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Acculturation, Pluralism, and Digital Social Advocacy in Nonprofit Strategic Communications

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the use of acculturation-themed images in nonprofit strategic communications and digital advocacy efforts of 13 organizations serving Hispanic and Latinx immigrant communities in two U.S. states. The study analyzes data from 14 in-depth interviews with the public relations and marketing communication professionals responsible for the website content and digital strategy for the organizations. Based on study findings, the authors argue that these nonprofits are using their websites in soft advocacy efforts to promote positive prototypes of the populations they serve to majority audiences and leverage the flexibility of social media for most of their digital advocacy efforts. This analysis applies acculturation theory to a study of digital social advocacy and extends the literature on nonprofit public relations and public interest communications.

Introduction

Organizations that serve Latinx and Hispanic¹ populations in the United States are performing their work in a tense political environment due to the rhetoric of the Trump administration's

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¹ The authors recognize that terms "Latinx," "Hispanic," and "Latina/o" are not interchangeable to those who self-identify with one, and diverse groups representing many ethnicities, nationalities, and cultural backgrounds make up these groups. However, respondents used both terms to describe the populations their organizations serve. For this study, the single term Latinx is used to describe the populations served by the nonprofit organizations in the sample to streamline the reading experience and maintain clarity.

crisis at the border immigration stance. Because of changes in U.S. immigration policies under the Obama administration, by 2013 the United States was deporting more than nine times the number of undocumented immigrants than it did 20 years previously during the height of Latin American migration (“The Great Expulsion,” 2014). The Trump administration has promised to increase the number of deportations and has begun construction of a restraining wall along the U.S.-Mexico border (Miroff & Blanco, 2020; Shear & Nixon, 2017). Immigration advocates and researchers have argued that increased deportation of long-term U.S. resident undocumented workers will only serve to destabilize immigrant populations, disrupt U.S. families, and undermine the industries relying on immigrant labor (Lazare, 2017; Shear & Nixon, 2017; Waxmann, 2017). Due to the aging U.S. population and the lowest birthrate in 32 years (Hamilton et al., 2019), immigration shortfalls also will jeopardize the ability to grow the U.S. economy with young workers and fund Social Security in the future, harming the nation’s elderly (Reznick et al., 2007).

Although immigration decelerated further in the years following the 2008 recession, some Latinx nonprofits have reported the need to expand their missions and services due to local cuts in funding (Stepler, 2016; Waxmann, 2017). It is also important to note that 75% of immigrants are in the United States legally and 44% are considered naturalized citizens as of 2017 (Lopez et al., 2017). Additionally, according to the Urban Institute, the U.S. nonprofit sector is increasing largely due to charitable giving, which recovered after the recession (McKeever, 2015). The U.S. Internal Revenue Service reported an increase of 2.8 percent in nonprofit registrations from 2003 to 2013, and this sector contributed an estimated \$905.9 billion to the U.S. economy in 2013 alone (McKeever, 2015). Despite the recovery in charitable giving and slowing immigration, nonprofits serving Latinx communities face new challenges arising from shifting demographics as well as changes to U.S. immigration policy—especially increased deportation and forced expulsion (Shear & Nixon, 2017; Waxmann, 2017).

Since these shifts in immigration policy, instances of negative stereotypes directed toward immigrants and organizations that serve them have been reported in news media and by researchers. The Trump administration has been described as promoting a “politics of fear” through their choice of language and negative descriptions of immigrants (Demata, 2017, p. 1), which often reinforce racial stereotypes of Latinx people in general (Heuman & González, 2018). In addition, subsequent news coverage linking undocumented immigrants with criminal activity has been shown to bias audiences toward Latinxs presented as suspects whose “menacing picture” Trump has used to depict individuals crossing the U.S.-Mexico border (Figueroa-Caballero et al., 2019, p. 46).

Since digital platforms are essential communication channels for resource-strapped nonprofits, are they strategically choosing visuals to both promote the interests of the groups they serve and rebut negative stereotypes used in the immigration political debate? This study seeks to explore this issue from a strategic communication standpoint. The project looks at the key role that websites play in communication efforts of nonprofit organizations serving Latinx communities in the United States. Results from interviews describe the use of advocacy, cultural

pluralism, and empowerment-themed messages and images, as well as the use of such messages as part of these organization's digital social advocacy efforts. Social media are also considered as these nonprofits formulate strategic communications based on the populations they are trying to reach, the messages they are sharing, and their organizational goals per best practices of public relations (Grünig et al., 2006).

Drawing from Hon's (2015) model of digital social advocacy and Kim's notions of acculturation as well the findings of a recent study examining acculturation, pluralism, and resistance visuals on U.S.-based nonprofit websites (Adams & Johnson, 2019), this research project explores how positive cultural prototypes depicting empowerment and advocacy messages are being used as activist counterpoints to perceived immigrant threats. The purpose of this study was to examine nonprofit communication by U.S. Latinx organizations in terms of digital social advocacy and consider how these resource-limited communicators might be leveraging digital media affordances to mobilize their publics and create social change similar to the way grassroots activists do.

Literature review

New media and immigration reform

Since the 2016 U.S. presidential election, migrants and immigration reform have been the focus of national debate as politicians have used terms such as “bad hombres,” and migrants have been framed as criminals or animals as part of that discourse (Ogan et al., 2018, p. 358). Twitter has become the key news channel for the Trump administration as the President's influence and media coverage have shaped this negative framing of immigrants in general and particularly of those from Mexico as dangerous and a threat to American society (Figueroa-Caballero et al., 2019; Ogan et al., 2018; Pérez-Curiel & Limón-Naharro, 2019). These discursive tactics framing Mexican immigrants have helped to spread negative stereotypes through mainstream news media and online social media channels.

The political rhetoric has led to cognitive and behavioral effects. Such negative stereotypes of undocumented immigrants have been shown to impact audience perceptions and fuel instances of hate crimes, school bullying (including college), and influence prison sentencing (Ramírez-Plascencia, 2019; Schubert, 2017) as well as mainstream support for the building of a “great and beautiful” wall to supposedly quell the influx of these dangerous “crooks” (Demata, 2017, p. 274, 281) and criminals to the United States. The 2019 Walmart shooting in El Paso, TX, is another example, with *The Washington Post* reporting that the perpetrator wanted to halt an “Hispanic invasion” from Mexico (Rosenwald et al., 2019, para. 2).

This wave of anti-immigrant discourse spreading online as well as through traditional news media channels presents challenges to both individuals and to organizations serving and

representing immigrant populations in the United States, gesturing to the importance of this research.

Acculturation, pluralism, and intercultural identity

One consideration for nonprofit organizations serving these U.S. Latinx residents is acculturation. Acculturation is the process of adapting to a different culture (Berry, 1997). Unlike assimilation, which assumes rejection of one's old culture in favor of the new, acculturation is defined as adjusting to the adoptive culture while retaining elements of one's original culture (Berry, 1997). This psychological concept is used differently by sociologists, anthropologists, and others, who employ it to describe change at the group level. A plural society, according to Berry (1997), is a diverse one where people with a variety of cultural backgrounds reside. Although some cultural groups may completely assimilate to survive, others resist succumbing completely to host values and maintain some original values, thus continuing the host nation's diverse profile (Berry, 1997).

Communication scholars have documented the centrality of communication in the acculturation process (Croucher & Kramer, 2017; Kim, 2001). For example, Kim paired communication concepts with the notion of adaptation or acculturation. Part of Kim's (2001) comprehensive theory of immigrant adaptation differentiates between ethnic and mainstream communication channels in a host society, focusing on ethnic and mainstream interpersonal communication, plus ethnic and mainstream news media use. Research has suggested that over-reliance on ethnic communication channels impedes overall acculturation to the new society (Cheah et al., 2011; Kim & Kim, 2016). For example, acculturation levels of primarily mainstream news users are typically higher than those of immigrants who rely on ethnic news media and ethnic interpersonal communication (Kim, 2001). However, Kim's model did not specifically address how ethnic organizations use digital media, the concern of this study. Nevertheless, important elements of Kim's theory for this research were the variables in the host society that affect successful acculturation. These included the overall ethnic group's strength (size of the demographic), the host society's receptivity to immigrants, and the host society's conformity pressure (Kim, 2001). As noted earlier, U.S. host receptivity has worsened due to visible racist political rhetoric.

Much of the prior communication research about acculturation has dealt with Latinx print and traditional mass media (De La Cruz, 2017) or interpersonal communication among Latinx populations (McKay-Semmler & Kim, 2014), honing in on the perspectives of individuals. This study takes a different direction by focusing on Latinx organizations' communication. Considering this, a 2019 study of the visual communication of 141 nonprofit websites of organizations serving U.S. Latinx populations found that most websites used culturally symbolic images and photos of people engaged in acculturation activities such as education. They also depicted families or civic rights such as voting (Adams & Johnson, 2019). Fewer sites included in the study featured visuals portraying resistance to U.S. authority and regulation such as

protests or marching. Only two websites had visuals showing “immigrant threat” activities such as illegal border crossing (Adams & Johnson, 2019, p. 2). Therefore, these nonprofits seem to be making strategic decisions to use visual communication that depicts positive prototypes of their clients and members to connect with mainstream audiences and to dispel negative stereotypes proliferating online (Adams & Johnson, 2019). This literature led to the first two research questions:

RQ1: Are ethnic nonprofits that serve Latinx groups using depictions of acculturation, pluralism, and/or advocacy to strategically communicate their missions and services on their websites?

RQ2: What target audiences do ethnic organizations seek to engage with their website and social media channels?

The next section delves into the literature on counterstereotypes.

Counterstereotypes and positive stereotypes

Stereotypes are “collective abstractions of persons or groups asserting that members lack individuality and conform to a pattern or type” (Johnson, 1999, p. 417). Research has described the persistence of Latinx media stereotypes, from early images in films and newsreels (e.g., Berg, 2002; Johnson, 1999) to contemporary stereotypes in traditional media and digital media (Guo & Harlow, 2014; Sui & Paul, 2017). In social cognition research, stereotypes are considered the “default” process (Gocłowska et al., 2012, p. 226) requiring the least mental effort.

Counterstereotypes are positive portrayals of members of cultural groups that divert from traditional oversimplified representations. Although recent work has been conducted on counterstereotypical African American images in blogs and on websites (Johnson & Pettitway, 2017; Quinlan et al., 2012), there are fewer studies about Latinx digital counterstereotypes.

Traditional news media effects studies have examined the impact of stereotypes and counterstereotypes on ethnic and White media consumers. Research has supported the negative individual and societal effects—cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral—of stereotypes such as adverse perceptions of other racial or ethnic groups (Dixon & Azocar, 2007) or negative repercussions on public policy (Fujioka, 2005). However, Mastro and Tukachinsky (2011) found that positive news media prototypes could improve White study participants’ perceptions of Latinx groups. Ramasubramanian (2007) observed that counterstereotypes could reduce prejudice, as did Goldman (2012). In another study on cognitive effects, researchers determined that counterstereotypes could lead to more cognitive flexibility and creative thinking, with possible ramifications for intergroup communication (Gocłowska et al., 2012). Regarding policies, Ramasubramanian (2011) found that exposure to counterstereotypes could aid support for affirmative action.

Although prevailing concerns have been about the effects of negative minority portrayals on White citizens, research has also addressed the impacts of these portrayals on the cultural groups themselves. Stereotype effects on those who identify as Latinx have been found to differ depending on level of identity (Erba, 2018) and whether the stereotypes were negative or positive (Tukachinsky et al., 2017). For example, positive images (counterstereotypes) of Latinx/as were associated with positive attitudes toward their cultural group among Latinx viewers, and negative images correlated with negative views of their ethnic group (Tukachinsky et al., 2017). Similarly, other studies found that consumption of ethnic news was more likely to result in positive self-esteem (Mora & Kang, 2016; Ramasubramanian, 2017). Based on this literature, the third research question addressed in this study was:

RQ3: Are ethnic nonprofits serving Latinx groups strategically choosing visuals to promote positive prototypes?

Digital social advocacy

In an article examining the grassroots activism of the Justice for Trayvon Martin campaign, Hon (2015) proposed a model of digital social advocacy for public relations to understand how decentralized groups with few or no resources might leverage the power of digital media networks to mobilize and gain mainstream awareness. Hon's (2015) model depicted the processes and factors that allow activists to spread messages on social media at an unprecedented higher speed and broader scale based on power law dynamics. She argued that the low transaction costs of digital activism, coupled with the affordances of networked digital technologies, or "supersizing effects," (Earl and Kimport, as cited in Hon, 2015, p. 300) of social media (such as increased speed and reach), can be very effective tools in the micromobilization of individuals and the activation of latent publics. Digital social advocacy takes into account the effects and affordances of digital media ecosystems (news, Internet, web, social, and mobile) as a set of variables contributing to activist campaigns. Hon (2015) noted that these supersizing effects or low transaction costs of digital participation do not determine behavior or campaign outcomes. However, they are crucial to understanding how resource-poor or small activist publics are using social media to share messages, gain supporters, and make their voices heard (Hon, 2015).

Hon applied her model of digital social advocacy to the Million Hoodies movement in a 2016 case study to provide evidence for its efficacy. Noting specific examples of supersizing effects (timeline graphic illustrating the speed and reach of the movement) and leveraged digital affordances (such as the ability to connect many-to-many and thus bypass macro-level media gatekeepers when organizing), Hon (2016b) argued that the framework of digital social advocacy explicates how decentralized social movements use social media platforms to unite individuals based on a common cause and grow widespread support. In addition, Hon's (2016a) case study illustrates that digital affordances of social media support easy division and sharing of labor

(such as volunteer outreach) and the ability to create and sustain a group sense of solidarity based on a shared common cause. Digital social advocacy (as a novel form of public relations) therefore expands the ability of individuals outside of formal organizations to come together and loose coalitions to support a common cause (Hon, 2015, 2016a, 2016b). The Million Hoodies case demonstrates that coalitions using the soft power of volunteer activists can create social change without physical resources by leveraging digital media (Hon, 2016b).

Since 2015, Hon's model of digital social advocacy has provided a framework for exploration for several studies, including a big data study investigating the practice of activist cluster tweeting during the Charlotte, NC, protests following the shooting of Keith Lamont Scott in September 2016 (Gallicano et al., 2017). Digital social advocacy also has been used as a framework to examine the communicative actions and functions of the official BLM Twitter account (Edrington & Lee, 2018) and proposed for application in public diplomacy contexts as a way to understand or predict activist behavior (Fitzpatrick, 2017). Most recently, the model helped form the foundation for a study of "Instant Activism" where the types of low-cost participatory behaviors that Hon described were manipulated to create support for "hoax" grassroots activism (Park & Rim, 2020, p. 1). Additionally, researchers have expanded the model's original conception of strategies and tactics to account for the back-and-forth messages exchanged between activists and their targets, recognizing that these interactions rhetorically shape messages (Stokes & Atkins-Sayre, 2018).

One factor to consider in any study of nonprofit communication is that the organizations typically lack the resources of corporate, government, educational, or faith-based organizations. Smaller, community-based nonprofits especially have less access to capital for their strategic communication efforts and quite often do not have dedicated full-time staff to support their campaigns and outreach efforts. Shortfalls in dedicated staff and other resources have been shown to negatively impact campaign efficacy (Kiwanuka-Tondo et al., 2009). Therefore, nonprofits lacking resources to promote their communication campaigns or support them with dedicated staff might look to how grassroots activists are tapping the low transaction costs and supersizing effects of digital platforms to effectively reach their various publics and mobilize support for organizational initiatives and advocacy efforts.

In addition, studies of activist media have noted that groups often do not fully use their websites to communicate their perspectives on issues and thus frame their arguments for audiences (Zoch et al., 2008) or leverage social media network influence to more politically activate U.S. Latinx and Hispanic audiences (Velasquez & Quenette, 2018). When grassroots activists do leverage social media fully through use of provocative memes or visuals (such as in the case of the Saturday Chores counterprotest²), they are able to achieve widespread recognition of their action and gain significant social and financial support (Adams, 2018). Therefore, there

² The Saturday Chores counterprotest used photos of the members posed with signs bearing witty or absurd messages such as "Weird Hobby" or "Women's Rights Activist" juxtaposed with those of anti-abortion protestors' signs to gain attention on social media in 2014. Originally shared for friends and family consumption, due to the founding members public profiles, their messages (or memes) went viral resulting in the formation of a formal activist group and organized action in late 2014 and throughout 2015.

is an opportunity for nonprofits serving these audiences to use visuals in digital communication channels to promote positive ethnic prototypes and creatively advocate for social issues in the best interests of the groups they serve. Thus, the digital social advocacy literature is the foundation for the last research question:

RQ4: Are ethnic nonprofits serving Latinxs groups using their websites or social media to engage in digital social advocacy?

Method

Sampling

A sampling frame of Latinx-serving nonprofit organizations was developed from a list extracted from Guidestar.com—a database of nonprofit organizations. As much of the research about U.S. Latinx populations has been conducted in the Southwest where Latinx populations are sizeable and sometimes demographic majorities, researchers were interested in investigating communication in environments where ethnic group strength was not as robust. In North Carolina, Latinxs comprise 9.1% of the state’s 10 million residents. In Wisconsin, they make up 6.6% of the state’s 5.8 million residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). This compares to the U.S. population overall where Hispanics are 18.1%, the largest minority group. Guidestar.com searches conducted for the keywords “Hispanic,” “Latino,” and “Latinx” for each state were collected and sorted by NTEE code (National Tax-Exempt Entity), state, and revenues. Then, organizations fitting certain criteria were selected (501(c)3, 100K+ revenue, located in North Carolina or Wisconsin, and a service mission targeting U.S.-based Latinx populations). These choices were based on research reinforcing that organizational resources are key factors in successful communication implementation (Kiwanuka-Tondo et al., 2009). A total of 54 organizations fitting these criteria constituted the final sampling frame. Responding to the call from Downes (2017), our goal was to interview those who implemented the organizational communications programs including those aimed at social and cultural changes. Therefore, a variety of organizations were represented with service missions ranging from education and senior support services to those with missions focused on professional networking and immigrant rights.

Following IRB review and approval, individuals listed on the sampling frame organization websites serving as a communication professional, public relations official, or other role tied to the promotion of the organization using their online platforms (marketing director, for example) were contacted via email and direct phone call to participate in the study. If prospective participants did not respond to the initial emails within a week, direct phone calls were made to solicit participation. All 54 organizations fitting the study criteria were contacted during a two-

month period of June and July 2019 for participation in the study with 14 individuals from a total of 13 organizations completing in-depth interviews.

As this study is exploratory in nature (designed to confirm and identify the strategies and goals driving the digital communications and advocacy efforts of these particular organizations), generalizability was not the priority. Instead, this study offers insight into the strategic communication practices and challenges facing these ethnic nonprofits in the current social and political climate and provides evidence for the development of future formal research questions on the topics of digital social advocacy communication strategies.

Procedures

The two primary researchers and one research assistant conducted in-depth structured interviews for this study. Participants were interviewed in-person and via phone dependent upon the manner most convenient for them, and all interviews were digitally recorded for later transcription. Interviews ranged from 12 to 40 minutes and the average length was 23 minutes. This approach resulted in just over five hours total of audio interview data. Interviewers followed a 12-question interview protocol (see Appendix) inquiring about the strategy, content choices, and perceptions of each organization's website and social media content as well as digital social advocacy efforts.

The questions drew from the authors' previous study of Latinx nonprofit visual communication for the acculturation concept (Adams & Johnson, 2019). The strategic use prompts about information/management, public relations, and advocacy were based on literature describing the various uses in public relations for organizational websites and social media (Connolly-Ahern & Broadway, 2001; Curtis et al., 2010; Hon, 2015, 2016a, 2016b; Sommerfeldt et al., 2012). The interviews resulted in 93 pages of transcribed data for hand-coded analysis by the researchers.

After transcription, the interviews were initially analyzed following a codesheet developed by the researchers based on the theoretical constructs that formed the foundation for the study. A pretest of the codesheet was conducted following training on a randomly chosen number of cases from the sample. Research instrument validity was determined by constant comparison checks between cases during the initial data collection period and by performing member checks with study participants following interviews (via follow-up emails). Results satisfied the researchers that the instrument was valid for the concepts addressed in the study. Therefore, researchers proceeded to double-code the rest of the sample.

Following best practices of in-depth interview research as described by Bernard et al. (2017), coders performed several sessions of close reading of each transcript to develop a rich understanding of the motivations, intentions, and strategic decisions as reported by each subject and to understand the various organizational functions being performed via each media channel. As this study is qualitative and exploratory, transcripts were analyzed for content and only frequencies were captured by category. Each interview transcript was analyzed by both

researchers, and results of responses, quotes, and notes for contextual understanding were tabulated.

Reliability

The calculation of reliability is important to qualitative research, including in-depth interviews where researcher interpretations of meaning may vary based on personal worldview or readings (Bernard et al., 2017). However, as interviews are reflexive in nature, some researchers caution about using statistical methods to calculate reliability for studies with smaller samples where human interaction is a factor and simple agreement should suffice (Braun & Clark, 2006; Morse, 1997).

Considering this, after final coding, researchers calculated simple agreement of the main themes based on the double-coding of data. Due to the small number of cases studied (14), no statistical tests of agreement were conducted. Reliability was 100% agreement for all but one category (item three on the interview protocol, strategic use of website), which was 92.9%. As these reliability measures were above the generally accepted level of agreement for qualitative interview research, all coded results were included in the final analysis.

Results

Study results indicated that these nonprofit communicators were leveraging digital platforms to perform the managerial function of information management and also to promote positive cultural prototypes and to advocate for social change. Although the extent to which each organization practiced advocacy differs (often based on organizational mission and individual definitions of advocacy), all but one organization reported engaging in such activities as part of their day-to-day operations.

Strategic uses of websites and social media

Participants were asked about how they used their websites and social media channels to communicate with their various audiences. Responses to these questions were categorized as either “Information management,” “Public Relations,” or “Advocacy” as functions that the media performed for the organization. For the purposes of this study, “Information management” was defined as the dissemination of information by an organization for the purpose of one-way information sharing and “Public Relations” as the use of the website or social media to generate news coverage and build community with external publics (Lovejoy & Saxon, 2012; Su et al., 2017; Yeon et al., 2007). “Advocacy” was defined as the posting or sending of messages designed to mobilize constituents (Hon, 2015; Park & Rim, 2020; Reber & Kim, 2006; Sommerfeldt et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2001).

All but one of the interview subjects reported that their organizations used their websites for information management, and five noted that they also used their sites to support advocacy efforts as part of their missions. Only two organizations said that they used their website for public relations activities such as media relations (posting media releases for example). When asked about their use of social media versus their website, all the participants reported that they used social media for information management—sending quick messages to clients or members or to promote events. As social media are more immediate than updating a website, most participants reported using social media for all time-sensitive communication. One organization also noted that it employed social media for media relations, and five organizations used their social media channels for social advocacy efforts.

Acculturation, public relations and empowerment

Next, respondents were asked to describe the type of visuals they used to depict the work of the organization, why they chose them, how audiences perceived the organization based on the website, and to describe their site's primary audiences. Responses were categorized following Kim's (2001, 2006) notions of acculturation as well as digital social advocacy efforts as described in recent scholarship (Hon, 2015, 2016a, 2016b).

Addressing RQ1

Results showed that the nonprofit organizations strategically chose images depicting acculturation activities such as education (graduates with diplomas in hand or students in classrooms), work (such as a truck driver or people in professional settings), and leadership (awards or honors). This finding aligns with many of the service missions of the organizations; therefore, it is not surprising. However, it confirms that these organizations were aware of the social climate and used their websites strategically. Twelve of the 14 organizations reported using such images and content to both promote their services and show the organization's many contributions to the community as well as depict clients as valuable members of that community. Additionally, two organizations reported choosing images and content depicting advocacy (rallies, protest marches) as part of their mission. One organization also reported deliberate use of images to promote pluralism, and another noted that it also chose visuals to communicate its Ignatian social mission (a Catholic nonprofit).

Additionally, when asked about how they felt audiences perceived their organization as portrayed on their websites, 10 respondents said that visitors would first observe the work they do in the community and the services they offer (acculturation), while three respondents also noted that visitors would view their empowerment efforts (promoting diversity, supporting Latinx culture). Two organizations also said that website visitors also would see their advocacy efforts. One respondent (an arts organization staffer) explained further, arguing that visitors perceived their organization (by visiting their website) as “a space that celebrates the richness and diversity within the Latinx community.”

Several respondents noted that they felt obligated to communicate diversity from their organizational perspective in different ways (and that it was part of their job to do so). As one respondent offered, “Even though we are Latino and a Latino organization, we have a lot of support from White and Black people. So, we like to show that we are not just Latinos, but also others are interested and support the Latino community.” In summary, results show that these communicators strategically chose images and photos carefully to illustrate the diversity of their organizations and their stakeholders as well as to depict the benefit their organizations provided to their local communities.

Addressing RQ2

As reported previously, all study respondents said that they used each media channel differently—social media for immediate communication regarding events (fundraisers or rallies for example) versus using the website as more of a static homepage depicting basic organizational information.

Twelve interview respondents said that donors were the primary target audiences for their websites and they developed content accordingly. Volunteers and clients/service members were reported as the next largest audience, and employers and corporate partners also were noted as important website visitors.

However, several respondents took pains to point out that the website was largely for mainstream or “Anglo” audiences (donors, volunteers, and often, the news media), whereas their social media were the preferred channel for their clients or service recipients. Use of social media—especially private Facebook groups—to share information on mobilization, voting, or changes in legislation was reported as one way these organizations participated in digital social advocacy.

As one respondent explained, the practice of using private communication allowed them to protect themselves and their clients: “We know the political climate right now.” [This] county “is one of the most conservative counties in Wisconsin.” Therefore, these nonprofit communicators strategically used their organizational websites as the public face of their organizations and as the primary way they attracted prospective donors, while leveraging social media to engage their clients and members—often via private groups. This result speaks to both the professionalism of the communicators as strategists and to their need to keep some advocacy efforts and messages restricted to their clients and members—and out of view of the general public.

Positive prototypes and counterstereotypes

Addressing RQ3

Respondents were asked about the types of images employed to depict their target audiences, board members, or volunteers. Responses to the open-ended question were coded broadly as “Stock photos” and “Authentic representation” with any information offered on ethnicity,

diversity, or other identity factors noted. Any responses that did not fit these two categories were coded as “Other,” and notes were made as to the intention and activities. However, responses documenting the preferences for types of activities depicted in these photos were coded per the acculturation codes (“Acculturation,” “Pluralism,” “Advocacy,” and “Other”) as the choice to promote certain activities over others was considered an indicator of positive prototypes consciously being used as a communication strategy. Categories were not mutually exclusive, and the use of stock photos was tabulated as well as photos taken by the organization specifically to represent their clients, volunteers, staff, and other stakeholders.

All 14 respondents noted that they relied heavily on photos taken from events, classes, rallies, and other organization-related sources to authentically represent their services and constituencies. Only one respondent noted the use of stock photos in addition to those they took at events, and these stock photos mostly were included as static web-design elements, not as depictions of specific activities.

All but two of the organizations reportedly chose acculturation or service-related activities as the focus of their website photos with five also noting that they purposefully selected photos of diverse groups and individuals (pluralism) to counter the negative stereotype of the bad Mexican and empower Latinx audiences. Three organizations also used photos from recent protest marches and rallies (advocacy) to depict those actions to audiences. The use of acculturation and pluralism photos were noted as “culture-binding” elements by one arts organization in particular. Using photos of art or musicians and artists also was reported as strategic both to promote events and also to support cultural connections and positive cultural prototypes.

Several of the organizations noted that providing factual information to clients (and often the general public) to counter misinformation or hateful anti-immigration rhetoric had become one of the key ways they used their website and social media channels. Photos depicting their work in the community and actual clients and volunteers was one way they did this. As one interviewee said, “We are giving the truth and they can relate to it with this picture.” Others discussed changing stereotypes with accurate information as education. For example, one participant said, “Without broader understanding, that is going to continue to inhibit our ability to provide our services and programs.”

When asked if there were specific activities they preferred to represent with photos on their website, one respondent explained that they chose images that portrayed their clients as part of the community and wished to educate mainstream audiences about them:

That's a really good question and I would say no. But that may be a naive answer, [but] I think that it's important especially for mainstream media and community to know more and understand more about the needs and services in the Latino community in particular and the contributions that they make in the community. And there's a lot of, and I'll just say it. You know around immigration—there's a huge lack of knowledge

and understanding, and a majority of people are making decisions based on a lack of accurate information and any time we have the opportunity to help change that [we do].

Digital social advocacy

Addressing RQ4

Finally, respondents were asked about their use of their digital channels in social advocacy efforts on behalf of the organization and its members or clients. If the response was yes (that the organization did engage in digital social advocacy), subjects were asked to describe their goals for these efforts and how they used each media channel to achieve them. Although Hon's (2015) model was designed to explain grassroots social movement formation via social media, we used this model to explore how resource-poor nonprofit organizations serving marginalized people may adopt similar strategies and tactics in digital social advocacy work.

Results were evenly split on the question of website use for social advocacy efforts. Of the seven organizations that reportedly used their website for advocacy outreach, respondents also reported that social media were the primary way they enacted digital social advocacy. Social platforms allowed these organizations to send quick messages and calls to action to their constituents, whereas website updates require more resources. Additionally, private Facebook groups were being used to share information on immigration legal issues, deadlines, and updates to clients by two organizations. This enabled one organization whose mission did not focus on immigration to share DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) legislation updates to young professionals in their network without having the communication be subject to mainstream audience scrutiny.

Conversely, an interviewee from an organization focused on immigrant rights/immigration reform explained social advocacy this way: "What we're best at is putting a lot of people in the street—mobilization." For them, the website is the "easiest way for people to learn about what issues are affecting [the state's] residents." It "keeps people updated on where bills are at the moment." The main goal for this organization's digital social advocacy is to "inform people, to get them motivated and get them to show up, act, and donate."

When asked if they felt that their digital social advocacy work was part of their job (or personal social advocacy), all but one respondent answered affirmatively. In fact, many respondents spoke at length about how their nonprofit work either focused on direct advocacy for Latinx and Hispanic community members or how their roles had expanded to include advocacy efforts following changes in U.S. immigration policy and law that have negatively affected these communities. These changes also have reframed definitions of social advocacy for many. According to one respondent from a nonprofit professional organization:

How I define advocacy? Our main mission is to support and advance Hispanics. We are in support of any collaborations or initiatives that we feel benefit the Hispanic

community specifically as it relates to increasing representation in leadership roles in our sector and in the community. That being said, as far as...immigration goes, you know we're a nonpartisan organization because we are a non-profit. However, I would say in the past couple of years we have had to take a stand one way or another especially when it relates to DACA students. We are an organization that supports DACA students. We don't require immigration status information for our scholarships. And we know that there are [DACA] students who are part of our organization. So, I would say we advocate in that way by connecting with them with resources.

Based on these findings, it is apparent that individual communicators creatively reframed the ways they performed their outreach and service work by considering ways to use their digital assets to better support their clients and members. Additionally, they often saw this direct advocacy work as part of their jobs and a holistic effort that benefitted the community (and therefore, society), aligning with current conceptions of public interest communications (Brunner, 2017).

To summarize, organizations clearly used the same supersizing and web-leveraged affordances to share information and mobilize their constituents as informal social movements do to organize (Hon, 2015). Small nonprofit teams and individual communications managers are using social media as their primary channel to “get the word out” when needed to mobilize rallies and organize support. However, unlike Hon’s model, the cultural work done by these organizations generally supported a sustained connection beyond the social action or activity period. Rather than rely solely upon traditional public relations tactics to gain support, these nonprofits used their websites to present the organizational mission and story and often leveraged social media networks to mobilize when needed and to share information privately to vulnerable minorities.

Finally, these organizations reported challenges (lack of resources and funding) typical to nonprofits that impact efforts that they faced striving to reach their communication and business goals (Kiwanuka-Tondo et al., 2009). However, respondents reported that they also faced additional legalities due to deportations and the changes to DACA legislation as these factors directly impacted their clients and missions. The current political climate was noted as a challenge by several nonprofits, and two reported receiving hate mail because they serve Latinx constituencies. Certainly, turning to online social advocacy work such as using photos to dispel negative stereotypes or creating a private Facebook group allowed these nonprofits to bypass traditional media gatekeepers to spread their messages and grow support for their causes.

Discussion

This study was developed as the second stage of a visual content analysis (Adams & Johnson, 2019) to confirm the intentionality and strategic decision making behind the choice of visuals used by these ethnic nonprofits. Based on the results, this study confirms that these nonprofit communicators are intentionally seeking to promote positive cultural prototypes. Results also show that digital channels are becoming increasingly specialized by use by nonprofits (following corporate communication) in that websites are designed for mainstream consumption and present general information about and legitimize the organization and its services. Social media are the primary means for digital social advocacy efforts for these organizations due to increased speed and reach as well as the ability to send targeted private messages to specific publics.

Digital social advocacy was defined in several creative ways by study respondents. It was represented by most as a continuum where “soft” digital advocacy was practiced through strategically chosen photos intended to promote cultural connections, a feeling of community, or positive ethnic prototypes, and “hard” advocacy efforts were comprised of overt and direct communication (such as in calls for action to mobilize for protesting or defeating legislation). To respondents who addressed this, soft advocacy work also included acting as an informal bridge between their clients and resources to help them connect when needed (for example, connecting someone facing imminent deportation with a known immigration attorney). Others noted that just keeping their constituents informed about coming immigration legislation or specifically choosing images that depict diversity and community involvement were examples of soft advocacy efforts they could do daily that both supported their organizational needs and are also the right thing to do for their organizations and communities (Page, 2019). All but one of the organizations spoke about such soft advocacy efforts as a component of their mission and as part of their day-to-day role that did not present a conflict with their 501(c)3 status, which prohibits lobbying.

Several respondents also spoke to a need for an expanded advocacy role that goes beyond their job descriptions wherein they/their organizations act as conduits for immigration information (such as sharing a DACA legal workshop with young professionals on the job market) or as a source of information on immigration and immigrant rights. One respondent from an education-focused nonprofit said that digital social advocacy is part of her work of just “being there” as a resource for those seeking information about immigration and for connecting people to legal help as needed. These sentiments were echoed throughout the interviews. Similarly, another respondent recognized the importance of the website in communicating the organization’s role in social change. This professional (from an arts organization) argued that the website communicates that “we have the power to move things and to make changes in the community.”

An emergent theme that arose from the interview data aligns with the respondents’ perceptions of digital social advocacy and the work done by the organization as a community member—authenticity. Above all, study respondents noted that it was crucial that the images and

content chosen for use on their digital channels illustrate their clients and the work they do as valuable and as part of the community. One way that respondents said they achieved this was through the use of authentic images and transparent communication. As one respondent noted: “We use pictures of the local people. That way they know us. We are giving the truth and they can relate with this picture.” This finding also aligns with respondents who noted the need for their digital communication to present truthful facts to counter misinformation surrounding immigration and immigrants. Both findings support Kim’s (2001, 2006) notions of alignment with the host society and inform ethical public interest communications.

Considering these findings, notions of digital social advocacy should be expanded beyond the call for direct action (use of social media for mobilization) to consider the role of soft advocacy done by nonprofits representing marginalized individuals in society. Examples are representing minority groups they serve as valued community members, connecting clients with legal resources, or providing education to mainstream media or schools.

Finally, as part of the data collection process and nature of the in-depth interviews, two study respondents noted that they or their organization had been the recipient of hate mail—U.S. Postal Service mail or via online channels (social or email). A few also linked this hate mail to the negative campaign rhetoric and discourse on immigration proliferated by the Trump administration (Figueroa-Caballero et al., 2019; Ogan et al., 2018; Pérez-Curiel & Limón-Naharro, 2019). Not only is this finding troubling, it points to the need for the soft advocacy work being done by these organizations per study results, and possibly, the use of direct tactics to promote positive ethnic prototypes in their respective media markets.

In summary, this study confirms the results of the previous examination of the use of visuals as strategic communication and counterstereotypes by U.S. nonprofits serving Latinx groups (Adams & Johnson, 2019) in that the choice of visuals is both strategic and increasingly intended to help counter hateful online discourse and depictions. In addition, it identifies several points of best practice for professional nonprofit communicators and organizations engaged in public interest communications, particularly as part of their service mission to U.S. minority groups.

Specifically, this study offers the following strategic observations from the findings. Images used on websites are important in soft advocacy work because they may provide counterstereotypes to be viewed by their targeted majority/Caucasian audience (including key publics such as donors, foundations, or corporate community partners). Images used on social media are also important because they provide positive prototypes and counterstereotypes for the Latinx publics the organization serves. Digital social advocacy appears to exist on a continuum for those engaged in the type of work done by nonprofits that serve minority publics (where overt lobbying is off limits and soft advocacy efforts are considered appropriate).

Implications

The use of private social media groups to share information on immigration and for mobilization points to a growing danger faced by these organizations and their clients. Two organizations' reports of hate mail preceded the Texas Walmart shooting directed at Latinx residents. These reports demonstrate the importance of public interest communications practice and research to combat stereotypes, prejudices, and hateful online discourse. Unfortunately, these nonprofits' soft advocacy work is increasingly important as the United States continues to struggle with immigration policy surrounding the global COVID-19 pandemic and social media conversations reflect continued use of stereotypes by partisan news and social media outlets. Nonprofit digital assets can help counter these stereotypes, but more overt communicative action on the part of these organizations—especially in the face of violence—may be necessary.

Also, following the widespread adoption of the Zoom video conferencing application during the pandemic, this research project could be extended to other U.S. metro locations with a diverse range of Latinx-focused nonprofit organizations. Considering this opportunity for in-depth interviews, researchers also might look deeper into the role that these nonprofits play in their communities—not just as service providers supporting adaptation to mainstream culture, but also perceptions of their value as community members and advocacy efforts by the mainstream donors and funders they target via their websites.

Future research on the topics addressed in this study should consider the creative use of social media for mobilization and information sharing as well as the use of soft advocacy to promote positive perceptions of members and constituencies. Additional qualitative research is needed to better define and investigate the notion of soft advocacy and understand how nonprofits may be using digital channels to work for social change while maintaining compliance with 501(c)3 status restrictions.

Last, further exploration into digital social advocacy might consider how these minority-serving organizations are helping to set the mainstream news media agenda on the topics of immigration and migrants' rights.

Limitations

This study was limited geographically to two mid-sized metropolitan areas of the United States. Although as described in the introduction, both areas represent a cross-section of nonprofits (considering organizational age, service focus, etc.). However, given more time and other resources, the project would have benefitted by extending data collection to more sites across the country.

Further, the study was limited in scope due to the private nature of some of the social media outreach and advocacy work being done by these nonprofit communicators—including volunteers. Several participants reported using private Facebook groups or applications such as WhatsApp to communicate mobilization messages to their members or clients. However,

researchers had no access to these communications and had to rely on interview respondent perceptions of their efficacy. To better understand these efforts, interviews with members of organizational publics would have contributed to the study's understanding of message reception efficacy as well as perceptions of nonprofit advocacy.

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Appendix

Interview protocol and codesheet

In addition to noting any emerging themes and yes/no answers to each question, PLEASE CODE BY QUESTION FOLLOWING THE THEMATIC SCHEME BELOW. Codes are not discrete—more than one can be used for each question.

1. Can you tell me (in general) about how you use your website? What functions does it serve for your organization and how you decide upon its images and the content?
CODES:
 - Information management (news, events, sign ups, registration)
 - Public Relations/Publicity (press releases, etc.)
 - Advocacy (mobilization, calls to action, etc.)

2. Can you compare the function of the website versus your social media? How does your strategic approach differ between them? CODES:
 - Information management (news, events, sign ups, registration)
 - Public Relations/Publicity (press releases, etc.)
 - Advocacy (mobilization, calls to action, etc.)

3. (Category-Acculturation) Going back to your website, what types of visuals do you prefer to use to depict the work the organization does? Why?
 - Acculturation (services): education, work, leadership, citizenship, family
 - Pluralism: empowerment
 - Advocacy: protest, mobilization
 - Other (note):

4. (Category-Stereotypes/positive prototypes) What types of images or visuals do you use to depict your audiences, board members or volunteers? Why?
 - Stock photos
 - Authentic representation (actual volunteers, etc.)
 - Other (note):

5. (Category-Stereotypes/positive prototypes) Are there any **activities** that you prefer to depict over others? Why?
 - Acculturation (services): education, work, leadership, citizenship
 - Pluralism: empowerment
 - Advocacy: protest, mobilization
 - Other (note):

6. (Category-Acculturation) Staying on the subject of your website, how do you think people perceive your organization by viewing it?
 - Acculturation (services): education, work, leadership, citizenship
 - Pluralism: empowerment
 - Advocacy: protest, mobilization
 - Other (note):

7. (Category-Acculturation) Who do you think of as the primary target audiences when you are planning or adding content to your website?
 - Donors/funders
 - Volunteers
 - Clients/members/service recipients
 - Employers
 - Other (note):

8. (Category-Digital Advocacy) Does your organization engage in digital advocacy efforts in regard to the groups you serve? Can you describe how? (How do you/your organization define advocacy in general?)
 - Yes
 - No
 - Digital Media Ecosystem (note platforms & digital strategies used, etc.)

9. (Category-Digital Advocacy) Do you use your website to support advocacy efforts (such as immigrant rights, etc.)? Why or why not?

- Yes
- No

10. (Category-Digital Advocacy) What are the goals for your organization’s digital advocacy efforts – thinking of both your website and your social media? (Example: to mobilize follower support for DACA recipients)

Note goals and any of the following factors and outcomes discussed in the response:

- Antecedents: Social, Political, and Economic Context
- Processes: Strategy and Tactics
- Digital Media Ecosystem (platforms used, etc.)
- Effects: Outputs (Volume & Reach) and Outcomes (Goals)

11. (Category-Digital Advocacy) Finally, do you consider this work as just “part of my job” or as social advocacy?

- a. Yes (Professionals as advocates)
- b. No

12. (Open-ended) Before we conclude the interview, is there anything else you’d like to add?