



(Dis) Connecting with the *Ummah* in e-Spaces: How Latino Muslims Shape Their Identity Through the Internet?

Diana Carolina Zuniga Gomez & Mehmet Ozkan

To cite this article: Diana Carolina Zuniga Gomez & Mehmet Ozkan (2020) (Dis) Connecting with the *Ummah* in e-Spaces: How Latino Muslims Shape Their Identity Through the Internet?, Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs, 40:2, 302-317, DOI: [10.1080/13602004.2020.1773100](https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2020.1773100)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2020.1773100>



Published online: 06 Jun 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 146



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

(Dis) Connecting with the *Ummah* in e-Spaces: How Latino Muslims Shape Their Identity Through the Internet?

DIANA CAROLINA ZUNIGA GOMEZ and MEHMET OZKAN

Abstract

This article aims to give a better understanding of the role and dynamics of communities in Latino Muslims' online lives. Latinos extensively use online spaces as a way of learning, connecting and interacting. This is not an exception for Latino Muslims. This study answers the question of how and in what form the online presence of Muslims in Latin America creates a sense of belonging as part of the Ummah; and in what way their interests are converged with those of Muslims in other parts of the world. Focusing on structure and practices, authority and hierarchy, and the broader connections with other (e-) communities, this paper argues that Latino Muslims are highly disconnected from the overall Muslim world and there should be an initiative to connect them with the Muslim world based on their needs, conceptions and perspectives.

Keywords: *Latino Muslims; identity; Ummah; social media; sense of community; leadership; e-communities; Latin America*

Introduction

Since the invention of the Internet, most of the aspects of daily life have moved onto the World Wide Web; libraries, businesses and others have created websites, blogs, forums, films and other spaces aiming to spread and gather information.¹ Spirituality is also being practiced in cyberspace, beginning with the uploading of solid texts and now going to the extent of having virtual churches with online rituals.² Religion on the Internet has undergone a change in what was once considered as sacred performance or space.

In the last several years, there is an interesting, but highly important, development in Latin American countries: the number of Muslim converts is rising at an unusual

Diana Carolina Zuniga Gomez is an independent researcher and freelance journalist-translator based in Turkey. Previously she worked at Anadolu Agency as a journalist and taught Spanish. After studying BA in Communication at Antioquia University in Medellin, Colombia, she completed her MA in Public Relations at Anadolu University in Turkey. Her study focuses on Latino Muslims, Islamic calligraphy and cultural studies.

Mehmet Ozkan is Executive Director of Maarif Foundation USA and Non-Resident Fellow at Center for Global Policy in Washington, DC, USA. Previously he taught at universities in Colombia, Turkey, Bosnia & Herzegovina; worked as Director for Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) in Colombia and International Center for Terrorism and Transnational Crime (UTSAM) in Turkey. After conducting research in South Africa, Sweden, India and Egypt, he completed his PhD at Sevilla University, Spain. His study focuses on comparative politics, religion and politics, Latin America, the Middle East, Africa and Turkish foreign policy.

speed.³ This trend is currently not getting any attention from both academic and political perspectives. However, this growth is not only important for political reasons, but also for the way these new communities are being developed through the use of the Internet, and their aspects as online communities based on real communities in an environment where there are almost no visible indications of Islam as a cultural or political element in society.

What is the use of Facebook as a communication tool for the Latino Muslim communities? This is not only an issue with theoretical, but also with practical day-to-day life dimensions. There is not a large Muslim population in Latin America. Most of the Muslims in Latin America live in distant places, far away from each other. As there are no strong face-to-face relationships, the role and importance of online communication among Latino Muslims is increased.⁴ By using online spaces such as Facebook, experiences, knowledge and information are shaped, which in one way or another help to build a sense of community.

While many of the Islamic organizations have a presence online, not all of them have specialized staff in communication and new technologies and not all groups or Fanpages belong to organizations (some of them are made by the initiative of a single member). In Latin America especially, due to the lack of funding and personnel, it may even be seen as unnecessary; thus, communication inside these online communities is carried on in an empirical way. At the organization level, recognizing the failings and strong points may lead to better performance of the community in front of other organizations and the public; meanwhile at the social level, it can improve the engagement of the members inside the community and, in the case of immigrants, with other communities.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the activities of Latino Muslims in online spaces and investigate how the sense of belonging is established through the use of e-spaces such as Facebook through which virtual communities are built. This study also aims to help understand the members of Latino Muslim communities and contextualize the way they interact in online spaces from a theoretical and academic perspective.

Detecting and Sampling Latino Muslims in Online Spaces

The Muslim community is fast growing in Latin America, and according to an estimate, each week between one and three people are becoming Muslim in each mosque; this increases the number of Muslims rapidly. In the Latin American context, the communities are usually formed by mostly women converts, along with Arab Muslims who immigrated there at various times in history.⁵ It is hard to understand why all these people are choosing to be part of a religion that comes from the other side of the world and from a completely unknown culture. More importantly, how do they develop a sense of community, despite the geographical distance between Latin America and the Muslim world? Having in mind the lack of affinity between the Islamic and Latino cultures plus the fact that there is an enormous lack of knowledge in Latin America about Islam and Muslims,⁶ the use of the Internet is the main source of knowledge in these areas. Consequently, groups and communities on the Internet have been made to fulfill the need of belonging as well as the lack of knowledge.

This e-space knowledge about Latino Muslims is available, but it is always the subject of manipulation and misinterpretation and even falsehood, due to the fact it is very difficult to find up-to-date information and related statistics about the numbers of Latino Muslims, and thus about their presence online, but this does not undervalue the importance and urgency of this socially developing issue for an academic study.

There are a variety of reasons for writing on this issue and this research hopes to contribute to a wider society and academia in several ways, along with establishing a relationship between the developing Latino Muslim community and overall Islamic world in terms of understanding/interpreting the way they use e-spaces as a tool of communication.

As mentioned, this study will analyze e-space groups from Latin America, which meet the requirements settled on to evaluate them and analyze how online communication may or may not help to develop a sense of community. The vast geographical area and disperse situation of Muslim minorities in the continent make this selection difficult. However, through a sampling design, this study made this selection based on the activeness of these groups and geographical coverage in the Latin American continent.

This article focuses on Muslim converts in Latin America. The geographical distance of these converts from the Muslim world and low density of the Muslim population in the continent make direct communication between the Muslim world and Latino converts very difficult.⁷ Therefore, using the advantages of technology, these Muslim converts resort to e-spaces as a way to communicate, share information, get to know about other Muslims in the continent and, most importantly, develop a sense of community. Latin America is far away from the Muslim world and this puts them in an environment where the challenges they face living as Muslims are very different and unique, considering the Latino culture and false perceptions about Muslims among Latinos. These elements also promote the use of e-spaces.

One can find many e-spaces on Facebook about Latino Muslims and there are no official lists of Latino Muslim online communities, besides the ones used in the events organized with these minorities by international religious organizations. This study sought to find a representative list of Muslim communities in the continent, however, there is no official information about these communities.

To overcome this obstacle, this study was carried out for Latino Muslim communities excluding Caribbean countries as well those who were not Spanish speakers. Based on the contact information provided by Turkey's Presidency for Religious Affairs (DIYANET) about the "First Latin American Muslim Religious Leaders Summit in 2014"⁸ and the material collected in the "First Congress of Latino Muslim Women in Latin America in 2016" in Mexico City,⁹ invitations were extended to the communities in order to get the addresses of their official sites on Facebook so that they could be analyzed. Thirty-one organizations were invited, but only ten of them answered and met the requirements for the research (having a space in Facebook active for 2 months or more during the months designated for this research). A total of 910 posts were classified and analyzed according to the previously settled categories; new categories were included when needed. Overall the spaces have low engagement, there is no presence of authority, the formats used consist mainly of texts and images, the topics are mainly related to the community and Islamic information and the linkages with other communities are few and it cannot be determined if there are real alliances between them or if they are merely sharing information.

Using both the list provided by Turkey's Presidency for Religious Affairs (Diyamet) and information gathered personally at the "First Congress of Latino Muslim Women in Latin America" in Mexico City, this study has invited all relevant communities mentioned in these lists, by email or in person, to participate in this research. However, if the organization did not answer, did not accept the invitation or did not own a space in Facebook, it will not be analyzed. In the case that the space is not active during the

two months designated by this study, it would be categorized as “Inactive”; it has thus been eliminated because it is unlikely to contribute to this research.

The following organizations from Spanish-speaking countries participated in the “First Latin American Muslim Leaders Religious Summit” in Istanbul and were reached using the information provided by Veysi Kaya, Director of Educational and Cultural Services from the Diyanet Foundation. In total, they are 29 organizations (Table 1).

The following organizations were contacted during the “First Congress of Latino Muslim Women” in Mexico City held in February 2016; three of them were contacted before the event as well through the information provided by the Presidency for Religious Affairs (Diyanet) (Table 2).

The e-spaces analyzed represent ten communities from eight countries; these Muslim populations in these countries represent some of the most known communities of Muslims in Latin America. Despite the limitations of this study, this sampling hopes to give a picture of these virtual communities through this research. However, in any sampling approach, the researcher tries to find cases rich in information¹⁰ having certain attributes demanded by the character of the study.¹¹ For this study, those attributes are related to the background of the Latino Muslim communities such as how old they are, their populations, whether they have support from, or connections with, the Muslim world and their active participation in the Latino Islamic environment. Although we sought more detailed information about their history, membership and alliances about these communities, it could not be fully achieved as the information was often lacking.

Measuring the content of e-spaces is not an easy task. However, this study investigates the Latino Muslims communities’ online presence on Facebook Fanpages and groups with the following objectives:

- (i) It analyzes if these spaces can meet the characteristics of a virtual community, or if they remain as settlements catering to a specific need;
- (ii) Qualifying the engagement, participation, responses and reactions of group members are key elements to observe and analyze their sense of community;
- (iii) In all e-spaces analyzed for this study, we looked at the practices of communication, whether there is consistency in the topics that are posted as well as the type of content used. If there is a connection between them, it is likely that the spaces have a discussion structure;
- (iv) Related to the overall discussion strategy, which sets the agenda and commands the knowledge and debates is very important. This paper has also analyzed this dimension in these groups;
- (v) The authority presented as well as any type of hierarchy is crucial to analyze to acknowledge who and how the groups are led;
- (vi) Latin America has one of the least visible Muslim communities. Therefore, the connection of Latino Muslims with the overall Muslim world is critical not only in terms of learning Islam better but also being part of the *Ummah*. In these e-spaces, this study looks at this dimension as well.

Data collection for this study is facilitated through content analysis. The organizations were contacted in person or by e-mail, in order to obtain the official or institutional link of the space on Facebook. The content of the space was screened for a definitive time period and analyzed in detail. This analysis was done through the lens of the above-mentioned points to substantiate the arguments of the study. In order to gather data which answers the research question, a suitable research method needed to be found. In the following

Table 1. Organizations contacted with the information provided by Presidency for Religious Affairs (Diyamet).

Country	Organization
Argentina	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Organización Islámica de America Latina - Centro Islamico - Centro Islamico de Mendoza - Centro Islámico de Córdoba
Bolivia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Centro Islamico - Asociacion Islamica de Bolivia
Chile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Centro Islamico de Chile - Centro Cultural Islamico
Colombia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Asociacion Islamica de Colombia - Centro Cultural Islamico de Barranquilla - Centro Islamico de Maicao
Cuba	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Asociacion Islamica de Cuba
Costa Rica	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Centro Islámico de Costa Rica
Ecuador	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Centro Islamico de Ecuador
Guatemala	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Asociación Guatemalteca de Musulmanes
Honduras	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Asociacion Islamica de Honduras
Nicaragua	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Centro Islámico de Nicaragua
Mexico	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Centro Cultural Islamico - Instituto de Lengua y Cultura Arabe

(Continued)

TABLE 1. Continued.

Country	Organization
Paraguay	- Centro Islamico de Paraguay - Centro Islamico de Asuncion
Peru	- Comunidad Islamica de San Borja - Comunidad Islamica de Peru
Uruguay	- Centro Islamico de Uruguay
Panama	- Comunidad Musulmana de Panamá - Asociación Panameña de Musulmanes
Venezuela	- Centro Islámico de Laguiria - Sociedad Islámica de Venezuela - Centro Islámico Sur

Table 2. Organizations contacted during the “First Congress of Latino Muslim Women” in Mexico.

Organizations Contacted	
Country	Organization
Argentina	Islam Para Niños
Colombia	Asociación Centro Cultural Islámico de Medellín
Ecuador	Centro Islamico de Guayaquil
Uruguay	Centro Islamico de Uruguay ^a
Honduras	Asociacion Islamica de Honduras ^a
Mexico	Instituto de Lengua y Cultura Arabe ^a

^aAlready contacted with the information provided by the Presidency for Religious Affairs (Diyanet).

paragraphs, the choice for participant observation and how this observation was conducted is explained. After observing the content of the selected e-spaces, the information was categorized in order to process it for analysis.

Latino Muslims Online: Scope, Content and Issues

At the outset, some general observations should be made in order to have an overall view of the communities. Only one community states its mission in the “About” section; it is very important to publish this so that it can be known what type of organization it is and

who is behind it. When analyzing the spaces, there were some similarities that were found in most of them; for instance, most spaces had some level of engagement within them, though, in most cases, the engaging members represented much less than a quarter of the total members. Most of the spaces used a Fanpage format, which gave much more priority to the posting and moderation of content, as well as providing options (e.g. the insights feature) which may be used to help improve the development of the space. It is important to underline the fact the most of the communities did not encourage or promote dialog; in fact, most members barely participated after posting content, with only a few of them getting involved through “liking” comments received or responding to inquires. This is representative of low engagement.

Most reactions to posts were positive, though some reactions were negative too. Most of the comments did not lead to conversations; they were supporting words and tags. An interesting finding was that many members expressed gratitude for the posts and sharing information. With regard to the content, it can be seen that mostly they were images with text followed by Facebook links; a few communities were also producing their own material and using their logo on the graphics. Regarding the topics, most were related to the community and it could be noted that members had greater responses and engagement with posts about community events or containing community pictures as compared to external content. The spaces posted much Islamic information that also seemed to be relevant for the general public. It was unexpected that the management of the different communities was not organized about the topics of the content posted and the time of the release of this content; only in the case of the Sufi community had some repetitive activities been specified.

Members of the communities did not all seem to be locals; in fact, there were many who seemed to live away from these communities, but they were active participants. On the other hand, it could be seen that some members participate in different communities at the time, being very active, although due to the limited information it was not possible to determine if they were leaders. Most of the members seem to be inactive or lurkers.

It seems that most of the spaces are strongly based on the offline communities and their events, members seem to be more interested in the offline sphere. The connection or relation with other organizations is low, but there is presence, however, it cannot be established how strong those ties are. It seems that the communities from, Medellin, Guayaquil and Mexico have relations or at least share other organizations' material. It is important to point out the importance of international support such as from the Saudi Arabian Government and Turkey's Presidency for Religious Affairs.¹²

Although most of the spaces were Fanpages with a management team, they do not really exert a strong influence over the community. Majority of the managers in these spaces are rarely aware of the interactions, while only few seem to be responsive, either supporting or recognizing members. It could not be identified any hierarchy, simply because of the fact that the analysis was focused on defined time period. Similarly, it cannot also be seen whether there is any type of censorship or banning for content and members.

The sense of community was not fully perceptive in any space although some of them had characteristic of recognition, support and relationship. However, emotional attachment, obligation and identification were barely found, meanwhile a high expression of gratitude was found in most of the communities.

Table 3. Number of posts that represented reactions, shares and comments in the Latino Muslim spaces.

Organization	Number of posts	Reactions	Shares	Comments
Islam Para Niños (ARG)	35	34	8	2
Centro Islamico Republica de Argentina (ARG)	120	115	87	75
Centro Islamico Boliviano (BOL)	42	41	31	28
Centro Cultural Islamico (Sufi) (CHI)	24	22	14	9
Asociación Centro Cultural Islámico de Medellín (COL)	127	112	-	48
Asociacion Islamica de Cuba (CUB)	8	3	1	-
Centro Islamico de Ecuador (ECU)	300	279	25	63
Centro Islamico de Guayaquil (ECU)	137	135	108	48
Asociacion Islamica de Honduras (HON)	11	11	10	6
Instituto de Lengua y Cultura Arabe (MEX)	106	107	65	40

To analyze the engagement of the members within the space, three elements were observed; reactions, shares and comments. This helps us understand if and how members react to the post, if they spread them and engage in interactions through their comments on conversations or discussion. The findings are presented in Table 3.

Most of the posts received reactions; however, the shares and comments are lower and less persistent. Reactions constitute a great source of information regarding engagement. Facebook gives six options: “Like”, “Love”, “Ha ha”, “Wow”, “Sad” or “Angry”; allowing users to express their feelings about a post. The outcomes are shown in Table 4.

The “share” in a Facebook site represents how many times the post has been replicated publicly, and this a good indication of engagement and spread of information. The results of this analysis are shown in Table 5.

Dialogs and discussions given on the virtual spaces imply interactions among members as well as it can hint characteristics of SOVC (Sense of Virtual Community) like relationship and recognition (Table 6).

There is a very low presence of dialog and discussion over the posts. Mainly comments are supporting (Arabic) words and tags.

Results and Analysis

One of the first failings of Latino spaces is the lack of basic information, despite the fact that most for them had their logo and addresses, only few have their history, vision and mission, as well as the name and contact person in charge. Virtual communities do not provide further information rather than the one provided automatically by platform, this is important to know who they are and who could join. However, it was found that some communities use albums to group-related pictures. It is also noted that some of the post studied belong to update of these albums, as it indicates they often have same reactions, shares and comments.

It should be noted here that some of the spaces have diversity of languages and expressions, which establish borders not only in communication but also in identity. It could be found that some comments included Arabic words and texts fully in Arabic; it cannot be identified if they were Latinos or Arabs living in Latin America.

Table 4. Observation and commentaries on the reactions found in the Latino Muslims spaces.

Organization	Reactions
Islam Para Niños (ARG)	All posts except one have reactions ranging from 1 to 18 all positive mainly “Like” and “Love”, most of the posts posses between 2–6 positive reactions.
Centro Islamico Republica de Argentina (ARG)	Most of the reactions were positive “Like” and “Love”, few were sad (24 May, 13 June, 15 July and 31 July), the minimum reactions found in a post were 1 and the maximum was 190.
Centro Islamico Boliviano (BOL)	Range from 0 to 79, all of them being positive. The higher numbers of reactions were on the albums where pictures of activities done by the community are shared.
Centro Cultural Islamico (Sufi) (CHI)	All of the posts were positive, around 10–20 but ranging for 0–90.
Asociación Centro Cultural Islámico de Medellín (COL)	Some post do not have any reaction at all. The reactions are mostly positive except from the post on 4 July where an “angry” was found.
Asociacion Islamica de Cuba (CUB)	Only 3 posts had reactions, all were positive.
Centro Islamico de Ecuador (ECU)	Most of the reactions (279 post) were positive “Like” and “Love”. The reactions “sad” were found in the post on the death of Muhammad Ali; in the post of 15 July regarding families in Gaza during Ramadan; 16 July a post about the lack of water during Ramadan in Gaza (beside an “angry” reaction); 2 sad reactions about the post of 24 July about Burma.
Centro Islamico de Guayaquil (ECU)	Most of the reactions on the Fanpage were like or love. 235 post presented reactions.
Asociacion Islamica de Honduras (HON)	All of the reactions were “Like” and “Love” except for “angry” in the post of 25 July.
Instituto de Lengua y Cultura Arabe (MEX)	All reactions were positive, from 1 up to 90, but in general stable numbers between 20 and 40.

Table 5. Observations and commentaries of the “share” found in the Latino Muslim spaces.

Organization	Shares
Islam Para Niños (ARG)	8 posts have been shared once or twice.
Centro Islamico Republica de Argentina (ARG)	Members do not share all posts, but the shares range from 0 to 204. In an overall they reproduce between 10 and 30 times.
Centro Islamico Boliviano (BOL)	Most of the posts are shared more than once, ranging from 0 (very few) to 20 shares. Most share 4 times.
Centro Cultural Islamico (Sufi) (CHI)	Around half of the posts were shared, but some were shared very low (twice) others in very high numbers (50–90 times)
Asociación Centro Cultural Islámico de Medellín (COL)	There are no shares at all although all the material is shared from other sites.
Asociacion Islamica de Cuba (CUB)	There were only 2 shares.
Centro Islamico de Ecuador (ECU)	Most of the posts are not shared; it can vary from 1 up to 22.
Centro Islamico de Guayaquil (ECU)	Posts were shared from 1 to 24 times, but most of them from 1 to 5.
Asociacion Islamica de Honduras (HON)	All posts except one was shared ranging from 2 to 29 times, being more repetitive around 5 times.
Instituto de Lengua y Cultura Arabe (MEX)	The posts are often shared, from 0 to 194, overall between 10 and 20 shares can be observed.

Table 6. Observations and commentaries about the comments found in the Latino Muslim spaces.

Organization	Comments
Islam Para Niños (ARG)	There were few (4 in total) comments and they were tags to other members.
Centro Islamico Republica de Argentina (ARG)	Some of the comments were basic Islamic information like the 99 names of god and history about Islam in Spain. There is a discussion or conversation given about the Diego Maradona where some members expressed different opinions about the soccer player on 9 June. In the post of 24 May it can be seen that members discuss the position of the organization regarding the terrorist attacks in other Islamic countries. Finally words of support like “congratulations”, “ <i>Allahu Akbar</i> ”, “ <i>MashaaAllah</i> ” and replies to supplication like “ <i>Amin</i> ” or “ <i>Insha’Allah</i> ” can be found in the comments of some posts.
Centro Islamico Boliviano (BOL)	Most of the posts have comments, but they are not conversations, one can find messages of joy or gratitude, finding Arabic expression like “ <i>MashaaAllah</i> ” (used to express joy and thankfulness) or “ <i>Mabrouk</i> ” (used to express blessings or congratulations).
Centro Cultural Islamico (Sufi) (CHI)	There were very low numbers of comments mainly supporting with words like “ <i>MashaaAllah</i> ” or thanking. There were not conversations.
Asociación Centro Cultural Islámico de Medellín (COL)	The numbers of comments are low 1–20, around 4 averages and not in all posts, just in a few post conversations can be seen (23 May, 29 May, 30 May, 20 June) and users in the comments tag other members.
Asociacion Islamica de Cuba (CUB)	There are no comments on the posts.
Centro Islamico de Ecuador (ECU)	It can be seen that most of the comments are replies to supplications or events, there is just one kind of conversation or debate between a member and the management regarding the way to make the Adhan. Most of the comments are <i>Amin</i> , <i>MashaaAllah</i> , <i>Allah Akbar</i> and <i>Alhamdulillah</i> .
Centro Islamico de Guayaquil (ECU)	Few posts had comments on them, ranging from 0 to 25 per post, being 0–2 on average. Most of the comments are words of support or tags. There are very few conversations.
Asociacion Islamica de Honduras (HON)	The comments were not real conversation or exchange of information, although some members were having questions and requesting, help answers are rarely found.
Instituto de Lengua y Cultura Arabe (MEX)	Some people made tags on the comments. A short conversation is given on the post of 12 may where members talk about. In most of the comments where people asked support or had question management answered. However, it does not motivate dialog. Words like <i>Allah Akbar</i> , <i>Alhamdulillah</i> , <i>Amin</i> can be found in the comments (14 May).

Main Outcomes of the Research

(1) *Is there sense of virtual community in the Latino Muslim groups on Facebook?*

There is a differentiation between settlements and communities, as well these latter own sub-categories of communities of practice and solidarity. Once the spaces of the Latino Muslims in Facebook analyzed, it could be perceived that they have some community characteristics (that may be present offline), they do not have a sense of community, thus they are settlements. However, they share characteristic or both *Gemeinschaft*

and Gesellschaft communities, such as the relationship, both strong and weak ties, there are features of practice and solidarity communities based in both virtual world and offline.

(2) *Is there Recognition of members?*

Recognition was present in six of the ten studied spaces; however, it was perceived through tags and comments, which indicated that they know each other in person. It was very clear that members recognize highly imams, sheikhs and people from management rather than other members. The communities that do not have any indication of recognition were Islam para niños, Centro Islamico Republica de Argentina, Asociacion Islamica de Cuba and Instituto de Lengua y Cultura Arabe.

(3) *Is there identity and identification?*

It was found signs and symbols of identity such as Islamic images in the profile picture of the members, Arabic names and writing, Arabic and Islamic expressions. It can be said that some members express their identity through Facebook. However, there was not much statement of self-identity or others' identification. The communities that presented some sign of identity or identification were Centro Islamico Republica de Argentina, Centro Islamico Boliviano, Centro Cultural Islamico (Sufi), Centro Islamico de Guayaquil and Instituto de Lengua y Cultura Arabe.

(4) *Is there exchange of support?*

Support was expressed mainly supporting activities (both on/offline), it was seen that many used Arabic expressions like MashaaAllah and Allahu Akbar to encourage members. Only three spaces did not have this characteristic: Islam Para Niños, Asociacion Islamica de Cuba and Asociacion Islamica de Honduras.

(5) *Are there relationship among the members?*

Only two communities show that members had relationship like friendship, which were Asociación Centro Cultural Islámico de Medellín and Centro Islamico de Guayaquil. It was seen that members have relationship among them and with the sheikhs, imams or leaders of the mosque; the language used expressed closeness, respect and appreciation.

(6) *Is there emotional attachment?*

Emotional attachment was observed in four spaces: Centro Islamico Republica de Argentina, Centro Islamico Boliviano, Asociación Centro Cultural Islámico de Medellín and Centro Islamico de Guayaquil. It is important to underline that some members apparently living abroad and these communities expressed to miss the community; perhaps it was not clear what it meant the community online or offline. Likewise, some members expressed to miss the activities of the community offline and support them.

(7) *Is there obligation?*

Obligation was perceived only in Asociación Centro Cultural Islámico de Medellín, where members try to push others to participate in the offline activities of the community. This is important because the sense of community does not only shape the experience of the members but also the way they communicate and the schemas they may follow to it. Communities with higher SO(V)C have more involvement and participation, thus

members are closer to each other. They also create or develop their own language according to the characteristics as well as the live experiences as a group.

(8) *Is there engagement to these types of online groups by its members?*

Interactions or links are important to define the community because they indicate the level of communication between members and the space. In the sites analyzed here, it could be seen that most of the connections were weak ties, mostly lack of relationships; yet strong ties with relationship among some members could be found. In order to be a real virtual community, the commitment and participation by the members is important to maintain the space, in this sense few members were participating beyond than reacting, and it could not be determined who were active or not, even in the case of leaders due to the low involvement. The participation was very low in comments and shares especially that can be said that the majority of the members were inactive; therefore, it is difficult to define how many people are actually reading the post. These virtual settlements are weak as far as they are based on geographical communities and it might be important to see if the lack of interest and participations is also reflected at the real place.

(9) *What are the practices, content and topics used on e-spaces in Facebook by Latino Muslim e-communities?*

It could not be seen if the spaces had practices regarding the communication, only the Centro Cultural Islamico (Sufi) seems to have the same activity often and the Centro Islamico de Guayaquil likes most all of the comments done by the members to its posts.

Regarding the content, they use many formats, but the main elements are images and text. Interestingly, infographics, animations, audios were never used. The topics are tightly related to Islam, like verses, actions or sayings of their prophet as well as relevant information for and about the community. It is important to highlight the appeal to universal values like, good behavior, solidarity, generosity and others that were included in posts and in some cases through Islamic stories and teachings.

One of the functions of management is to create significant content for the members; however, administrators do not produce much original content rather than copying texts and sharing external material. There are not utilizing the full use of the Facebook tools, for instance, the Fanpage are used to propagate events, but most of them they do not use the Facebook tool of "create an event". In these cases, the engagement was very naturally low. It also seems that people in charge of the communication in the e-spaces are not fully aware of the interventions done by its members.

(10) *Are there discussion structures, who and what, in the Latino Muslims communities online?*

There are not practices or discussion structures in these spaces. Managers do not have strong commitment with the posting and monitoring of responses, in fact, there was not evidence of members executing tasks or having roles.

(11) *Is there authority or hierarchy in Facebook groups?*

Despite that was expectation that there may be some type of surveillance by Islamic authorities in the minorities' spaces, the presence of external authorities was non-existent. Power struggles among the members were not found during the analysis; members do not seek to establish themselves as authorities nor the management, in fact, there is not any type of visible norms or rules to follow up.

Although it was suggested that international Islamic authorities may have any influence in virtual environments, in the minorities of Latin America no indicators were found, in fact, the communities seem to support each other and some of what could be called a discussion structure was built with the events or material from other Latino spaces. Literature tells us that in virtual communities anyone can become a leader, a decentralized authority, in part, thanks to the fast release and dissemination of information given not only by the organizations but also strongly by the public. These new figures (leaders) may echo whichever judgments and commentaries going beyond organization's posture. Thus, similar sites are networked in Latino America where leaders are starting to link each other.

(12) *Are built links between Latino Muslims e-communities and the broader Muslim (e-) communities? If so, what are they for?*

The relations or alliances with broader Muslim (e-) communities, in fact, were poor, it was expected to find high support from Arab countries and organizations, due to the fact that the phenomena was found previously by other researchers in Europe specially in money flows, which could be represent not only a way of financing these Latino communities but also source of information and education. It was found that only Turkey's Diyanet and Saudi Arabian government are involved in two of the communities studied giving support for the Islamic festivities. However, the influence of these governments in the Islamic education, material and dissemination of information cannot be evaluated due to the lack of data.

Discussion

This study seeks to address the current situation of Latino Muslims in virtual environments, not only from theory but also from practice. Spaces in Internet have been cataloged as third spaces for societies that adopt a new culture, in this case a new religion for the Latinos. One of the objectives of this study was to look the sense of community in the Internet, as well as, aspects like, the discussion structure, authority and linkages with other communities.

The lack of official information sources about Muslims in Latin America despite their origin makes hard to obtain statistics about these communities, few countries in Latin America have updated census. The other relevant information about Latino Muslim communities found in American research centers is also insufficient and old.¹³ In addition, Muslims immigrant or "Los Turcos"¹⁴ in the continent are now second or third generation which imply that they are no longer *only* Arab anymore due to family mixings although some still remain as Muslims. This study did not include other communities majority consist of immigrants such as Arabs or "los Turcos" despite that fact that these communities whose mainly speak other languages like Arabic or Urdu.

It is questionable how reliable is the identity presented in the Facebook profiles simply because anyone could fake it. In fact, it is well known that many Muslim women use other women's pictures in their social networks in order not to reveal their faces online. Perhaps in other studies, identity creation and sense of community of Arabic generations in the continent could be explored. However, what we found is that members did not seem to have common relationships on the Latino Muslim spaces, even Latino and Arab Muslims seem to remain separated or with low involvement at least in the virtual environment. This is what this research found by looking at the available public content;

however, it could not be assured that there are not relationships at all among the members as they may develop or express them in offline spaces. Similarly, Muslim Facebook users may use the private messenger to establish relationships with the members. The emotional attachment is very important for the community although members play an important role, managers should play the role of the principal initiator. Managers can influence dramatically the engagement in the community and consequently make members to feel an emotional attachment to the space. Participation, however, is the result of all the previous experiences; members cannot feel any commitment to a space if that does not offer them an added value. Most of the spaces analyzed principally share other site content and do not watch the community.

Even though if these Latino Muslim communities would fulfill the whole characteristics of the Sense of Virtual Community (SOVC), it would be hard to sort out if there are strictly communities of practice or solidarity as they share characteristic of both. In fact, they seem to be very heterogeneous, because of the members' involvement and needs.

As it was shown, few Latino Muslim communities on Facebook shared the characteristics of the SOVC, like support, recognitions and relationship in a low way but still present. However, the identity singularities remained as one of the biggest challenges is to create an authentic identity in virtual spaces as well as understand them. It is very hard to establish if the members are real and if they are not faking their identities as these networks allow controlling what is shown and how their own image is perceived by others. With the use of Arabic names and images with Islamic content, it was impossible for this research qualify or verify the Islamic identities of the Facebook users in these spaces, despite people seem to incorporate their offline habits into the virtual world and *vice versa*.

The Latino Muslim e-spaces really lack a leader who can guide them rather than being the figure of administrator who has a very low or no participation in the conversations. There is not an effective use of the tools of Facebook by managers of the Latino Muslim spaces, thus they must have good decision regarding what and how the post in the spaces, because the discussion structure they use will show the both sides of the organization, the private and public identity. For instance, as mentioned before, some spaces (most of them) do not use the tool offered by Facebook to create events.

The lack of resources and inconsistency by the communication staff is prevalent in the virtual spaces, most of the time the community supported when members generate content. It is interesting that despite that all groups share in majority the same culture and religion, the results changed from space to space. For instance, the Sufi community does not use Islamic content; instead, it is more focused to spirituality and values. Besides, the management of the communities in Mexico and Guayaquil (Ecuador) was more aware of the interaction. The other communities, such as the one in Bolivia, generate their own content and use community events to engage members. All these differences lead us to wonder why the results changed from space to space? For instance, is this a technical problem? Or, might it be related to the local culture of each country? If so, it would be also thought provoking to compare the immigrant Arab Muslim communities between them and with the Latino ones in order to see how much the results differ.

The most important matter perhaps is the sense of community. What makes a person to feel part of? The Sense of Community (SOC) tells us that a member should feel membership, influence, fulfillment of need and share emotional connection in the geographic communities. For the virtual communities similar features are needed, users must feel

recognition, identification, support, relationship, emotional attachment and obligation; these are the requirements to have a sense of virtual community. SOC and SOVC are similar and may share qualities, but in any case all are required. To achieve the SOVC, it is important to have a good management relation and maintenance. The first one refers mainly to connectivity, conversations, content creation and collaboration, while the maintenance suggests a support exchange, creates and makes identifications and the production of trust.

Conclusion

The aim of this article is to contribute to the Latino Muslim communities in Latin America to improve the sense of virtual community, for this it is suggested that these spaces should work independently of their geographical partners, but it does not mean those cannot get support from each other. The offline activities may improve the engagement, for instance, people seem to like more pictures of their own and their activities rather than external content. This advantage can be explored more to improve engagement. Despite the existence of these possibilities, Latin American Muslims do not use e-spaces effectively neither for better communication nor communication between themselves and overall Muslim world. There could be many reasons for this, including language barriers, urgency of local needs etc. However, what is striking is the overall lack of good and effective management of e-spaces. If these could be done, it will be probably one of the most important tools to connect Latino Muslims with the rest of the Muslim world and also help a lot in internal communication.

NOTES

1. See, Necati Anaz, The Geography of Reception: Why Do Egyptians Watch Turkish Soap Operas? *The Arab World Geographer*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2014, pp. 255–274.
2. Cheryl Anne Casey, “Virtual Ritual, Real Faith: The Revirtualization of Religious Ritual in Cyberspace”, *Online-Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2006, pp. 73–90.
3. “Árabes y musulmanes en América Latina”, *BBC Mundo*, 15 March 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/specials/newsid_4294000/4294241.stm (accessed 8 September 2016).
4. For a different perspective on the role of online communication and lack of radicalization among Latin Muslims, see Mehmet Ozkan, “Latino Muslims and Radical Extremism: Why There Is No Daesh (ISIS) Threat in Latin America”, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 37, No. 3, 2017, pp. 284–293.
5. Phillip Bruckmayr, “Syro-Lebanese Migration to Colombia, Venezuela and Curacao”, *European Journal of Economic and Political Studies*, No. 3, 2010, pp. 151–197.
6. Kemal H. Karpat, “The Ottoman Emigration to America, 1860–1914”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 1985, pp. 175–209; I. Klich and J. Lesser, (Eds), *Arab and Jewish Immigrants in Latin America: Images and Realities*, London: Routledge, 2013.
7. See, M. David Sills and Kevin Baggett, “Islam in Latin America”, *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2011, pp. 28–41; Fatima Rajina, “Islam in Argentina: Deconstructing the Biases”, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 2016, pp. 399–412.
8. “Turkey hosts Latin American Muslims in conference”, *WorldBulletin*, 15 November 2014, <http://www.worldbulletin.net/haber/148091/turkey-hosts-latin-american-muslims-in-conference> (accessed 8 September 2017); Mehmet Ozkan, “Turkey’s Religious Diplomacy Toward Latin America”, *Daily Sabah*, 14 November 2014, <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/2014/11/14/turkeys-religious-diplomacy-toward-latin-america> (accessed 3 April 2017).
9. One of the authors, Diana Carolina Zuniga Gomez was a participant in this meeting.
10. M. Q. Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, London: Sage Publications, 1990.
11. D. Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000.

12. Religious diplomacy has gained importance in the last decade. See Mehmet Ozkan, "Turkey's Religious Diplomacy", *The Arab World Geographer*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2014, pp. 223–237.
13. Sills and Baggett, "Islam in Latin America", *op. cit.*
14. More on *Los Turcos*, see Aaron Moore and Kent Mathewson, "Latin America's Los Turcos: Geographic Aspects of Levantine and Maghreb Diasporas", *Nóesis: Revista de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades*, Vol. 22, No. 43, 2013, pp. 290–308.