be themselves and the ability to identify with individuals like them (Jackson et al., 2003). The Internet has become this place. Through the use of online discussion forums their identity can flourish, as the formation of identity

is a spatialized process (Drzewiecka & Nakayama, 1998). Hence, conceptualizing Internet use as an alternative public sphere, in which self-affirming identity is constructed, can advance our ability to transform existing knowledge on digital divides.

PRINCIPLE INVESTIGATION

Issues, Controversies, Problems

In examining the issues, controversies and problems associated with Internet use and identity construction in the African Diaspora, we acknowledge that perspectives on the consequences of Internet use are often paradoxical (i.e. utopian view and dystopian view). On the one hand, scholars with a dystopian viewpoint believe that Internet use leads to social isolation and negatively influences psychological well being (Kraut et al., 1998). They believe the Internet is a tool that will destroy communities; it will lead individuals to spend significant time interacting online, which will result in these individuals disregarding their offline relationships. Turkle (1995) argued that the ability to create multiple personalities in this online world would be so emotionally engaging that it would fracture identity. Others have noted problems associated with anonymous communication, which is the cornerstone of an Internet culture that promotes sharing and free speech and is overtly anti-establishment. While individuals can say how they feel with little concern for repercussions, this freedom has associated costs. According to Davenport (2002), if people remain anonymous they cannot be identified, making it impossible to hold them accountable. Anonymous communications on the Internet can open the door to many forms of criminal and anti-social behavior, while leaving victims and society helpless. One such anti-social behavior is known as flaming, which is “composed by CMC behaviors that are interpreted to be inappropriately hostile” (Riva, 2002, p. 200). As noted by an anonymous forum participant in our study, “there are some who have posted opinions on this forum indicating, and more overly, criticizing that the forum is hateful and that some commentaries made by people of African ancestry ‘bash’ people of African ancestry openly on the forum is less than desirable or necessary”.

On the other hand, scholars of the utopian perspective believe that the Internet can be used to break down the geographic and social barriers imposed by society, thereby uniting people all across the globe (Kraut et al., 1998). The asynchronous nature of discussion forums supports this notion, as it is a social affordance of the Internet that not only supports interaction amongst people in different locations but also different time zones (Boase & Wellman, 2006). The asynchronous nature of discussion forums also makes it a useful place for identity negotiations for individuals of the African Diaspora, since participants need not worry about real time and time zone differences. Although possible to meet face-to-face with individuals within the same geographic location, the breadth of geographic dispersal makes using the Internet better for increasing the amount of the population that is reached. Additionally, on the Internet, users tend to be less inhibited and speak more liberally (Riva, 2002). The diminished inhibition results from the anonymous nature of online communication, as well as (in some cases) the absence of visual and audio feedback (Boase & Wellman, 2006).

Both the utopian and dystopian viewpoints are limited in that they fail to take into account how the Internet is actually being used (Boase and Wellman, 2004). To overcome this limitation, we examine Internet use by individuals typically seen as being on the wrong side of the digital divide. We frame our examination by presenting three important aspects of Internet use, the African Diaspora and identity. First, cyberspace has altered the geographic dominance of ‘developed’ countries that have historically served as the locus of power. In cyberspace, individuals in Ghana and other ‘developing’ nations have a platform from which to speak to the global community. These discussion forums are the culmination the voices of individuals, not an organized source that speaks for the ‘Other’ from the standpoint of the dominant ideologies. There is no single entity that can control all of the voices on the Internet (Mitra, 2001).

Second, with the improvement of Internet access across the globe, there has been an emergence of individuals using the Internet to form virtual communities. “Some online communities truly help stigmatized people accept themselves, fit into a group, and feel more comfortable in their real-life communities” (Papadakis, 2003, p. ix). Online communities provide individuals with an opportunity to communicate with others like them across the globe, in attempts to construct a collective existence. Discussion often mimics the private talk that would occur in a third place like a café or a barber shop (Kvasny & Igwe, 2008). Yet online talk is akin to a published article because the transcripts of the conversation can be read by anyone online. In this way, online forums straddle between the public and private spheres of communication.

Third, and perhaps most important, the Internet serves as a medium where marginalized individuals can exercise discursive power, and resist damaging representations. Socially marginalized groups speak to one another as they speak against authority. “On the Internet, the marginalized can call on the dominant and put the dominant in the difficult position of acknowledging the marginalized, or further distance the dispossessed by ignoring the call” (Mitra, 2001, p. 32). The Internet also affords marginalized people a place to discuss and debate amongst themselves, which facilitates the process of individual and collective identity (re)construction. “[I]dentity is never a finished product, it is dynamic and fluid and constituted in interactions... [I]dentity and ethnicity are both co-created in communication, which means that ethnic identity is constantly re-created, it is flexible and evolving rather than static and fixed” (Drzewiecka & Nakayama, 1998, p. 21).

Identity Theory

Identity is the set of behavioral or personal characteristics by which an individual is recognizable as a member of a group. Identity is often imposed by society as a result of physical and social characteristics such as nationality, race, gender, and class (Drzewiecka & Nakayama, 1998). For individuals of the African Diaspora, the Internet provides a location where these forced identities can be contested. It is a place where diasporic people can be themselves and renegotiate their identity with individuals like them. On the Internet, these individuals can reconnect with their culture, which has been

forgotten, left behind, craved since the time of their dispersal, or devalued by society. In other words, members of the African Diaspora use the Internet as a way to not only heal, but remember and define their true identity. Like other diasporic people, individuals of African descent recognize the added value the Internet can offer to their lives; the Internet is a tool to help them sustain their identity through cultural, social, and political connections to their home countries (Parham, 2004).

While sharing an identity is strongly about binding individuals together, identity is also about signifying difference; as much as it allows for inclusion (i.e. in groups) it also results in exclusion (i.e. out groups; Woodward, 1997). Therefore, it gives diasporic people something to 'own'. It allows them to be not only consumers of information, but also active producers of information. Through exchange of discourse on the Internet, members of the African Diaspora are given the opportunity to create and re-create their identity, while being selective of the people they include in their community.

Identity theory posits that individuals' behaviors are a function of the extent to which the behavioral choices are related to a personally relevant or salient role-identity. Each individual has a number of hierarchically arranged identities such as religion, class, ethnicity, gender and race. In this chapter, we focus on the labels that diasporic Africans use to describe their choice of preferred labels, and how they explain the meaning of these labels. We do so because African Americans' experiences with oppression in the United States (US) differ significantly from members of other ethnic groups in the US. They also differ from the experiences of diasporic Africans in Ghana and other countries. For instance, African Americans lost their core personal identities when they were wrenched from their native lands. During slavery the US Constitution denied the humanity of African Americans. As slaves, they were defined legally as property. Their immigration to the US was forced, and their indigenous culture was stripped away. Social integration with Whites was illegal for nearly a century after slavery ended. As Blacks achieved emancipation they forged a new blended culture and institutions to serve their needs and interests. Due to these experiences, the concept of race has historically played an important role and has had real consequences in the lives of African Americans (Sellers et al., 1998).

Racial identity is one of the most heavily researched aspects of African Americans' psychological lives, and plays a significant role in the lives of people of African heritage (Sellers et al., 1997). Racial identity reflects understanding shared by members of the group of what it means to be Black. Stereotypes and other perceived trait differences are the symbols and shared perceptions used as the basis of racial self-identification. Jackson, Hecht, and Ribeau's (2003) argue that identities have semantic properties that are expressed in these core symbols, meanings, and labels. There is, however, great diversity in the meaning of being African American. Much of this diversity is attributed to the unique culture and history of African Americans (Sellers et al., 1997). However, there is no single set of attitudes or behaviors definitive of African Americans. Thus, to understand racial identity, researchers must uncover how African Americans define themselves and the qualitative meanings that they ascribe to membership in that racial group.

A number of approaches to the study of racial identity have emerged. Early scholars of the mainstream approach, such as Allport (1954), theorized that living in a racist environment has negative consequences for the African American psyche, while scholars of the underground approach, such as DuBois (1902), theorized that African Americans could develop positive self-concepts despite the stigma of being devalued by the larger society. Through the concept of “double consciousness”, DuBois (1903) suggests that healthy ego development occurs through the reconciliation of the tension between being both Black and an American. Building on DuBois’ claims, Cross’ (1971) model of Nigrescence describes a five stage model of racial identity development to a psychologically healthy Black identity. Sellers and colleagues (1997) developed the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity that focuses on the status of an individual’s racial identity at a particular point of time rather than the stages of racial identity development (i.e. Nigrescence).

Self-identity can occur through the construction of labels or semantic designations that reflect shifts in consciousness and sensitivity to sociopolitical milieu. Linguistic process, such as labeling or self-identifying, is the primary means through which social reality is constructed (Hecht & Ribeau, 1991). According to Smith (1992), changes in group labels reflect strategies of redefinition by Blacks to improve their social standing in a world that historically rendered them inferior. This shift can be seen through the series of studies on racial/ethnic label preferences of African Americans conducted by Hecht and colleagues. In a study by Hecht and Ribeau (1991), 69 undergraduate survey respondents indicated their preferred ethnic/racial identity labels as Black (46%), Black American (22%) and Afro American (15%). In a later study conducted by Larkey, Hecht and Martin (1993), ‘Black’ (38%) and ‘African American’ (39%) were the most preferred ethnic/racial identity labels identified by 108 survey respondents. Respondents who preferred “Black” expressed a strong racial identity, while those who preferred “African American” expressed a blended heritage. In a subsequent study (Larkey & Hecht, 1995), the majority of the 126 survey respondents identified as Black (60%) but only 9% identified as African American.

Smith (1992) chronicles the shifts in self-identity labels used by Blacks in the US, and notes that the common goal of these shifts has been to find a group label that instills group pride and self-esteem. ‘Colored’ was the dominant term in the mid to late 19th century. The term fell out of favor because it included Blacks, mulattos and people of mixed ancestry, Asians, and other non-White races. Influential Black leaders, such as Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois, led the movement to change the label to Negro. Negro was replaced in the 1960s as the civil rights movement promoted Black as standing for racial pride, militancy, and power. The increase in the popularity of the African American label in the 1990s has been attributed in part to the recognition that part of their dual heritage was from Africa, and the support the label has received from leaders in the Black community (Smith, 1992).

In the next subsection, we use textual analysis to examine the process of identity (re)construction among geographically dispersed people of African heritage. We do so by

examining the transcripts of a threaded conversation that took place on an online discussion forum. Online discussion groups are highly decentralized and open, which permits a many-to-many discussion to be instituted in a global environment of communication. For the dispersed African Diaspora, “the electronic space is the only common space that they can occupy” (Mitra, 1997, p. 70), and affords a site for constructing self-affirming ethnic identities. Cyberspace fosters a sense of solidarity based on sub-Saharan Africa as a place of origin and the marginalized identities in the US.

An Empirical Example

Textual analysis is used to examine identity labels and identity claims employed in a discussion board used by people of African ancestry scattered around the globe. The discussion topics tend to focus on issues related to racial identity such as interracial dating, the state of sub-Saharan Africa in world affairs, and fostering solidarity within the Diaspora. Textual analysis is a standard methodology in the social sciences for studying the content of human communication. Researchers reduce qualitative text, such as speeches, websites, policy documents or newspaper articles, into smaller analytical units based on the development of a consistent set of core themes that emerge from iterative reading of the texts. Data reduction is conducted by objectively and systematically determining the presence of certain words or concepts within texts. Researchers quantify and analyze specific characteristics of the message. These characteristics include the presence, meanings and relationships of such words and concepts. Researchers then make inferences about the messages based on these characteristics.

In this chapter, we provide preliminary analysis that focuses on a single threaded discussion that was sparked by an anonymous post titled “Black American not African American”:

Haven't you people ever heard of the word Negro? Your race is Negro if you are a black person, whether you are from Africa or America. If you were born in Africa, then your Nationality is African. If you were born in the US, then your Nationality is American. So, blacks born in the US are American, not African-American. A person can not have 2 nationalities. Get it? Born in Asia = Asian, born in Germany = German, Born in China = Chinese, Born in France = French, etc.

A total of 71 usable responses to this initial post were included in our analysis. We excluded from our analysis posts which were off topic or blank. We also excluded portions of posts that directly quoted the content of previous posts. In counting the number of posts, however, we noted that it is possible that a single individual may post multiple responses. In addition, many posts were simply attributed to “anonymous”, which limits our ability to accurately account for the number of unique individuals. Rather than attribute “anonymous” posts to a single user account, we worked from the assumption that each IP address represents a unique visitor. Using IP addresses also enabled us to determine the geographic location of users. In Table 1, we report the total

number of posts for members from each represented country. We also differentiate between posts by anonymous users and those from individuals with user names in the belief that named users demonstrate a higher level of commitment and accountability to the group. Since individuals can make multiple posts, the total anonymous and names users do not equal the total number of posts.

Table 1: Community Demographics

Country	Total Posts	Total Anonymous Individuals	Total Named Individuals
United States	57	14	30
Ghana	3	0	3
Nigeria	3	0	3
Netherlands	2	0	1
Canada	1	0	1
China	1	0	1
Ireland	1	0	1
Saudi Arabia	1	0	1
Tanzania	1	0	1
United Kingdom	1	0	1
Total	71	14	43

We understand that individuals may falsely identify themselves as an in-group member, an out-group member, or may not identify themselves at all. This is an unavoidable limitation on our analysis, due to the text-based nature of discussion forums. Therefore, while “some commentaries made by people of African ancestry ‘bash’ people of African ancestry openly on the forum”, we cannot prove that this is actually the case. Some forum participants make note of this limitation as well, “Your accusations are unfounded and I rather doubt that you can speak on the behalf of all Africans or all African-Americans. I contend that you are white and perpetrating to be of African ancestry on this forum”.

Community members responded to the initial post by negotiating the meaning of a set of identity labels. These identity labels and associated frequency of use are included in Table 2. The most frequently discussed labels include African, American, Black and Negro. However, frequency of use provides limited insights. For instance the Black and Negro labels were primarily viewed as unfavorable labels. The African label was primarily discussed in the context of being an imprecise but acceptable label for the descendents of slaves who were stripped of their African nationality and culture. Those who could trace their tribal and ethnic heritage adopted these identities rather than the more general label of African. The American label tended to be invoked as individuals refuted the hyphenated “African-American” label and claimed their national identity as simply American.

Table 2: Identity Labels

Identity Labels	Total References
African/Afrikan	141
American	110
African-American/African American Afro American/Afro-American	67
Black	155
Black American	26
Colored/Coloured	2
Negro	130
Negro-American	3
Nigger	7
Specific African nation (Ghanaian, Nigerian, Somalian)	7
Tribal affiliations (Ga, Ashanti, Ewe, Yoruba, Igbo)	7
Total	655

To make sense of the meanings that were articulated as community members discussed their preferences and objections to identity labels, we use a six category scheme (ethnicity, race, blended heritage, pride, terminology and birth/origin/nationality) developed by Boatswain and Lalonde (2000) to code and categorize meanings. Through our analysis, we found these six labels to be an effective means of classifying the texts in our corpus.

In what follows, we provide three quotes that demonstrate each meaning category. It is important to note that a single response can contain several personal meanings. In these cases, we categorized the quote with the dominant meaning based on the larger context of the discussion.

The first meaning, *ethnic identity*, involves references to a source of ethnicity, culture, or ancestral heritage. This was the least prevalent social meaning employed by discussants. In interpreting the use of ethnic identity, we find that most individuals refer to the American experience in which African slaves were denied their heritage, history and culture. This cultural separation led some African Americans to actively learn about African culture, while others disavowed ethnic ties to Africa. Those from African nations worked diligently to persuade their American peers to embrace their African heritage. Table 3 contains representative quotes that express ethnic identity.

Table 3: Ethnic Identity

1. We have not been allowed to give ourselves an identity that is associated with a heritage we were not allowed to claim or show our pride by practicing the customs or speaking the language until they were lost to us. We like to acknowledge the fact that we do have roots despite the fact that white America likes to deny that claim.
2. If you truly believe that ex-colonial masters meant the word Negro NOT to be negative, then you are denying a very important part of our history. The 400 years

<p>of slavery, abuse and discrimination was not based on love, but on HATE. Nothing positive, only negative. From the beginning these so called Negroes were seen as less than human, justifying the many actions that were inflicted upon the people. These are documents found where “negroes” were described as being less than animals, and equal to dirt. And what about the Jim Crow law? That “negroes” were only 3/5 human.</p>
<p>3. Where is Black on the world map? Look, if you don’t know who you are and where your people come from, then you are most assuredly a lost babe in high weeds...You have saliently inferred that you have NO affinity with Africa or African people. Then you are just Black...a nondescript American whose origin is somewhere called Black. Go forth and be Black to your heart’s content. Enough respect for the lost.</p>

Racial identity, the second category, involves references to race and/or skin color. This category was heavily used in the discussion, but mostly as a means of rejecting the “Black” label as categorization based solely on skin pigmentation. People found pride in their racial identity, but noted how skin color made them targets for oppression. Americans, in particular, expressed extreme difficulty in avowing other aspects of their identity because this society places primary importance on race. Table 4 contains representative quotes that express racial identity.

Table 4: Racial Identity

<p>1. Black Americans have the stigmatism of being labelled Black, which is a crayon color rather than a race of people. Since Black Americans have always been disrespected because of the color of their skin it makes no sense [sic] to deny them the right to identify with the nationality to which they belong.</p>
<p>2. Black Americans were not allowed to identify with Africa when they were brought to America. Nor have they been allowed to fully be received as Americans. Always a Black, Colored, Nigger, or some other derogatory description of their skin tone.</p>
<p>3. As a Black person, society expects me to forget everything else that makes me me and just concentrate on the fact that I am Black. It is the same with you. Of course, the colour of my skin is celebrated as Black, but that is not the only thing that sets me apart from the next person, feel me?</p>

The third category, *blended heritage* includes references to dual ethnicity/culture or to some form of cultural/racial heritage plus one’s nationality or place of birth. This was the most discussed social meaning. While there was disagreement about the appropriateness of blended labels, there was a general consensus that both nationality and ethnicity are integral components of the diasporic experience. Table 5 contains representative quotes that express blended heritage.

Table 5: Blended Heritage

<p>1. The term African-American is respectful as well as accurately providing</p>

information regarding one's ethnic origins, though having been born in America. Hence an American who is "white" is often times regarded as Euro-American which depicts that individual's origins [sic] as being Europe though having American nationality. Having been born in America and being Negro (as you have stated) or a Black person, certainly does not removed the fact that one's ethnic origins are Africa.
2. Are you telling me, and other Black Americans, that we are to ignore the fact that we are descendants of Europeans, as well, and claim only that African side? I think not! Having said that, yes, we are Americans who just happen to be Black. I am an American and I proudly claim European and African mixture.
3. In America, people have been identifying themselves as Irish-American, Chinese American, Italian-American, Jewish-American, etc. So Blacks there wanted also to be identified by their origin: Africa.

Pride, the fourth category, was used when priority of meaning was given to notion of pride or a positive sense of kinship or nationality. This social meaning was most often used by people of African birth, and was directed primarily to individuals born in the US who disavowed an African lineage. In relation to the other categories, pride was used infrequently. Table 6 contains representative quotes that express pride.

Table 6: Pride

1. Somewhere along this social continuum, people of African ancestry must demand their respect and this includes you, my friend. When you call me African-American or refer to me as African-American you are according me the respect I am due...first as one of African ancestry and secondly as an American. To call me or refer to me by any other descriptive social terminology is not according me respect.
2. You might consider mustering up a little pride in being of African ancestry instead of separating yourself from Africa with a single word that you believe describes yourself. How can you expect others to respect you when lack respect for your roots? How can you so willfully deny and disconnect yourself for others of African ancestry? How can you look yourself in the mirror?
3. If pride in Africa is there, then we must wear it like a badge as we identify ourselves anywhere and everywhere and not pay lip service whenever and wherever it is convenient. Right? Changing the labeling does not change the historical facts as to who we are and where we came from.

The fifth term, *terminology*, was also used infrequently. Terminology includes simple meanings such as “who I am”, “the most appropriate term”, and “what I am”. This social meaning was typically employed as a means of adding credibility, context and strength to an argument. Arguments based on terminology were generally used in the context of strong disagreement or agreement with a point made by another individual. Rarely would one self affirm an identity without such stimulus. Table 7 contains representative quotes that express terminology.

Table 7: Terminology

1. I am not African American. I am a Black American and my race is Negro (Negroid, to be more accurate).
2. I can be as Black as I wanna be and that is all there is to this whole saga!
3. I am a displaced African who by the nature of forced immigration resides in the U.S. and I will always be African first.

The final category, *birth/origin/nationality* was used when respondents indicated that the label indicated where they were born, where they were from, or their nationality. This social meaning was heavily used and invoked when community members discussed the identity of people of African descent residing in the US. Based on the community demographics presented in Table 1, the majority of community members reside in the US. We further infer from the discussion that some of the US-based members are African immigrants and others are American by birth based on arguments presented in the discussion. Much of this discussion is an attempt between these two groups to make sense of their disparate experiences and histories. Table 8 contains representative quotes that express national identity.

Table 8: Birth/Origin/Nationality

1. Secondly, the term [Negro] does NOT offer a place of origin of the so-called "negro", or "Black", e.g., those born in France ... are not termed "blanc" or white, instead they are thought of as French first and foremost, and secondly as white which only depicts their appearance. Furthermore, their race is Caucasian. Those of African ancestry should receive the same cognitive response as well. Don't you think?
2. I understand your reasoning and why you specify nationality. However, Blacks in America have never been allowed to acknowledge their nationality besides being labelled as Blacks. America went so far as to specify Negroid or Negro or Black (other than Hispanic) in the census. Africans identify with Africa because they belong to that continent. But they belong to whatever country they were born in- Ghana, Nigeria, Somalia, etc.
3. ...preferring to be called or labeled "Black" does not tell your origins at the onset. It only gives a physical description of how your may look. The term African-American does, however, provide information about one's origin and one's nationality as well.

Solutions and Recommendations

Scholars such as Selwyn (2003) posit that people will use the Internet if they perceive social benefit in doing so. However, individuals may choose to opt out of Internet usage if it has no relevance to their lives, even if they possess the required computer access, skills and literacy. Hence, Internet access as well as the availability of culturally salient content and opportunities for social engagement become important factors in the shaping Internet use (Brock, 2005; Kvasny & Warren, 2006).

Prior research suggests that African American Internet users employ beliefs and concepts originating from their sense of identity when consuming Web content (Appiah, 2004). However, as Appiah reports and our study confirms, there is no single shared diasporic identity among people of African descent. While some individuals stressed a blended heritage that brought together their African ancestry and nationality, many people of African descent in the US did not express an identity that affirmed their African ancestry. Instead, they described themselves as Black or Negro. Participants from Africa took great pride in their ethnic and tribal identity, and struggled to understand why Americans would disavow African ancestry. Despite the diversity in labels and meanings associated with these labels, community members consistently called for group pride and a refusal of negative stereotypes ascribed to the group. The global reach afforded by the Internet helped to enable diasporic people to probe their existential significance and their heritage, and to forge new and self-affirming ways of defining the group.

One way of constructing more empowering discourses about the digital divide and the African Diaspora is to examine how these communities are actually engaging with the technology. Unfortunately, much of the research to date has focused on statistical analysis of Internet access and comparative studies of Internet usage patterns across demographic groups. There is also a tendency to focus on instrumental uses of the Internet such as banking, health information seeking, education and commerce. The results of such studies typically cast people of African descent as less savvy Internet users.

However, if scholars engage in critical and interpretive studies that start from the perspective of marginalized groups, we can uncover how these groups use the Internet in ways that are culturally meaningful. The digital divide becomes not just a technical issue; it also becomes a social issue that stems from longstanding 'regimes of truth' that subjugate the life chances of people of African descent (Kvasny, 2007). Technology should be used to redress seemingly intractable social problems such as inequities in healthcare, education, and workforce participation. However, in the absence of radical change in the world order that fosters social justice, welfare and equity, technology solutions will yield limited success.

FUTURE TRENDS

The chapter enhances knowledge of the digital divide by (1) providing an empirical example of the Internet as a place that fosters identity (re)construction in a population that has traditionally been viewed as deficient in Internet use, and (2) extending the digital divide discourse to affirm the cultural realities of diverse Internet users. Through our examination of an online discussion, we see an emerging public sphere where marginalized groups can define themselves in their own terms, challenge dominant viewpoints that perpetuate their subjugation, and reach a global audience. If and how this public sphere will be used to foster a shift from abstract discourse online to concrete collective action offline remains to be seen.

CONCLUSION

Through the construction of a narrative, summarizing the ways identity is constructed by forum members, this chapter demonstrates the importance of identity and culturally salient content for framing a digital divide discourse. Using ICTs allows diasporic people to negotiate their identities and develop a better understanding of who they are as individuals as well as a group.

ICTs are currently being used to enable and advance the interests of people who have historically been marginalized and silenced. More specifically, the Internet is a place that fosters identity formation and self-authorship in a population that has traditionally been viewed as deficient in Internet use. Therefore, the digital divide can result in limited negotiation of cultural identity among diasporic people, as access to ICTs provides the ability to communicate with individuals all across the globe. This communication range is useful for individuals belonging to groups that are geographically dispersed and attempting to strengthen their cultural identity. As discussions on the digital divide transform from focusing on technical access to more societal concerns, the notion of culture and identity becomes more substantial. As the digital divide continues to close, the potential for reducing the “cultural divide” continues to increase.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

1. **African Diaspora:** People of African descent living in the Americas, the Caribbean, Europe, and Australia. Although voluntary immigration has become the primary force in the modern diaspora, the trans-Atlantic slave trade represents the largest migration of people of African descent.
2. **Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC):** The process by which people create, exchange, and perceive informational messages using information and

communication technologies. To be mediated by computers, the communication must be done by participants fully aware of their interaction with the computer technology in the process of creating and delivering messages.

3. **Diaspora:** A dispersion of a people from their original homeland through voluntary or involuntary migration.
4. **Digital divide:** The term "digital divide" refers to the gap between individuals, households, businesses and geographic areas at different socio-economic levels with regard to both their opportunities to access Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and their use of the Internet. The digital divide depends on several variables, including income, education, age, gender, racial and linguistic backgrounds, and geographic location.
5. **Identity:** The set of personal characteristics by which an individual is recognizable as a member of a group.
6. **Identity labels:** Self-referent terms used by individuals to identify their membership in groups.
7. **Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MMRI):** Sellers et al. (1997) identifies four dimensions: identity salience, the centrality of identity, the ideology associated with the identity, and the regard in which the person holds African Americans. *Centrality* measures the extent to which a person normatively defines her or himself with regard to race. *Racial salience* refers to the extent to which a person's race is a relevant part of her or his self-concept in a particular situation. MMRI theorizes that the more central a person's racial identity, the more likely it is to become salient in racially ambiguous situations. *Regard* refers to the extent to which a person feels positively or negatively towards African Americans and their membership in that group. There are two components of regard: private (how the individual feels about his or her own race) and public (how others feel about the race). *Ideology* is the individual's philosophy about the ways in which African Americans should live and interact with other people in society. The four philosophies include nationalist (emphasizes the importance and uniqueness of being of African descent); oppressed minority (emphasizes commonalities between African Americans and other oppressed groups worldwide); assimilationist (emphasizes commonalities between African Americans and the rest of American Society); and humanist (emphasizes the commonalities of all humans). MMRI theorizes that individuals are likely to hold a number of philosophies that vary across situations.
8. **Nigrescience:** Cross (1971) describes a five-stage model to describe the experiences associated with becoming a psychologically healthy Black man or woman in the US. In the *Pre-encounter Stage* individuals do not believe that race is an important aspect of identity. In the *Encounter Stage*, the individual is faced with a profound experience(s) directly related to their race that causes her or him to reexamine their identity. During the *Immersion/Emersion Stage*, the individual becomes obsessed

with identifying with Black culture, but remains uncommitted to endorsing Black culture and history. This feeling of inner security and satisfaction with being Black occurs during the *Internalization Stage*. In the final stage, *Internalization-Commitment*, the individual translates his or her internalized identity into action.

9. **Race:** a socio-biological phenomenon placing people in a social and value hierarchy. These perceptions on race depend on history, traditions, and personal experience, not genes.
10. **Racial/Ethnic Identity:** Racial identity is the significance (how important is race) and qualitative meaning (what does it mean to be a member of this racial group) that individuals attribute to their membership within the Black racial group. Ethnicity a cultural phenomenon that is shared among people who originate from the same geographic area and share language, food, ways of dress, customs and other cultural markers of group identity.