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RACHNA KUMAR, 2019

BY RACHNA KUMAR

# EXTRACTING CULTURAL EMPATHY FROM ONLINE MEDIA PLATFORMS AND APPLYING IT INTO ORGANIZATIONS

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## ABSTRACT

In this research paper, I introduce the term cultural empathy and describe what this term means along with other concepts that are relevant to set boundaries for the focus of the research. I address how cultural empathy is prevalent across online media platforms and the various conditions that allow cultural empathy to thrive in an online context. I demonstrate how and why organizations currently fail in addressing cultural empathy and what lessons they can learn from an online context and leverage these lessons within their organizations. Finally, I highlight certain steps that organizations can follow to successfully implement cultural empathy across their organizations and describe the process of design thinking to ensure that the solution recommended will be designed according to their organizational culture.

As I look forward and recognize the implications this research has on my career, I hope to continue to define myself as an organizational design expert, with a focus on cultural empathy. With a renewed arsenal of design tools to further explore this topic creatively and that too with the right experts at the table, this research serves as the first part in a long series of research inquiries I will pose in the future to further build on this topic.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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"This is a  
precious moment.  
It is a little  
parenthesis in eternity."

- Paulo Coelho

I would like to thank...

My secondary advisor, Jayme Johnson, who encouraged me to step into the world of Human Resources transformation and change management consulting while believing in my ability to take on any client.

My principal advisor, Alia Weston, who has played several roles along my journey in academia, contributing new and compelling points of view to my countless questions while providing the necessary space and psychological safety I required to get to the answers on my own.

My friends who supported me through this intensive process always reminding me of the importance of pit stops for race cars.

My partner, Paul Koonar, who remained stable, patient and ever so loving throughout this major milestone in my life.

My siblings, Shekhar & Kirti Saxena, who have never let an opportunity to laugh together go by, keeping me grounded throughout this process.



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# DEDICATION

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**And finally, this work is dedicated to my parents, Ashok Kumar & Mamta Rani, because there is no other pair of individuals I would ever want to call mama and papa. They are the people who lift me up when I'm down and raise me higher when I'm up.**

Through every experience I have lived, I feel lucky. I feel lucky to have a voice and feel empowered to share my story as well as my research in a place that is diverse and accepting. To have friends of every colour of the rainbow and personalities to match. To have meaningful discussions with strangers about their pasts, presents and futures. And of course, to have words to live by from great writers who preceded myself. Specifically, words from one of my favourite authors, Paulo Coelho, from the "The Alchemist":

*"We are travelers on a cosmic journey, stardust, swirling and dancing in the eddies and whirlpools of infinity. Life is eternal. We have stopped for a moment to encounter each other, to meet, to love, to share. This is a precious moment. It is a little parenthesis in eternity."*

The opportunity to apply for; be accepted to; attend classes in; travel across the world for; immerse myself in a new network at; and creatively research, write and stitch together a final Major Research Project in my Masters of Design in Strategic Foresight & Innovation at OCAD University was truly a parenthesis in eternity and one I could not be more thankful for.

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# DEFINITIONS

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**Culture:** the ways in which a given society, community, or group organizes and conducts itself as distinguished from that of other societies, communities, or groups (Espinoza, 2018).

**Empathy:** the imaginative act of stepping into another person's shoes and being able to look at the world from their perspective (Krznaric, 2007).

**Race:** the idea that the human species is divided into distinct groups on the basis of inherited physical and behavioral differences (Smedley, 2019).

**Diversity:** about the individual. It is about the variety of unique dimensions, qualities and characteristics we all possess (Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion, 2019).

**Inclusion:** is about the collective. It is about creating a culture that strives for equity and embraces, respects, accepts and values difference (Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion, 2019).

**Diversity & Inclusion:** is about capturing the uniqueness of the individual; creating an environment that values and respects individuals for their talents, skills and abilities to the benefit of the collective (Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion, 2019).

**Equity:** is the fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement for all people, while at the same time striving to identify and eliminate barriers that have prevented the full participation of some groups (Kapila, Hines, & Searby, 2016).

**Cultural Competence:** a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enable that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations (Kirmayer, 2012).

**Social Media:** a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Dijk, 2013).

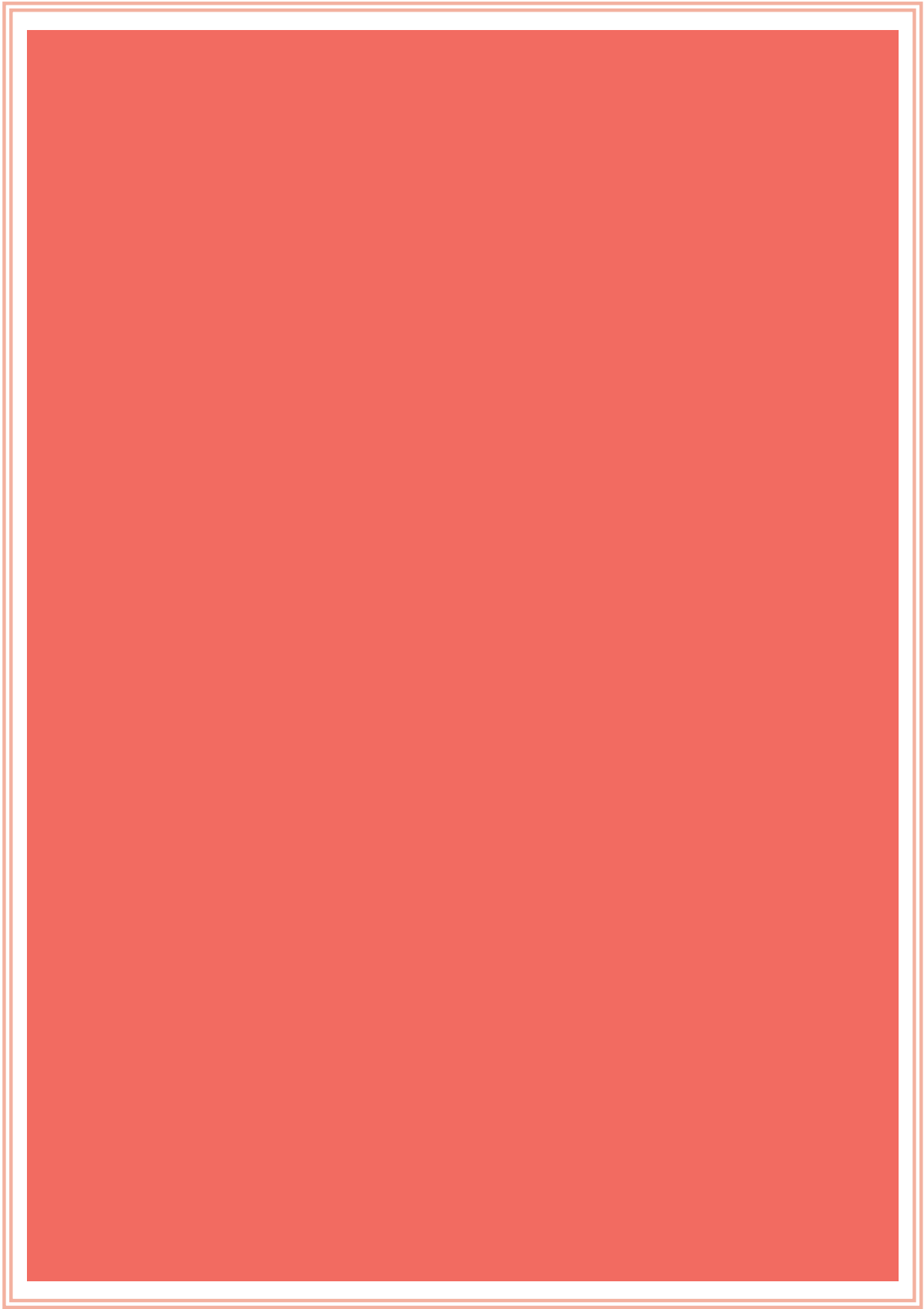
**Organizational Design:** is a step-by-step methodology which identifies dysfunctional aspects of work flow, procedures, structures and systems, realigns them to fit current business realities/goals and then develops plans to implement the new changes. The process focuses on improving both the technical and people side of the business (Allen, 2015).

**Organizational Culture:** Organizational culture includes an organization's expectations, experiences, philosophy, as well as the values that guide member behavior, and is expressed in member self-image, inner workings, interactions with the outside world, and future expectations. Culture is based on shared attitudes, beliefs, customs, and written and unwritten rules that have been developed over time and are considered valid (gothamCulture, 2019).

**Unconscious Bias:** it refers to a bias that happens automatically, is outside of our control and is triggered by our brain making quick judgments and assessments of people and situations, influenced by our background, cultural environment and personal experiences (Storey, 2017).



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# PREFACE

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# what?

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**This is you coming face-to-face with a missed opportunity for a person to exercise cultural empathy, however the person making you feel that feeling is often so far removed from the effect it has on you that you feel it isn't even worth addressing.**

Even today when my father is calling a service provider to complain or figure out an invoice where he was overcharged, he waits until I am home, delicately asking me for the favour of calling on his behalf. My father speaks English perfectly. He has lived in Canada longer than me. I was born here and often take my citizenship for granted, he,

on the other hand, is grateful and more Canadian than I will ever be. You know, the sort of Canadian that sticks a few maple leaves on his luggage when he travels. The sort of Canadian that goes to Niagara Falls to see the fireworks on Canada Day. The sort of Canadian that feels blessed to live in such a diverse and safe country.

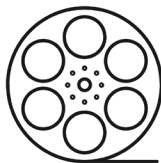
Yet, when he must deal with a service provider, he hesitates and asks me to do it for him. I remember being annoyed one day and asking him to call in and I would sit beside him while coaching him through the call. The minute he started speaking to the service provider, explaining the dilemma their company had put him through, and she heard his faint accent, her entire tone was riddled with disrespect. The tone that originally was a polite, "Hello, how may I help you?" quickly turned into a scathing, "Sir, if you read the policy correctly, you would know that this call is a complete waste of my time," or a variation of that. In a moment of fury, I took the phone and addressed the service provider calmly and with a vast vocabulary and a very "Canadian" accent that I have been fortunate to have developed over the years. My father sat dumbfounded beside me as her tone changed to one that was apologetic and full of deference.

He simply shrugged his shoulders and smiled at me while I continued to fume. When our eyes met and I noticed the calm in his, the storm in my own eyes vanished and I realized that in the many battles my father had fought, this one was a battle he chose to laugh at.



Figure 1: My papa decked out in Canadian Maple Leaves

**He simply shrugged his shoulders and smiled at me while I continued to fume. When our eyes met and I noticed the calm in his, the storm in my own eyes vanished and I realized that in the many battles my father had fought, this one was a battle he chose to laugh at.**



To fixate on the issue was futile, yet the pit in my stomach grew bigger. I am not for a minute asking anyone but myself to know how this realization can shape the person I have become. However, I know that as humans, we can empathize and think for a moment on what that feeling could have been. This knot that people describe as a pit in your deep gut. This is you coming face-to-face with a missed opportunity for a person to exercise cultural empathy, however the person making you feel that feeling is often so far removed from the effect it has on you that you feel it isn't even worth addressing.

With the growing use of online media and technology allowing complete strangers an opportunity to connect and engage in discourses about a multitude of various topics, including culture and race issues, suddenly people are confronted with information and feelings they may never have experienced in the past. That feeling that was once foreign is now accessible through a search, a click and a comment, engaging in conversations that allow individuals to comprehend what being culturally empathic encompasses. Cultural empathy has been defined as an opportunity for individuals to look within their own lived experiences and upbringing to offer an opportunity to acknowledge and relate to the lived experience and upbringing of another to



recognize similarities in the context of their cultural differences.

As a woman of colour who is born in Canada but culturally Indian, who has friends of every race, religion, culture and ethnicity and who is lucky enough to speak multiple languages, my identity is one that I struggle to explain. I am acutely aware of how everyone's identity is based on their unique experiences, backgrounds and the network they surround themselves with, whether that network exists in-person or online. I often seek others' opinions about aspects pertaining to my culture, and often these individuals are found in cyberspace and not in my immediate network. These individuals speak to me through the podcasts I consume, the movies I watch, the music I listen to, and of course the blogs and comments I read online. I am joined by many others who use technology as a source of information to expose them to greater conversations and opinions that they may not have been exposed to in the past or thought of in that way. I am still someone who engages in difficult conversations in-person, however I recognize that doing so online is much easier when you personally do not know the people you are sharing your opinions with.

As a former Human Resources (HR) Transformation Consultant, I oversaw large companies' change management and organizational design requirements, all the while witnessing how often the conversation revolving around Diversity & Inclusion programs was a black box that few of my clients knew how to address. It was a space where you either found confused executives trying their very best to piece together this mysterious puzzle or you found external consultants conducting trainings and workshops for an organization, they

knew very little about. Through my Master's degree, I have picked up many useful tools that will help me uncover the mystery of the research topic I have decided to explore, in an effort to build a bridge between my career and what I have learned in academia, which is the opportunity to apply design thinking tools and principles to this problem many organizations face. This process provided me with the opportunity to use a methodology that was foreign to me even a couple years ago yet coming out with major insights and findings that can be applied to all organizations was a very rewarding experience.

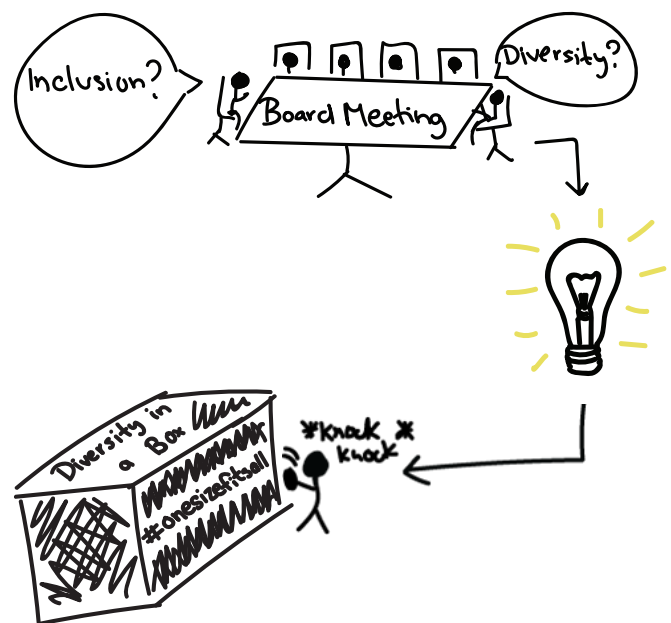


Figure 2: Organizational confusion about Diversity & Inclusion

My Major Research Project (MRP) is catered towards organizations, specifically the executive leadership team of an organization. Although, there are inevitably many more stakeholders in an organization that this research affects, the outcome, insights and findings of this project are intended for the executive leadership team.



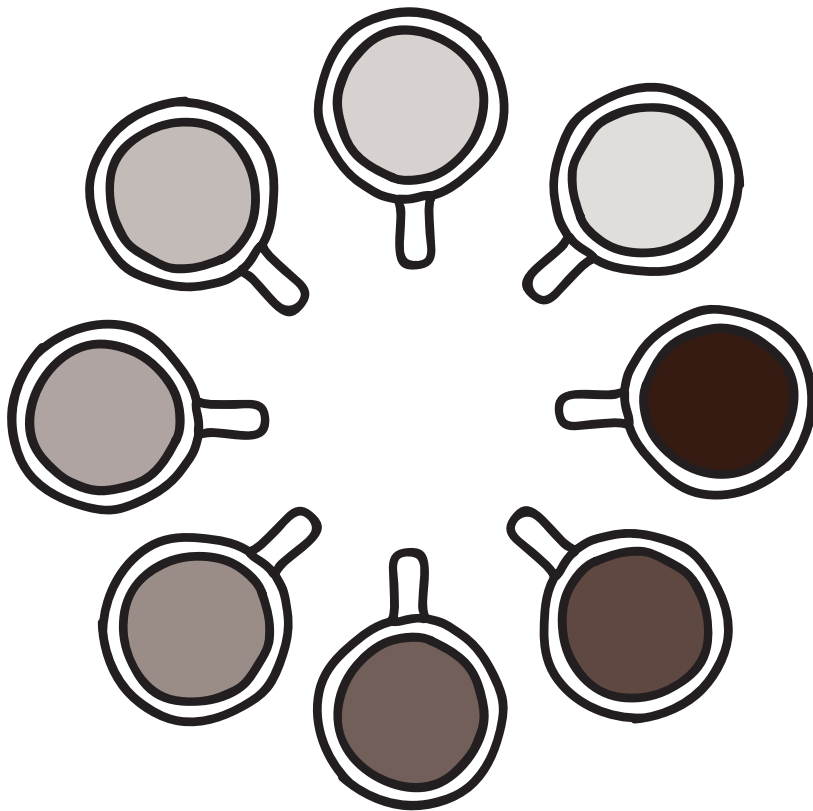
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# INTRODUCTION

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# Introduction

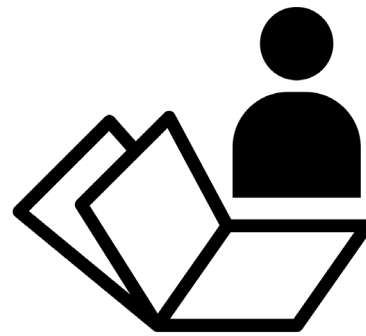


**"Race is..."**

**“Race is one of those topics in America that makes people extraordinarily uncomfortable. You bring it up at a dinner party or in a workplace environment, it is literally the conversational equivalent of touching the third rail. There is shock, followed by a long silence...Then I realized, the first step to solving any problem is to not hide from it, and the first step to any form of action is awareness. And so, I decided to actually talk about race. And that if I came here and shared with you some of my experiences, that maybe we could all be a little less anxious and a little more bold in our conversations about race.”**  
(Hobson, 2014)

Mellody Hobson, President of Ariel Investments, has pinpointed the discomfort that people experience when speaking about a topic such as race openly, and acknowledges how this discomfort also drives people away from having these conversations in person. This discomfort extends into executive leadership teams at organizations who implement diversity and inclusion programs that do not cater to their organizational culture and lack the insight and ability to execute sustainable programs.

Organizations began investing heavily in training and diversity programs as a reaction to lawsuits handed out in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). However, these diversity training programs focused heavily on the words delivered and less about the people that they were speaking about (Llopis, 2018), which in turn activated further biases (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). Diversity and inclusion programs failed due to a lack of needs assessments, inadequate monitoring after their implementation and a lack of contextual relevance in the organizational culture adopting the program (Chavez & Weisinger, 2008). This potential lack of knowledge amongst executive leadership of the challenges other members of their organization face resulted in the failure of these programs (Humphreys, 2012). Organizations have a need for explicit diversity content that promotes understanding, affirmation, and respect for people from diverse backgrounds (Humphreys, 2012). The need organizations have is for cultural empathy.



Cultural empathy is a combination of two terms that I have become very familiar with throughout my life: culture; the ways in which a given society, community, or group organizes and conducts itself as distinguished from that of other societies, communities, or groups (James, 2010) & empathy; the imaginative act of stepping into another person's shoes and being able to look at the world from their perspective (Krznaric, 2007). This left me with the research question:

**“How does cultural empathy occur in online media platforms, and what lessons can be applied to organizational HR training contexts?”**

Based on this understanding, cultural empathy is the opportunity for individuals to look within their own lived experiences and upbringing to offer an opportunity to acknowledge and relate to the lived experience and upbringing of another to recognize similarities in the context of their cultural differences. Online media platforms

allow for self-disclosure that is generally more accepted than in a face-to-face conversation (Humphreys, 2012). Online media platforms allow for the visibility of conversations surrounding cultural issues as well as transparency of the comments found in response to this cultural content (Highfield, 2016). This provides users of online media platforms with a wide array of content, opinions and perspectives of seemingly complex issues that may not have been approachable to this scale, in the past. By focusing on online media platforms as part of the solution, I can extract successful lessons from an environment in which cultural empathy thrives. It is important that organizations look to implement these lessons with a human-centric approach as teaching human beings to communicate with other human beings should be delivered by a human being (Smith, 2018).

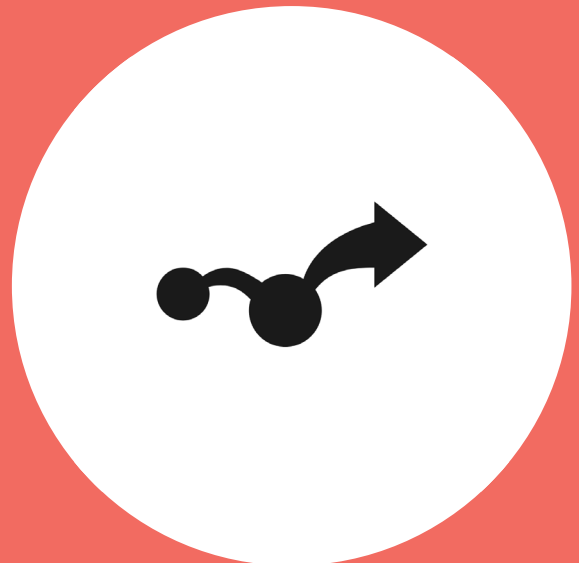
In the next part of this research paper I focused on **setting the context** as well as defining the boundaries of my research by outlining the specific areas of focus that I was exploring in this project. This was done by completing a literature review that not only emphasized the infancy of the term “cultural



empathy” in academia, but also uncovered the conditions that allow cultural empathy to thrive in an online context. The literature review addressed how organizations currently implement diversity and inclusion programs and how they can leverage lessons learned from an online context within their organizational cultures. This section inspired the overall approach taken in the project and set the context.

In the third part of this research paper, I speak to the **research methods** I employed to gather insights while analyzing the way in which I unraveled major insights through the data collected. The research methods I used included netnography; derived from ethnography and is used to explore cultural worlds on the internet (Kozinets, Dolbec, & Earley, 2017), semi-structured interviews with organizational and online experts and reflexivity in the form of personal reflections.

In the fourth part of this research project, I carried out qualitative thematic analysis (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003) that involved coding the data through a three-step process: data management, descriptive accounts and



explanatory accounts (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). At this stage of the process, this is where I was able to analyze all the data collected while provide recommendations as they related to the initial research question. The **analysis and recommendations** are articulated in a digestible manner at this stage.

In the final part of this research project, I look forward and articulate **next steps**, while acknowledging that the research question I set out to investigate has been verified, elaborated and has the ability to be applied in the future (Sanders & Stappers, 2016). This was important for me, as I recognized that although I had limitations in this phase of the research, this was a great first step to exploring this topic further and setting up the application of my findings into organizations. This stage further acknowledges and highlights the future impacts this research can potentially have on organizations along with a greater outlook on its application. Organizations cannot afford to be colour blind, but must be colour brave (Hobson, 2014) in order to remove the black box around diversity and inclusion programs by adopting cultural empathy.



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# CONTEXT

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# Context



The aim of this chapter is to conduct a literature review exploring the emergence of “cultural empathy” as it occurs across online media platforms while understanding how cultural empathy manifests in an organizational context. Due to the infancy of the term, “cultural empathy” in academia and in an organizational setting, the literature in this chapter will encompass information from academic and online experts to inform the concept of cultural empathy.

The first part of the literature review will address the origins of cultural empathy to set the boundaries of the research project. The second part will address the growing phenomenon of cultural empathy as witnessed online and how conversations about culture and race issues emerge. The final part will speak to cultural empathy as it is implemented within organizational contexts and speaking to the role organizational design plays.

## Defining Cultural Empathy

Cultural empathy is a combination of the terms culture, which is the ways in which a given society, community, or group organizes and conducts itself as distinguished from that of other societies, communities, or groups (Espinoza, 2018); and empathy, which is the imaginative act of stepping into another person’s shoes and being able to look at the world from their perspective (Krznicar, 2007). This left the term cultural empathy to be defined as an opportunity for individuals to look within their own lived experiences and upbringing to offer an opportunity to acknowledge and relate to the lived

experience and upbringing of another to recognize similarities in the context of their cultural differences.

The concept of cultural empathy has been called various terms throughout the years, most recently being called “diversity”, “racial literacy” (Vulchi & Guo, 2017), “inclusion”, “equity” and “cultural competence” (Kirmayer, 2012). It is still a term that is ambiguous in its nature and manifesting itself as something different in every industry it finds itself in. From Human Resource practices to mainstream media, many of us are exposed to different versions of the same phenomenon. It is said that technology plays a huge role in the way in which empathy is expressed, specifically, technology is enabling exposure to new perspectives (Greenfield, 2015). It is said that those of us who tend to spend more time on social networks and instant messaging frequently are better at expressing empathy online (Collins, 2014).

With the growing use of social media, approximately 67% of internet users (Collins, 2014), it is seen as a form of computer-mediated communication, like email and online forums that enable content to be exchanged between people via the internet (Collins, 2014). Over a billion people now use social media to communicate, create, and share information, opinions and insights (Kozinets et al., 2017), allowing people from around the world to partake in conversations ranging many topics online, that they may not have been able to have had in the past.

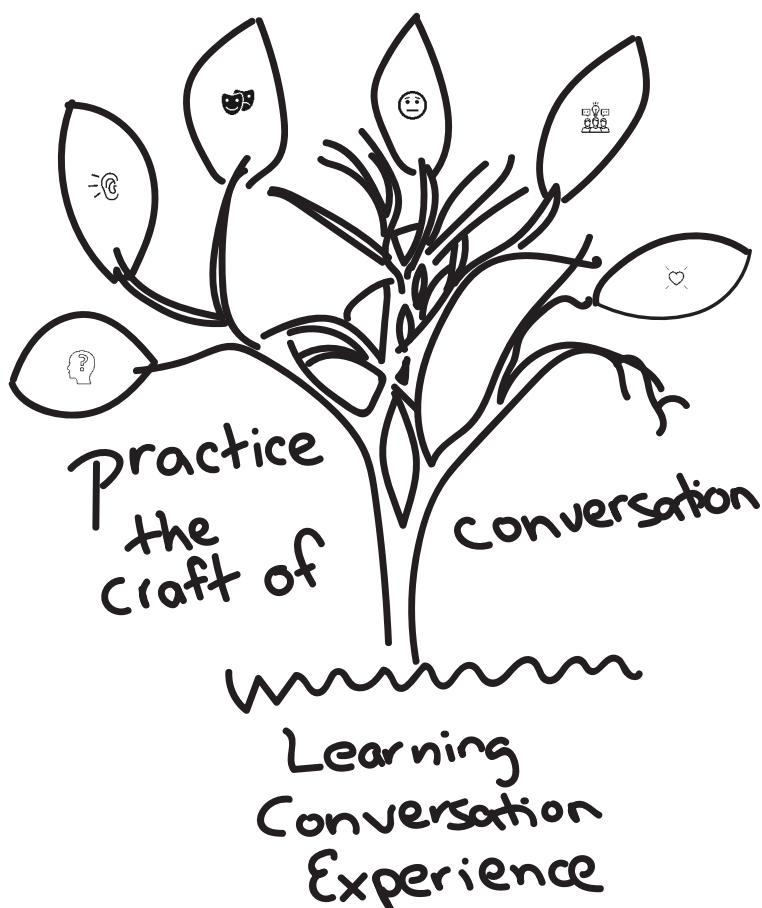


Figure 3: Tree illustrating Roman Krznaric's empathy framework

A growing topic that has surged in popularity online is the topic of culture. A common metaphor for culture is the image of an iceberg, which has both visible and invisible aspects to it (Vaudrin-Charette, 2019). The invisible including implicit cultural codes such as values, norms and myths that are present in intercultural interactions (Vaudrin-Charette, 2019). Any cultural understanding must appreciate the ways in which culture is dynamic, shifting, and constantly interacting with other forces of society, and this constant fluidity when it comes to culture is heavily mimicked in online conversations (Petronzio, 2014). These conversations result in an opportunity for complete strangers to empathize with one another. By extending empathy into the context of culture, I will be exploring how cultural empathy is being

discussed, circulated and curated online and how people of various backgrounds, experiences and opinions are engaging in conversations surrounding cultural empathy.

To help illustrate this, it is important to understand the basic tenets of empathy through a structured framework, inspired by the extensive research conducted by Roman Krznaric. The framework first highlights the foundation of empathy through three principles: learning, conversation & experience (Krznaric, 2007). When speaking to the first principle, Krznaric suggests that individuals take the time to learn about a person they wish to empathize with by “learning” about their beliefs, lives and cultures from books, films, photos and artwork (Krznaric, 2007). The second principle is to engage in “conversation” that goes beyond superficial dialogue and becomes personal in its nature (Krznaric, 2007). The last principle is to “experience” how the person you are empathizing with, lives, to understand what they have gone through for yourself (Krznaric, 2007).

These three principles help to inform the six habits that Krznaric created, which are habits that highly empathic individuals possess, the fourth habit being: practice the craft of conversation. This habit is very significant when understanding how cultural empathy manifests online, specifically, when addressing the qualities required to engage in empathic conversations, which include: curiosity about strangers, radical listening, taking off masks, concern for others, creative spirit, and exhibiting sheer courage (Krznaric,

2014). It is said that conversation and empathy are intimately intertwined, and making the effort to comprehend another person's perspective, through conversation, can help bring an otherwise unremarkable dialogue to life while conversation itself has the power to force empathic connection (Krznaric, 2014). Although, there are other frameworks that speak to empathy, it was Krznaric's that was the most approachable when it came to the applying it within the context of organizations and the detailed explanation behind each of the principles and habits.

By exploring how to practice the craft of conversation online, I will address how cultural empathy exists within this virtual environment through a greater understanding of the foundation of cultural empathy being a combination of both culture and empathy.

## Cultural Empathy in an Online Context

Since its inception, the internet has always been perceived as powerful, significant and a huge player when it comes to facilitating a new way of social interaction. The use of Critical Technoculture Discourse Analysis (CTDA), has been used by researchers to examine online discourses about culture and race (Brock, 2009). Since its use, researchers have analyzed various online interfaces to not only understand the internet form, but also its function visually, symbolically and interactively when helping to facilitate and mediate discourse online

(Brock, 2009). One major takeaway from this analysis was how self-disclosure online is generally more accepted than in a face-to-face conversation (Humphreys, 2012), while allowing for relationships to develop with people who were outside the online users' already established network (Collins, 2014). Online mediums, such as blogs, pose as an accessible platform to host conversations that anyone with a working internet connection can access (Brock, 2009). Blogs and online forums are one type of medium that allows online users to be more connected and globally aware (Krznaric, 2014) than ever before, especially when engaging in conversations with people who are not geographically near them (Collins, 2014).

With all its benefits, social media has also been touted for allowing racial discourse to flourish, especially when the discourse is unmoderated, during which the comments can quickly degenerate into trolling, obscenity & worse (Brock, 2009). This can be attributed to the anonymity offered by the internet (Humphreys, 2012), through the usage of alias accounts. These types of accounts allow users to be whoever they wish to be, and should they find themselves in an unfavourable situation while in the comments section, they can simply exit the conversation at any point (Greenfield, 2015). It is important to remember that the internet is as racist as the society it stems from (Nakamura & Lovink, 2005), and by adopting explicit diversity content that promotes understanding, affirmation and respect for people from diverse backgrounds (Humphreys, 2012), users will begin to be more culturally empathic.

Social media allows for the visibility of conversations surrounding cultural issues as well as transparency of the comments found in response to this cultural content (Highfield, 2016). This provides users of social media with a wide array of content, opinions and perspectives of seemingly complex issues that may not have been approachable to this scale in the past. People of colour (ie. those who self-identify as being a race other than Caucasian) are 30% more likely to get cultural information from personal blogs or podcasts, sources which are often geared toward specific demographics in ways that national publications or daily newspapers are not (Cohen et al., 2018). This is important when realizing the overall influence that online media has over those consuming more content online. Many consumers of online media follow social media influencers and consume their content to better inform their understanding about the world they live in and it is important to understand the role social media influencers play when it comes to cultural empathy.

The concept of celebrity has been redefined in the online space of social media. The emergence of “Social Media Influencers” (SMIs) (Daniel, Crawford Jackson, & Westerman, 2018) in recent years has allowed for people to share a passion or interest with a larger audience by virtue of their authenticity (content) and reach (number of followers) (Daniel et al., 2018). In the past, traditional media typically allowed celebrity influence through one-way communication that does not facilitate audience response (Daniel et al., 2018), however through social media, user

engagement with posted content is now possible.

Through the advent of the internet, SMIs not only exist, but can also post their content at their leisure, while facilitating responses to comments within seconds of their reply (Daniel et al., 2018). Some of the most effective social media platforms that focus on cultural issues enabled people to understand race better through commenters interactions (Brock, 2009). Many celebrities who have a large following on social media leverage their platforms to talk about complex, serious topics, such as racism and sexism (Petronzio, 2014) even though these platforms were originally created for very banal use.

The influence harnessed by heavily followed social media platforms allows for the sharing of opinions and feedback at an unprecedented rate and users have an opportunity to engage with people they have high trust with, while feeling close to those influencers in the process (Zhang, Li, & Wang, 2013). According to Ayesha Siddiqi, editor at The New Inquiry and BuzzFeed Ideas the internet is an “open and dynamic space that individuals should be reaching out and listening in” (Petronzio, 2014). Twitter is the perfect example of how things are constantly taken out of different contexts and conversations are in effect elevated to be discussed in different ways. This gives people a platform they may not have had in the past (Petronzio, 2014), while providing organizations with an opportunity to better understand the success garnered by social media’s ability to have these difficult

conversations in a myriad of ways, providing greater opportunities for individuals to practice the craft of conversations.

## Designing Culturally Empathic Organizations

Most of an organizations' executive leadership team – primarily heterosexual men age 45 and older – underestimate the challenges diverse employees face (Krentz et al., 2019). Organizations began investing heavily in training and diversity programs as a reaction to lawsuits handed out in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). However, these diversity training programs focused heavily on the words delivered and less about the people that they were speaking about (Llopis, 2018), which in turn activated further biases (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). Diversity and inclusion programs failed due to a lack of needs assessments, inadequate monitoring after their implementation and a lack of contextual relevance in the organizational culture adopting the program (Chavez & Weisinger, 2008). The benefits of organizational diversity will not appear unless the organization increases its tolerance for individuality (Shen, Chanda, D'Netto, & Monga, 2009). Therefore, the focus should be on creating an atmosphere of inclusion and making a commitment to valuing diversity (Shen et al., 2009).

Organization's leadership teams have a responsibility to first challenge themselves

and ask "why" there is a change in attitude within their organizations to truly grasp the need of diversity and inclusion programs in their organizational setting. According to Zen Media CEO, Shama Hyder, "a diverse employee group is a stronger, more effective one, especially as our world grows more diverse" (Hyder, 2017). She believes that by people coming from different backgrounds, life experiences & belief systems, organizations can create something richer when they open themselves to hearing different voices and challenging their own viewpoints (Hyder, 2017). This aligns with how organizations can practice the craft of conversations to build greater cultural empathy within their existent organizational culture, by looking at how social media is able to have these conversations dynamically and engage in a wide array of opinions and perspectives in the process. This begins by filling in racial literacy gaps that companies currently have (Vulchi & Guo, 2017), while creating a safe space when talking about biases (Smith, 2018).

Furthermore, all these organizational initiatives from diversity trainings to more inclusive hiring practices must be spearheaded by executive leadership as they set the tone for institutional culture and incorporate inclusive leadership skills in the process (Humphreys, 2012). Leaders cannot be part of the solution without understanding the extent of the problem and will lack the necessary commitment to design effective solutions (Krentz et al., 2019). Specifically, traditional thinking amongst leadership teams position

recruitment as the biggest obstacle for ethnic minorities, however recruitment is relatively easy compared with addressing the deep-rooted cultural and organizational issues that those groups then face in their work environment (Krentz et al., 2019). By incorporating an organizational strategy that capitalizes on multiple perspectives, organizations can benefit with greater creativity, productivity, organizational attractiveness and an increase in employee well-being (Chavez & Weisinger, 2008).

As companies and their leaders look to design their organizations to achieve cultural empathy via diversity and inclusion programs, they should look to observe the organizational environment with purpose and intent while inviting people into their organizations who do not look like them (Hobson, 2014). McKinsey released a report with data supporting that “top-team ethnic and cultural diversity is correlated with profitability” (Hunt, Prince, Dixon-Fyle, & Yee, 2018), motivating leaders in organizations to adopt an outlook when designing a culturally empathic workforce. By doing so, organizations will have access to more unfamiliar perspectives (Wood, 2018) that will bring better ideas, and different approaches that will help work get better (Wilson, 2018).

David Kelley, founder of IDEO, has described design thinking as the process of empathizing with the end user (Pattison, 2011), and

when applied to organizational design, this poses an opportunity for organizations to empathize with their employees. Organizations can co-create a shared organizational culture that identifies and embraces the different values and norms that exist in a diverse workforce (Vulchi & Guo, 2017) and this begins with adopting the behaviours required for the fourth habit for empathy by Roman Krznaric: curiosity about strangers, radical listening, taking off masks, concern for others, creative spirit, and exhibiting sheer courage (Krznaric, 2014). A lot of these behaviours are being practiced on social media and if companies can extract opportunities that could work from an online environment into their organizational context, they can get better at practicing the craft of conversation (Krznaric, 2014). This will result in organizations rethinking how they talk to their employees and at the end of these conversations reflect (Marron, 2018) on how they can better design their organizations with cultural empathy in mind.



## Theoretical Framework

By setting the context of the research, I was left with an understanding of how organizations can adopt cultural empathy through the lessons that emerged across online media platforms. The first thing I realized was how important it was to build awareness of the term cultural empathy to ensure that it was accessible for the intended audience of this research, which is the executive leadership team within an organization. This begins with using **important terms** that emerged from the literature review to set the boundaries of the research as well as explain how the term cultural empathy came to be. Specifically, the first half of cultural empathy is the term culture, and it was important to address that the term culture was specific to race and ethnicity (Brock, 2009), as not to confuse it with other definitions of culture, especially as it occurs across organizations. Through this understanding, cultural empathy is an opportunity for individuals to look within their own lived experiences and upbringing to offer an opportunity to acknowledge and relate to the lived experience and upbringing of another (Krznaric, 2007) to recognize similarities in the context of their cultural differences. These terms emerged seamlessly when looking at the **role online media platforms play** in achieving cultural empathy. From global presence to its ability to maintain the anonymity of its users (Humphreys, 2012) to **engage in conversations** with strangers they may never have to meet in person, there

**important terms**

**the role online media plays**

**engaging in conversations**

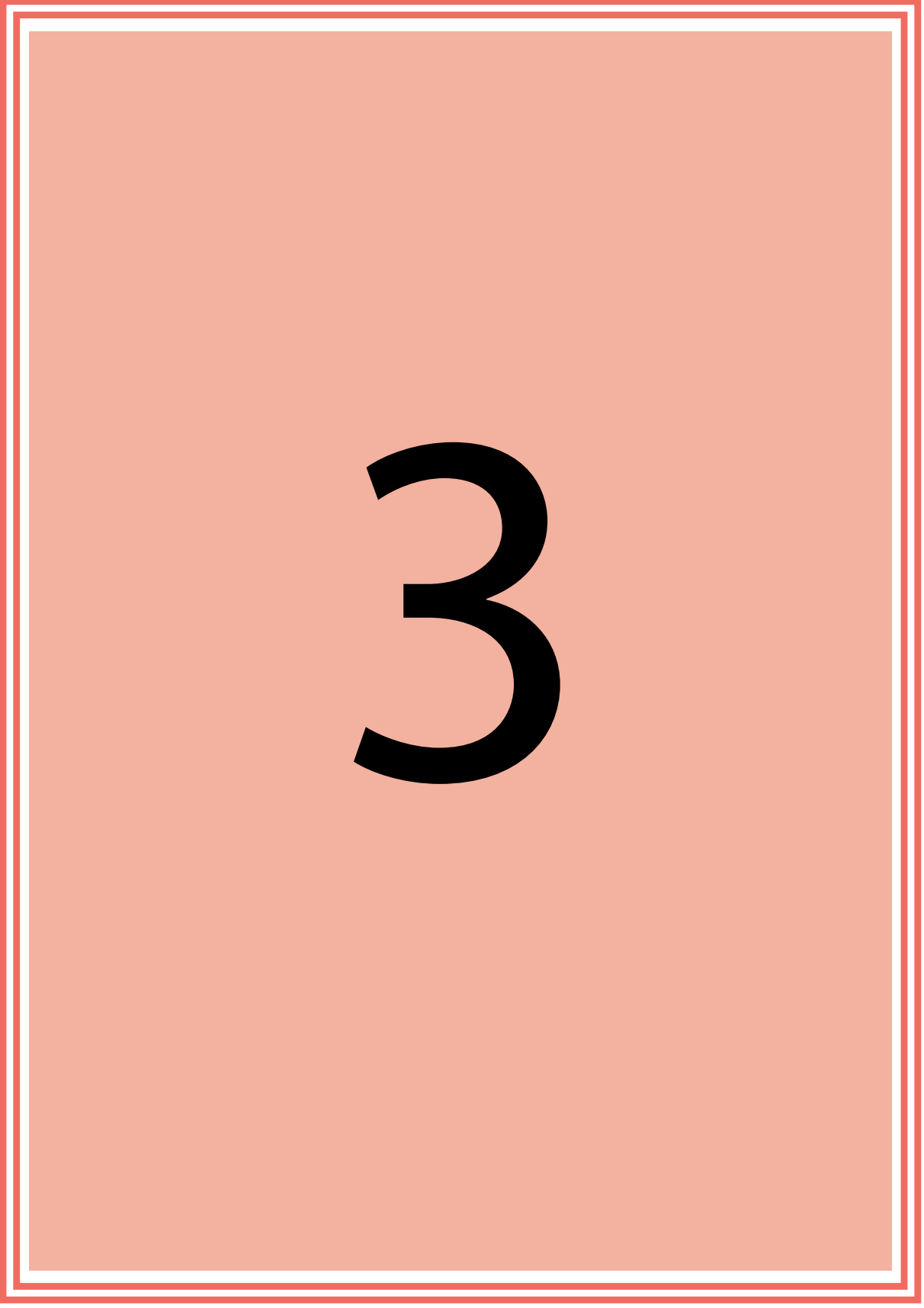
**organizational culture**

**human-centric approach  
to designing  
cultural empathy**

are many factors that organizations can mirror to have similar types of conversations. Specifically, cultural empathy can thrive in an online context due to its ability to create a space for complete strangers to engage in conversations about culture and race issues (Humphreys, 2012). Similarly, organizations can create a safe community in which conversations are moderated as they are conducted online, often by an influencer (Petronzio, 2014), which in the context of an organization would be the leadership team as they have the greatest influence within an organization. By doing so, the organization will inevitably sense a shift in their **organizational culture**, thus, it is in the organization's best interest to determine the current maturity of the organization (Chavez & Weisinger, 2008) to adopt cultural empathy. This speaks to the readiness of the executive leadership team, the training and tools capacity the organization has in place and of course the attitudes and behaviours of the employees to address their willingness to adopt cultural empathy into their everyday practices. By looking within, the organization can design a cultural empathy program that is not only sustainable but also fits the values of the organization. This will be achieved by the organization's ability to leverage a **human-centric approach to designing cultural empathy**, particularly by constantly iterating programs and solutions, such as workshops and trainings to meet the demands and needs of the organization. The executive leadership team can co-create solutions (Marron, 2018) with their employees and managers to further understand what programs they could implement to meet this need. This sets the foundation to ensure that the leadership

team is willing to empathize with employees (Pattison, 2011) all the while bringing the human back within human resource practices.





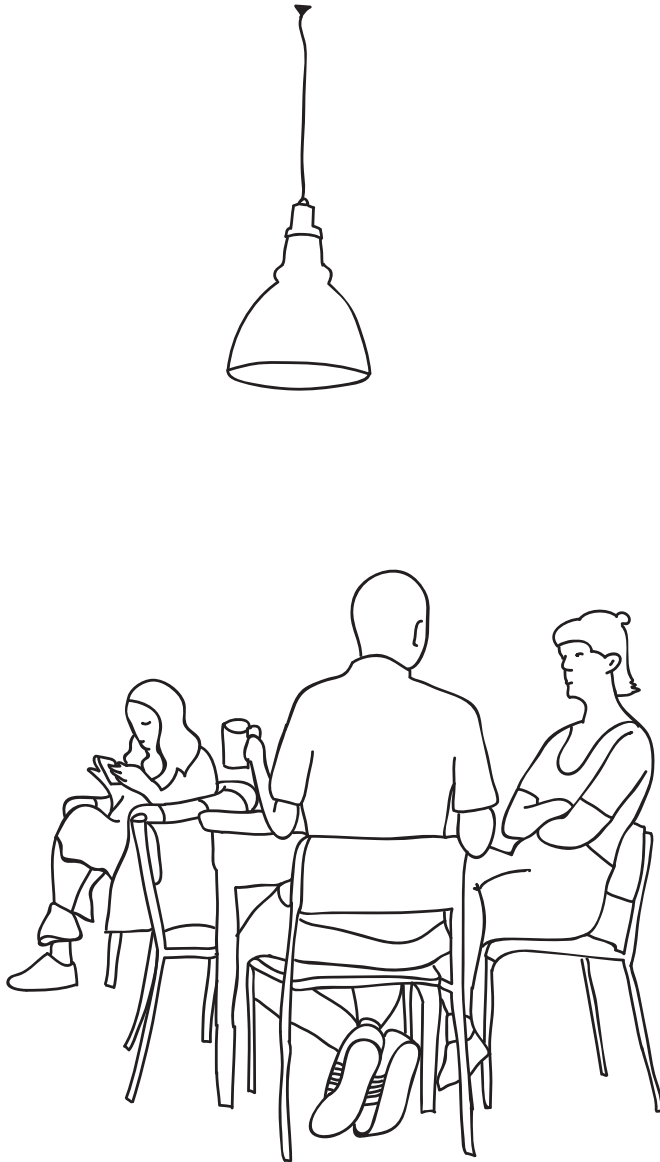
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# RESEARCH METHODS

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# Research Methods

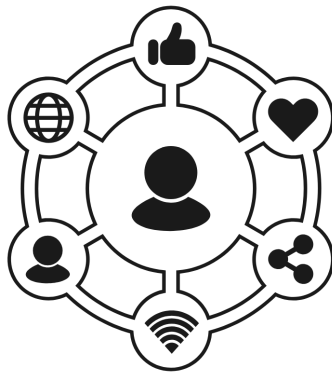


As previously mentioned, the literature review informed the research methods employed to further analyze and explore the research question: **"How does cultural empathy occur in online media platforms, and what lessons can be applied to organizational HR training contexts?"**

These research methods included: netnography, a form of ethnography, interviews with both online and organizational experts and finally reflexivity in the form of a personal reflection. The literature review can be seen in the previous chapter and helped inform the research methods that were chosen as well as inspired the overall approach taken in the project. All the research methods were qualitative in nature to provide information that revealed a rich symbolic world that underlies needs, desires, meanings and choice (Kozinets et al., 2017) of the people I was interacting with, both online and in-person.

## Data Collection

### Research Method 1: Netnography



The first research method employed was netnography, which is derived from ethnography and used to explore and explain rich, diverse, cultural worlds, and is conducted on the internet (Kozinets et al.,

2017). Netnography is a qualitative research method that adapts to ethnography research techniques within online communities (Kozinets et al., 2017). This research method is inherently open-ended, which provided me with the freedom to both observe and participate (Kozinets et al., 2017) in the various parts of the internet as it pertained to the research I was conducting. This flexibility resulted in elaborate and qualitatively rich data, however it also means that it is highly time-consuming (Kozinets et al., 2017).

This method had many advantages as it allowed me to access vast amounts of data while engaging in interviews with online users without having to consider where these users were located around the world (Kozinets et al., 2017). The three online platforms that were used to conduct the netnographic research included Instagram, Facebook and YouTube. All three of these platforms have communities that can be validated with easily available analytics, higher traffic of postings, many discrete message posts, detailed and descriptively rich data and finally more interactions between users on the platforms (Kozinets et al., 2017). It was important to keep a journal as I was conducting netnographic research in order to serve the following purposes: keep track of textual, visual, audiovisual and graphic information as I came across it; and record personal reflections to ensure I did not get warped into the comments and conversations I was taking part in as a participant.

This research method allowed me to take in large quantities of data while fully immersing myself into the conversations and discussions as they were organically manifesting online. As a participant who was conducting research, I was able to ask research questions while experiencing the sentiments one would have when conversing online about cultural empathy. As a researcher using netnography, I had a lot of flexibility, as the method is very fluid in its application (Kozinets et al., 2017), and I found myself adapting it to meet the needs of the research question. However, with this high level of flexibility and adaptability, I delayed the process of using it early on in my research, as it forced me to really think about certain factors that affected me personally, as a researcher. These factors included the following:

**Use of my personal accounts:** I was hesitant to use my personal accounts when conducting the research online on various social media platforms, and prior to beginning, I considered creating alias accounts to research via netnography. I was genuinely wary to put my own online identity out into the interwebs very publicly, albeit virtually.

**Confidentiality for users I was interacting with online:** From the very beginning, I started thinking about confidentiality of the profiles, users and platforms I would be interacting with online across various social media platform.

**Adopting an authentic voice:** When I use social media, I am always authentic and remain true to myself, however there is a level of privacy I always maintain to circumvent any potential risks to being online. After recognizing that I would be conducting this research publicly, I had to ensure that I adopted a voice that was authentic, while remaining professional as to maintain the integrity of my research.

Although these experiences delayed my research using netnography, they allowed an opportunity to answer key questions to set up a success criteria for my research. I was able to solve the first issue by using my personal account, as opposed to alias accounts across platforms. Once I did that, I was able to solve the latter two issues as I was now able to empathize personally with the users and platforms I would be interacting with and ensure that their privacy was protected the way I wanted my privacy to be protected. I realized early on that in order to select the appropriate platforms on which I would be employing netnography, I had to follow a criteria recommended by Kozinets (Colliander & Wien, 2013) when selecting the online culture and communities in which I would be conducting my research. The criteria were as follows:



**Relevant** - they should relate to the research question;

**Active** - they should have recent and regular communication;

**Interactive** - communication should occur between participants;

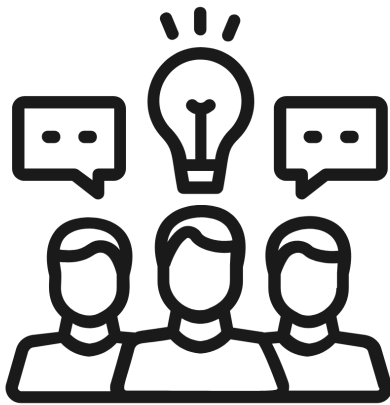
**Substantial** - they should have many communicators and an energetic feel;

**Heterogeneous** - they should have several different participants; and

By following this criteria, I narrowed it to five platforms: Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter and Reddit. However, I quickly realized, in order to ensure that I avoided the risk of being rejected as a researcher due to my lack of familiarity with the cultural worlds created in these virtual settings (Kozinets et al., 2017), I should research platforms with which I was already familiar. This resulted in me narrowing down my research focus to Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. When I began to engage with profiles on social media, I was surprised to see the level of self-disclosure I was engaging with first-hand. I saw both factual and emotional disclosure (Hassan, Mydock, Pervan, & Kortt, 2016), the former including personal facts and anecdotes about the questions I was posing online, while the latter was in the form of feelings, opinions & judgements. I also witnessed the sharing of many personal anecdotes as well as instant reactions to content these users were interacting with online.

As a researcher and a long-time user of various social media platforms, I had to remain cognizant of how to address my responses to users who were disclosing such personal details to me via social media. For example, I had to show understanding, validation and care for their views (Hassan et al., 2016), while remaining authentic and genuine throughout the interaction. For example, I not only responded to their responses, but also used other tools available to me on social media, such as the “like” button to further validate their post online and respond accordingly. A huge benefit to using netnography was being able to capture individuals in their natural settings online, without the use of a script, when engaging with various profiles on any platform.

## Research Method 2: Semi-structured Interviews



The second research method employed were interviews, which contains a series of questions that are organized around the research question (O'keeffe, Buytaert, Mijic, Brozovićbrozović, & Sinha, 2016), specifically, I employed semi-structured interviews, which is different than structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allowed for the interviews to be flexible and for myself, as the researcher, I was able to lean more on the participants' own understanding of the research question which naturally highlighted issues which were of most importance to the interviewees (O'keeffe et al., 2016). By using semi-structured interviews as a research method, I had the freedom and space to incorporate new themes (O'keeffe et al., 2016) that would inevitably emerge during the data collection phase.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with subject matter experts who were both online influencers as well as diversity & inclusion executives at Fortune 500 organizations. The two groups to be interviewed were chosen in order to accelerate my general understanding about how the topic of cultural empathy manifested in their respective spaces, while providing guidance on where I could find additional information about the research area. Semi-structured interviews are a suitable research method when studying people's perception and opinions to complex or emotionally sensitive issues (Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016). It is also appropriate for user groups who have a low level of awareness of the subject (Kallio et al., 2016), which in this case was the concept of cultural empathy. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews allow participants with the opportunity to focus on the issues that were meaningful for them and doing so in different ways ensured that all the interviews resulted in diverse perspectives and responses (Kallio et al., 2016).

### Background

**Organizational Information (applicable for Organizational Experts)**

**Personal Motivation (applicable for Online Influencers)**

**Definition of Cultural Empathy**

**Application of Cultural Empathy**

**Ideal World Scenarios**

In order to conduct comprehensive interviews, I developed interview guides as a tool to collect data using previous knowledge from the theoretical frameworks developed from the literature review (Kallio et al., 2016). The questions in the interview guide followed a logical flow as to direct conversations toward the research question (Kallio et al., 2016). It was imperative that I create two distinct interview guides, as to cater to the two different user groups I was interviewing: online influencers (refer to Appendix A) and organizational experts (refer to Appendix B).

A semi-structured interview guide consisted of two levels of questions: main themes and follow-up questions (Kallio et al., 2016). The interview guide was organized in the following themes:

The order of the themes was organized from the lighter themes to the more in-depth ones, in an effort to first begin with a question to break the ice and warm-up the interview participants, to then transition into issues that were more familiar to the interviewees, yet central to the research topic (Kallio et al., 2016). Although the interview guides had a myriad of questions, not all the questions were asked, however they did maintain the flow of the interview to gain accurate and optimal information (Kallio et al., 2016). All the follow-up questions were spontaneous in nature and often allowed the respondent to expand on a point (Kallio et al., 2016) in a manner that was logical and in the flow of the conversation.

I was able to interview a total of four organizational experts which were recruited through my established LinkedIn network. The individuals who were interviewed as organizational experts included:

**Kelly Lendsay** (Interviewee 1), President & CEO, Indigenous Works

**Mary Jane Maillet Brownscombe** (Interviewee 2), Co-Founder & Strategist, SHEACCELERATOR Inc.

**Tej Singh Hazra** (Interviewee 3), Head of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, HSBC Bank Canada

**Tina Varughese** (Interviewee 4), President, tWorks

In addition to organizational experts, I also interviewed a total of six online influencers, who were recruited heavily through my existent social media accounts (ie. Instagram and YouTube). The individuals who fit these criteria and were interviewed are as follows:

**Eleni Han** (Interviewee 5), Founder of Nuance Magazine

**Nataani Means** (Interviewee 6), Oglala Sioux and Navajo hip-hop artist

**Manal Aman** (Interviewee 7), Founder of Hello Holy Days!

**Hoodo Hersi** (Interviewee 8), Canadian Stand-Up Comedian

**Chris Studer** (Interviewee 9), Executive Director at The Get REAL Movement

**Emily Nguyen** (Interviewee 10), Member of / intersectTO Online Community

## Confidentiality

It was imperative that confidentiality was maintained for both netnography as well as the semi-structured interviews. When it came to netnography, the social media platforms being researched blended private and public information resulting in a methodological approach on protecting the users and profiles with which I was interacting. In order to do so, I had to maintain complete anonymity of everyone I was interacting with online to maintain the highest level of privacy and to avoid any future risks associated with these accounts and online profiles. The semi-structured interview participants all signed consent forms indicating their consent to allow or disallow their name and personal information to be published. Furthermore, interviewees had the option to maintain anonymity to quotes shared throughout the interviews, or they could indicate their consent to having quotes attributed to their name. Each of these options were clearly outlined as to ensure that the wishes of the participants were respected. All data was stored in a private folder on the researcher's private password protected laptop. This study has been reviewed and has received ethics clearing through the Research Ethics Board at the Ontario College of Art & Design University, file number 101500, and clearance number 2019-24.



Figure 4: Self-reflection template from The Service Innovation Handbook, by Lucy Kimbell

### Research Method 3: Reflexivity



The last research method I engaged in was reflexivity to explore cultural empathy. Self-reflexivity provided me, the researcher, with the opportunity to become aware of my connection to the topic area by adopting a reflexivity framework in the form of a self-reflection. This tool was used to engage in dialogue with myself to highlight my fundamental assumptions, values and ways of interacting (Cunliffe, 2009), with the research topic. The self-reflection template focused on eight different areas: my visions and values; my beliefs about change; weak ties; strong ties; my capacities and resources; my approach when starting off; my intention; and reflection (Kimbell, 2014). Each of these areas resulted in a greater understanding of what shapes me as an individual, while highlighting the capacities, values and accountabilities I bring to the research topic (Kimbell, 2014). By looking within, I was providing the reader

with a glimpse of the biases I have coming into this topic and no longer fixating on these biases as the research commenced. After completing this research method, prior to engaging in my other research methods, I was more responsive and open to understanding other points of views (Cunliffe, 2009) in relation to the research question. Furthermore, I maintained reflexivity in the background of the other two research methods I engaged in, to continuously highlight my biases as they related to the responses, I was receiving through data collection.

The self-reflection template is broken down into eight different focus areas that stem from the center, which is the “intent” of the project I would be undertaking and realized that the intent of my research project was to achieve awareness and understanding about the term, cultural empathy. This was followed by addressing the first focus area of “issues and challenges”, which framed the problem I would be tackling. I continued to address the other areas clockwise as this flow seemed logical:

**Issues and challenges:** What bothers me is blatant disregard by corporations and people in power who adopt ignorance or fail to do their due diligence when speaking to or about different cultures who surround and support their respective platforms.

**My approach when starting something new:** When I start something new, I usually take quite a bit of time planning and

organizing while ensuring I have the time and resources to achieve the task at hand.

**My capacities and resources:** I can easily ideate and source the necessary people to assist me in any of my ventures. I can't easily focus if I am not passionate about the task at hand.

**I have strong ties with:** the corporate world (ie. major banks and consulting firms, etc) as well as a few Toronto-based startups.

**I have weak ties with:** social media influencers and the technology and media industry.

**My beliefs about change:** change happens because it's inevitable. Whether it is due to circumstances, people or even a change in environment. I am always willing to adapt and roll with the punches, regardless of what's at stake.

**My vision and values:** The future I want is a product that is digestible to anyone, regardless of their background and industry. I wish to keep track of my process and share a comprehensible story of my journey.

**My accountabilities:** I feel accountable to my advisors, anyone who I will be interviewing and anyone who will participate in any workshops I have, because all of these people are giving up their personal time for my MRP.

The self-reflexivity exercise allowed me to question the research topic as well as any assumptions I had coming into this project.

When it came to actually addressing cultural empathy within the context of this research project, I came in with many previous experiences that may not all have been positive. With this acknowledgement, I was set on using reflexivity throughout this process to acknowledge and consciously avoid adding any personal biases within the research, analysis and recommendations. By using a framework that was organized and logical, I was able to sort out thought process and intention behind this project, all within an organized manner that was not only approachable but accessible to the reader. I did so by maintaining a critical lens when addressing the eight focus areas, all of which stemmed from a very clear intent. I used this framework at the beginning of my research, however I found myself thinking about reflexivity throughout the entire process, especially during interviews with experts where I was hearing others share their thoughts about cultural empathy all the while recognizing where there were similarities as well as differences in our thinking. This consciousness about my own feelings and assumptions towards the topic allowed me to maintain the role of interviewer without inserting myself into the dialogue and directing the conversation in a way that met my own biases. This proved to be beneficial as the findings truly spoke to the cumulative expertise of those who contributed to the research.



## Data Analysis

When analyzing the qualitative data collected from netnography and the semi-structured interviews, I carried out qualitative thematic analysis (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003) that involved coding the data through a three-step process: data management, descriptive accounts and explanatory accounts (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). After interacting with a total of twenty-six accounts online and interviewing a total of ten experts, I was left with very rich data, thus coding the data had to be done manually as to maintain the quality of the research as well as the consistency (Kozinets et al., 2017).

In order to get through all the raw data, I used a thematic framework to classify and organize all the information (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003), to uncover concepts and emergent categories. By uncovering these concepts and categories, I was able to pick out meaningful interactions in which I engaged with online profiles, while ignoring the large quantities of noise, spam and otherwise unusable content (Kozinets et al., 2017) I came across when using netnography. A similar process was used when extracting meaningful information from the interviews, which was done by going through every interview and audio transcript thrice to record meaningful insights from the interview participants on post-its, while ensuring every participant was a unique post-it colour. This coding exercise proved to be very effective as I could always reference the speaker in the future, should I require further clarification about the specific point they were making as well as to attribute key quotes to the appropriate speaker. When I coded my findings for netnography, I organized the data into textual, visual, audiovisual and graphical content, while

ensuring that I always included relevant dates, screenshots and a personal reflection to describe how that interaction affected me as a researcher and a user of that platform. This part of the exercise was the most telling as it allowed me to not only observe how others were interacting online but also checking in on myself and engaging in self-reflexivity in the context of the research question. It proved to be very enlightening and provided me with an opportunity to draw out insights in real time which were included in the final clustering of the post-its.

In order to make sense of the data, I leveraged the theoretical framework that was developed in the literature review, serving as an opportunity to order and categorize the data. However, as the researcher, my creativity and conceptual thinking skills were truly put to the test at this stage as I took another pass at re-organizing the clusters in a less stringent and more fluid structure to better reflect the organic nature of the qualitative responses that came from both netnography and the interviews. I wrote down a list of the themes that emerged as they were organized under the initial framework, that has been iterated upon many times since (refer to Appendix C).

### **1.0 Concepts**

### **2.0 Role of Online Media Platforms**

### **3.0 Organizational Culture**

### **4.0 Engaging in Conversations**

### **5.0 Human-centric approach to Cultural Empathy**



It was important to highlight the concepts that came up repeatedly amongst all the interviews while ensuring that I was able to gain a deeper and richer definition of each of these concepts as they pertained to my research question.

A huge component of my research encompasses online media and technology, resulting in many reactions about the positives and negatives of social media and the ways in which the online influencers set up their own profiles to work within this space.

The other part of my research encompassed organizational culture and many of the interviewees, specifically the organizational experts shared their views on the various aspects within an organization that affects cultural empathy.

One very important theme that many of the interview participants shared was the importance of engaging in conversations and a lot of thoughts and expertise surrounding greater areas of focus under this theme.

Finally, many of the interviewees spoke to the important role being human-centric was when tackling the topic of cultural empathy.

After organizing the data within the index, it was apparent that I would have to further unpack the content and nature of themes

(Ritchie & Lewis, 2003) through the steps of detection, categorization and classification. Detection was the first step, which involved looking through all the data points and finding areas that a substantial amount of the respondents mentioned as a point to further explore (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The second step of categorization forced me to further refine the categories and ensure that descriptive data was extracted from the interview transcriptions and added to the appropriate category (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Finally, the classification step ensured that the groups of categories were assigned to “classes” or larger themes (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The additional sub-themes that emerged further provided the context in which that theme or category was rooted in while providing me with another group in which I could further refine my clustering (refer to Appendix D).

The final stage of the qualitative analysis was extracting explanatory accounts, which was finding linkages that repeatedly occurred between themes (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003), while further refining the index with additional explanatory categories. The only way this was achieved was after reviewing all the raw data from the interviews together in the organized clusters that they existed in on the wall of post-its. I had to use my common sense heavily throughout this process to explain the logic and patterns I was finding in the data (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). I realized that there was some overlap with the findings I had found in the literature review and some of the themes (refer to Appendix E) I was seeing emerge in the synthesized data.



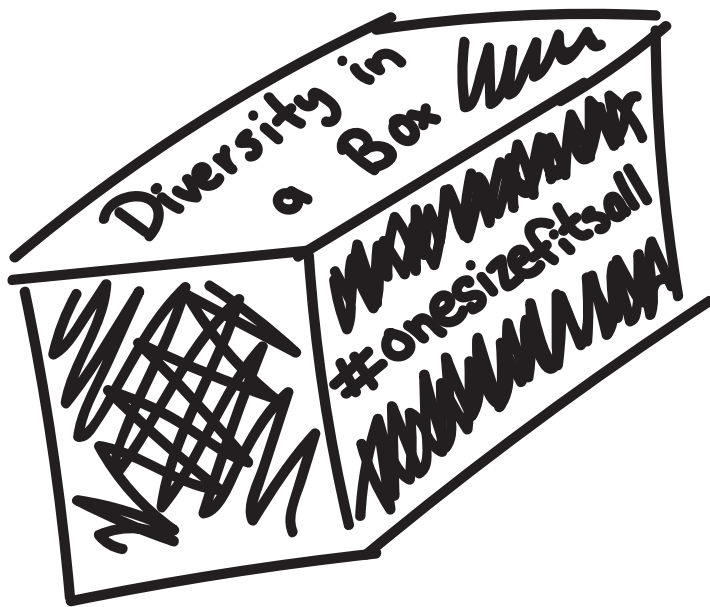
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# ANALYSIS & RECOMMENDATIONS

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# Analysis & Recommendations



In this section, I will analyze the findings from the research in the context of the theoretical framework as well as share recommendations that an organization can implement based on my research findings when addressing the research question:

### **"How does cultural empathy occur in online media platforms, and what lessons can be applied to organizational HR training contexts?"**

The first part will articulate the theoretical framework that was informed from the literature review and how the five focus areas emerged in the research conducted. This is an opportunity to expand on the theoretical framework while considering the findings from the research. The five areas that were initially addressed in the theoretical framework will be outlined in the context of the research collected and specific data will be highlighted to address research question. The second part of this section will outline recommendations that organizations can apply within the context of their organizational culture. These recommendations will be outlined as a step-by-step process that organizations will have to follow in order to successfully implement cultural empathy while making direct correlations to the findings from online media platforms and how those directly relate to the steps outlined for organizations.

### **Analysis: Cultural Empathy Across Online Media and Organizational Contexts**

The theoretical framework outlined in the literature review re-emerged in the data analysis phase of the research project and expanded even deeper based on the rich data that came out from the research methods employed. During the literature review, it was apparent that the literature only skimmed the top of the research topic and there was still an opportunity to dive deeper while considering the complex environments I was analyzing (ie. online media platforms and organizations). Each of the categories that emerged in the theoretical framework were expanded with sub-categories during the analysis phase.

### **Concepts that help define cultural empathy**

When outlining concepts in the literature review, I came across my first understanding of what the boundaries of the research would be while defining the various terms that were relevant for both online media platforms and organizations. Through the research conducted, I was able to solidify what the important concepts were as they emerged through the research conducted.

The term diversity came up predominantly amongst the experts from organizations. According to Tej Singh Hazra, (Interviewee 3), diversity occurred any time there were two different people in a room. Tina Varughese (Interviewee 4) expanded

on this further by saying that it spoke to individuals having a difference in thought and perspective, resulting in a diversity of innovation. The concept of diversity occurs heavily across organizations in the context of diversity and inclusion teams and programs, and it was imperative to understand the meaning of this concept as it related to an organization, specifically as a way to understand how employees come from different backgrounds, life experiences and belief systems, thus organizations have an opportunity to create a rich organizational culture by hearing these diverse voices and challenging their own perspectives (Hyder, 2017).

The term inclusion is another term that has transcended both online media platforms and organizations, and similar to diversity, it is heavily related to organizations in the form of diversity and inclusion teams and programs. It has been emphasized that organizations which have access to more unfamiliar perspectives (Wood, 2018) and can include these perspectives when making decisions can come up with better ideas and approaches to working better (Wilson, 2018). Kelly Lendsay (Interviewee 1) spoke about a tool that he created which allows for organizations to include these perspectives at the decision table, known as the Inclusion Continuum, a Workplace Inclusion System. The main tenet of the tool and his overall philosophy about inclusion is to diagnose an organization's competencies to achieve increased engagement and relationships with Indigenous people, business and communities.

This is a great example of a tool that organizations can leverage to diagnose and place themselves on this continuum while maintaining the foresight on where they wish to head as an organization when it comes to their inclusionary efforts.

The term empathy played a very important role in defining the greater term of cultural empathy and based on the responses from the research conducted, the definition of empathy garnered a myriad of responses, each of which stemmed from the principles of empathy: learning, conversation and experience (Krznaric, 2007). Eleni Han (Interviewee 5) began to describe it as compassion, while Chris Studer (Interviewee 9) mentioned how empathy was building bridges to make connections. There were two responses that countered each other, however by doing so, they both articulated the term, empathy, with a critical lens. Specifically, Manal Aman (Interviewee 7), founder of Hello Holy Days!, called out empathy as the ability to step into someone else's shoes, however Emily Nguyen (Interviewee 10) of /intersectTO questioned this definition to say that individuals cannot truly walk in someone else's shoes, however they can acknowledge another person's lived experiences and express understanding for these experiences after this acknowledgement. To do so would result in a sort of "reciprocity", as articulated by Hazra (Interviewee 3), as individuals can take the time to exchange their own experiences through dialogue while appreciating one another.

The term, culture, is ambiguous in its nature as it can represent various sections of society, however for the context of my research I ensured that it was defined within the boundaries of race and ethnicity. A common metaphor for culture is the image of an iceberg, which has both visible and invisible aspects to it (Vaudrin-Charette, 2019). The invisible including implicit cultural codes such as values, norms and myths that are present in intercultural interactions (Vaudrin-Charette, 2019), which Varughese (Interviewee 4) elaborated on as the parts below the water, such as an individual's unique lived experiences and history. On the other hand, the parts above the water include an individual's physical appearance. There is an element of self-organization that occurs based on individuals' cultural identities (Espinoza, 2018) and according to Han (Interviewee 5), culture is a shared set of values and often involves a lot of customs and values, which evolves and changes over time, a sentiment that is also echoed by Canadian stand-up comedian, Hoodo Hersi (Interviewee 8), who said that culture is fluid and ever-changing.

The final concept of cultural empathy was defined by Hersi (Interviewee 8) as the opportunity to get to the root of and unifying various cultures, especially with individuals who are totally different and still being able to connect with one another. This was taken further by Aman (Interviewee 7) who explained that it is the ability of being able to understand the things that make an individual unique and understanding how they are unique due to their culture. This is emphasized by Studer (Interviewee

9) who speaks to how this understanding allows individuals to relate to someone based on their cultural differences and being cognizant about how everyone has a unique upbringing and experiences based on their culture. According to Varughese (Interviewee 4), once an individual adopts each of these cultural empathic behaviours, they will be able to accept another culture's point of view, however as Han (Interviewee 5) puts it, although cultural empathy can permeate those uncomfortable conversations, society is still lacking the practical tools to have those conversations.

These concepts lay the foundation of the research topic that was being investigated to remove any confusion about the boundaries set for the research. Both online and organizational environments have different definitions for these concepts, reasoning the significance of defining them in the context of both perspectives from experts of both online media platforms and organizations.

### **Role of Online Media Platforms to understand cultural empathy**

The role of online media platforms in the context of the research topic is significant, as it offered a lens that organizations could leverage to adopt cultural empathy successfully within their cultures. There were certain aspects of online media platforms that emerged as focus areas for this section.

The first was understanding the global reach online media platforms provide, specifically by allowing users to be more connected and globally aware (Krznaric, 2014) while developing relationships with people who were once outside an online users' already established network (Collins, 2014). Han (Interviewee 5) takes this one step further to address how the internet is unique in that it is the only place where people can follow others who they may never meet in-person, solely based on a personal connection they feel to that individual. This is echoed by Nataanii Means (Interviewee 6), who has used his platform to reach many different people while amplifying his own and others voices to make an impact. Nguyen (Interviewee 10) highlights that it is this very accessibility of online media platforms that makes it attractive and a place for discussion to take place. The entire premise of online media platforms is being able to transcend geographic and physical borders, especially when engaging in conversations with people who are not geographically near them (Collins, 2014).

This directly relates to the second characteristic of online media platforms, which is anonymity. According to Han (Interviewee 5), individuals feel comfortable sharing and publishing information online due to the ability to remain anonymous. On the other hand, this also results in online trolling, obscenity and worse (Brock, 2009), a phenomenon Means (Interviewee 6) speaks to, as online users feel empowered to engage in negative and hurtful discourse. This has resulted in a strong "call-out culture", according to Han (Interviewee 5), who speaks

to community members being quick to engage in conversation to publicly denounce hateful speech seem on their online media platform. It is also imperative that online media influencers leverage community guidelines as well as safety measures native to these platforms (ie. blocking hateful users and deleting negative comments), which is expressed by both Han (Interviewee 5) & Studer (Interviewee 9), to circumvent negativity.

The final characteristic is the most significant, which is the emergence of social media influencers, who are individuals that garner a large online following by sharing a passion or interest with a larger audience through posted content (Daniel et al., 2018). According to Studer (Interviewee 9), "influencers have gifts and can resonate and connect with people," while creating organically evolved online communities. They can moderate dialogue through their influence, as seen after engaging in a conversation with a very influential Instagram account that caters to diversity and representation across beauty brands. It was apparent that their success was with their ability to be open to different perspectives, experiences and opinions of their community members while maintaining an open space for positive dialogue. This aligned with the importance of community guidelines which not only represent the brand of the account, but also acknowledges the space the online influencers wish to grow and ensure that all their users adhere to these basic guidelines.



Each of these characteristics demonstrate the key components that allow cultural empathy to thrive in an online context. From its global reach to the ability to remain anonymous to finally redefining celebrity and creating a new concept of influencers, online media platforms are positioned to successfully engaged in discourses around race and culture issues due to these characteristics.

## Cultural Empathy in Organizational Contexts

The second environment that was focused on in this research topic was organizations and how cultural empathy could flourish in this context. In order to understand that, it was imperative to address the various elements of an organization that should be highlighted when implementing cultural empathy.

The first are the existent human resource practices the organization has in place, including training programs, recruitment practices, and reporting & analytics. According to Hazra (Interviewee 3), employee training programs need to address unconscious biases and mindfulness, which transcends into recruitment practices. Organizations should constantly reassess themselves to see what training programs work and which do not, and in this case, reporting is key when assessing the impact of the change being implemented. This includes programs such as reverse mentoring to learn from younger and less senior employees to ensure that these programs are sustainable in the long-run, as Lendsay

(Interviewee 1) puts it. He continues to address that when organizations reassess themselves, they can design new approaches and solutions with the goal of creating better social cohesion within the organization. By doing so, organizations will have access to more unfamiliar perspectives (Wood, 2018) that will bring better ideas, and different approaches that will help work get better (Wilson, 2018).

The second element is the role of leaders and influencers who set the tone for institutional culture and incorporate inclusive leadership skills in the process (Humphreys, 2012). Lendsay (Interviewee 1) echoes this by saying that tone to adopt cultural empathy is set from the top, beginning with the board of directors, while Nguyen (Interviewee 10) maintains that

**"the leadership team has a responsibility to amplify everyone's voice, especially those who are not currently represented in boardrooms within organizations."**

According to Lendsay (Interviewee 1), the board of directors need to be diverse to achieve a diversity of thought, perspective and innovation, as Varughese (Interviewee 4) puts it.



"The leadership team has the responsibility to amplify everyone's voice, especially those who are currently not represented in boardrooms."

- Emily Nguyen, Member of /  
intersectTO Online Community

This leads into the third element, which are the attitudes and behaviours that are prevalent within the organizational culture, beginning with the executive leadership team to human resources team and managers. According to Varughese (Interviewee 4), it all begins with the leadership team who must be passionate about the change they wish to implement, all the while remaining authentic in their messaging. This attitude is mirrored by the human resources team of organizations who have an important role in implementing organizational training programs, according to Studer (Interviewee 9), for their employees which could include a wide array of topics: sensitivity training, unlearning prejudice, combating stereotypes, promoting acceptance, educating employees about acceptable terminology and finally promoting speaking up. These training programs are imperative for managers, who are the bridge between employees and employers who manage the challenges that change brings within an organization, as Tina Varughese (Interviewee 4) explains it. This is further addressed by Hazra (Interviewee 3) who pinpoints the important role managers play as being in tune with the employees they manage yet having to look beyond and focus on the greater mandate and strategy implemented by the executive leadership team. This will result in organizations rethinking how they talk to their employees and at the end of these conversations reflect (Marron, 2018) to identify and embrace the different values and norms that exist in a diverse workforce (Vulchi & Guo, 2017).

By understanding these elements of an organization in relation to the research topic, I can understand the criteria required to implement cultural empathy successfully.

### **Engaging in Conversations to achieve cultural empathy**

The ability for individuals to engage in conversations is key to achieving cultural empathy. It is said that conversation and empathy are intimately intertwined, and making the effort to comprehend another person's perspective, through conversation, can help bring an otherwise unremarkable dialogue to life while conversation itself has the power to force empathic connection (Krznicaric, 2014). There are certain tools for engagement that can be employed to ensure that conversations can effectively foster cultural empathy.

The first is storytelling This begins with using appropriate tools for engagement, such as storytelling. According to Studer (Interviewee 9), storytelling is a personal approach taken to open up about an individual's experiences while presenting the topic in an engaging way. This is mirrored online, where people share their stories and speak about a topic such as race and how they have overcome those obstacles in the form of a story. When people are passionate about storytelling and use stories and other mediums to make people understand their own experiences, they are effectively

allowing others to empathize with them, as Nguyen (Interviewee 10) puts it. The process of storytelling addresses all six of the qualities required to practice the craft of conversation, as storyteller's express curiosity in others, they are radical listeners, and take off their own masks while expressing concern for others with a creative spirit and sheer courage (Krznaric, 2014).

The second tool of engagement is highlighting similarities, as opposed to fixating on differences. Lendsay (Interviewee 1) emphasizes how humans have more similarities than differences and by using more fresh and innovative approaches to engaging in conversations, individuals can highlight these similarities. This creates a common ground to recognize what is similar, while focusing on the similarities as opposed to the differences. This process is aligned to the third principle of empathy, which is to "experience" how the person you are empathizing with, lives, allowing you to understand what they have gone through (Krznaric, 2007) to find that common ground.

These tools together will allow organizations with the foundation required to engage in conversations that are pivotal in not only addressing cultural empathy, but also in providing sustainable ways in which organizations can implement and manage change.

## **Human-centric approach to cultural empathy**

When implementing any type of change or organizational program, leadership should observe the organizational culture with purpose and intent (Hobson, 2014) to ensure that the change takes the employees of the organization into consideration. In order to achieve this, there are certain actions that an organization must adopt in their overall approach to implementing cultural empathy.

The first is the organization's ability to look within, to acknowledge the current state the organizational culture is in and reflect on how change can be implemented, according to Emily Nguyen (Interviewee 10). This is done to acknowledge other cultures and their experiences and internally reflect on where the organization is internally relative to their level of understanding. This will result in organizations rethinking how they talk to their employees and at the end of these conversations reflect (Marron, 2018) on how they can implement cultural empathy while taking their current organizational culture into consideration.

The second action organizations can take is realizing that everyone has a role to play to push things forward, as Han (Interviewee 5) puts it. Those in positions of power have a greater responsibility to amplify the voices of those who are the minority and can empower these groups, according to Lendsay (Interviewee 1). This is echoed by Hersi (Interviewee 8) who mentions how the

dominant culture cannot turn a blind eye and remain silent, but rather speaking up is integral to achieving cultural empathy within organizations. Han (Interviewee 5) takes this one step further by recognizing that a space has to be created within organizations in order to amplify these voices, which would result in cultural empathy being owned by all individuals in various levels of the organization. By incorporating an organizational strategy that capitalizes on multiple perspectives, organizations are able to benefit with greater creativity, productivity, organizational attractiveness and an increase in employee well-being (Chavez & Weisinger, 2008).

The final action is surrounding the attitudes and behaviours that exist within an organization to allow cultural empathy to thrive. This includes an environment that is free of unconscious biases and being mindful about where the organization is currently and what it will take to get to a place of cultural empathy, according to Hazra (Interviewee 3). This in addition to being comfortable with discomfort allow organizations to approach the topic of cultural empathy in a more accessible manner. Finally, the last behaviour is using humour and in effect laughter, to engage in human contact and address cultural empathy. Studer (Interviewee 9) adopts humour to approach serious topics and allows organizations with a good indicator of where social attitudes are when it comes to cultural empathy. Lendsay (Interviewee 1) maintains that laughter is the best medicine,

although for organizations, this behaviour can be high-risk, yet high-reward. By leaning into these human attitudes and behaviours, organizations have an opportunity to change their organizational culture by connecting directly to their employees for whom they are designing this change.

The human-centric approach to design cultural empathy within organizations allow for the organization to co-create a shared organizational culture that identifies and embraces the different values and norms that exist in a diverse workforce (Vulchi & Guo, 2017). This approach is sustainable and allows organizations to iterate and continuously adapt to a solution that works with the unique culture of the organization.



"Speak first to  
understand and then  
to be understood."

- Mary Jane Maillet Brownscombe,  
Co-Founder & Strategist,  
SHEACCELERATOR, Inc.

## Recommendations: Lessons for HR Training Contexts

After analyzing all the data, there was an organic next step to create recommendations for organizations to implement cultural empathy within an organization. Through the research conducted, the following understanding about cultural empathy emerged; Cultural empathy thrives in an organization when the following criteria is met:

**(1) change is driven by the executive leadership team;**

**(2) strategies are adapted to fit the organizational culture; and**

**(3) a human-centric design approach is adopted when undergoing this organizational design effort.**

The criteria directly mirror the metrics that were found to garner cultural empathy successfully in an online context. For instance, Studer (Interviewee 9), emphasized the importance of community guidelines to give the owners of an online profile the ability to control, manage and maintain civility and respect of the conversations online. The community guidelines extend organically from the pre-existent culture of the online platform, according to Studer (Interviewee 9), to meet the needs of the

community members who consume and engage with the content. Furthermore, Means (Interviewee 6), mentioned the importance of reminding his followers online that

**“We are all human...I don’t see myself as a role model, I’m just a human being...I just try to be as relatable as possible when it comes to human emotions,”**

which helps him connect with his followers who are also people with real problems and feelings, similar to him.

This criteria, along with the term cultural empathy being defined as an opportunity for individuals to look within their own lived experiences and upbringing to offer an opportunity to acknowledge and relate to the lived experience and upbringing of another in an effort to recognize similarities in the context of their cultural differences; provides the necessary foundation for the steps organizations can take to achieve cultural empathy in their own context. This is illustrated by Mary Jane Maillet Brownscombe (Interviewee 2), who identified the importance to,

**“Speak first to understand and then to be understood”,**

which is a comprehensive method organization can develop as they adopt the following steps:



"We are all human...I don't see myself as a role model, I'm just a human being...I just try to be as relatable as possible."

- Nataani Means, Ogala Sioux and Navajo hip-hop artist

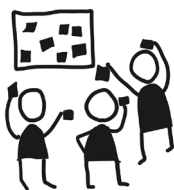




**STEP 1: Executive leadership team proactively take ownership to build cultural empathy with the organization Leaders set the tone to drive cultural empathy.**



**STEP 2: Organization invests in training programs that educates all employees on how to achieve cultural empathy.**



**STEP 3: Organization leverages design thinking when designing cultural empathy within their organization.**

The organization's ability to follow these steps will allow them to achieve cultural empathy, while adhering to certain processes under each step, to allow cultural empathy to thrive in the long-run.



"Everyone has their circle of influence and if yours is huge, you have an opportunity to make change."

- Chris Studer, Executive Director at The Get REAL Movement

## **Step 1: Executive Leadership team proactively take ownership to build cultural empathy with the organization's leaders setting the tone to drive cultural empathy**



For cultural empathy to take roots in an organization, the change must be driven by the leadership team (ie. Board of Directors and executive leadership team), which Studer (Interviewee 9) emphasizes,

**“Everyone has their circle of influence and if yours is huge, you have an opportunity to make change.”**

He continues to say how this aligns with the role social media influencers play online, as they have the gift to resonate and connect with people, which is similar to the influence

garnered by the leadership team in an organization. In order to manage this change, the leadership team must be:

**Comprised of a diverse team that can set a tone that is both authentic and genuine.**

By creating opportunities for individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds to make decisions about how the organization adopts cultural empathy, according to Maillet Brownscombe (Interviewee 2), new approaches and solutions will take shape. Hazra (Interviewee 3), mentioned how the old form of leadership was leading from the shoulder up, with your brain, however, to achieve cultural empathy, organizations are going to have to lead from the shoulder down, with their hearts. This allows the leadership team to not only lead by example, but also ensure that a culturally empathic point of view is taken into consideration when it comes to the greater mandate of a larger organizational change.

**Able to take accountability and looks within themselves and the greater organizational culture to get a grasp on the current state.**

Nguyen (Interviewee 10), community member of /IntersectTO says organizations cannot go on this journey without reflecting on their own mistakes and this is a journey leader should go on as they begin to adopt cultural empathy practices in their organization. By engaging in this form of self-reflexivity, the organization can

highlight their fundamental assumptions, values and ways of interacting (Cunliffe, 2009) in their current state. This can be achieved by looking at internal data that may or may not already be available, such as employee engagement surveys, hiring practice statistics, interviewing the Human Resource team and direct managers, as well as looking to and speaking with the Board of Directors and Executive team. In addition, the organization can look at external data such as audits conducted by third-party organizations about the current “Diversity”, “Equity” and “Inclusion” practices. Online platforms often practice this self-reflexivity in the form of having a self-moderated community, according to Nguyen (Interviewee 10), where community members engage with other members to maintain the overarching community guidelines as set by the online platform.

this change in their organization. These behaviours include being open-minded, being free of unconscious biases and being adaptable to evolve with the change that will occur year over year.

**Looking forward and adopting a long-term vision when implementing any organizational change around cultural empathy.**

The leaders implementing the change have a long journey ahead and as Lendsay (Interviewee 1) mentions,

**“You can change behaviours, not attitudes”**

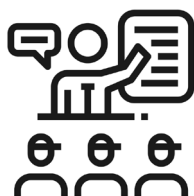
and encourages leaders to adopt certain behaviours themselves as they undertake



"Everyone sees  
human kindness, it  
does not have a race  
or citizenship."

- Kelly Lendsay, President & CEO,  
Indigenous Works

## Step 2: Organization invests in training programs that educates all employees on how to achieve cultural empathy



To ensure the organization adopts the strategy set out by the leadership team, the necessary training programs must be made available and prioritized for all employees at all levels. The content curated online by social media influencers can leave an impact as the messages being published can be shared, as Nguyen (Interviewee 10) explains, while Means (Interviewee 6) acknowledges how the internet can reach many people and help amplify the voices of social media influencers. The internet is an accessible form of media with the ability to share information, according to Nguyen (Interviewee 10), and organizations must ensure that the training programs created mimic these standards. These training programs can be done as workshops that:

**Incorporate topics such as removing unconscious biases and mindfulness techniques.**

The ability for users to be able to post, consume and contribute anonymously online is a huge advantage of online media platforms, according to Han (Interviewee 5), as people do not have the biases that they maintain when engaging with others in person. Hazra (Interviewee 3) maintains the importance of mindfulness and unconscious bias training as an opportunity for employees to be aware of and remove prejudices they may have had as managers, recruiters and leaders in the organization. Studer (Interviewee 9) further acknowledges that by combating stereotypes, promoting acceptance, providing education around appropriate terminology when speaking about cultural empathy and finally promoting a safe and open environment that fosters open discussion, only then will organizations be able to remove unconscious biases and adopt mindfulness. Studer (Interviewee 9) uses exercises, such as the “Grateful vs. Challenging” exercise, which has the participants write down one thing they are grateful for and another thing they find challenging anonymously, to demonstrate these techniques in his own workshops.

The facilitator then shares a few of these notes with the workshop participants in an effort to share their vulnerabilities in a safe environment and ground the conversation in the experiences of those attending the session.

**Hire a facilitator who is diverse and an excellent storyteller with a sense of humour.**

The success of online influencers is their ability to connect with those consuming their content, allowing them to bridge differences, according to Han (Interviewee 5). This is a very important quality any facilitator conducting these workshops should have, to moderate a safe conversation, and mimic the anonymity and safety measures that are achieved in online media platforms, as Nguyen (Interviewee 10) reminds us. When running their team's workshops, Studer (Interviewee 9) emphasizes the personal approach taken by each and every one of his facilitators by opening and sharing personal stories. This allows the facilitator an opportunity to be vulnerable and allow workshop participants to connect with these stories based on their own life experiences, regardless of what their own cultural background may be. As Lendsay (Interviewee 1) puts it,

**“everyone sees human kindness, it does not have a race or citizenship”.**

In addition to being a storyteller, the facilitator must possess a strong sense of humour to alleviate tensions the workshop may induce, as Varughese (Interviewee 4), often facilitates workshops, she says humour is always welcome, which is echoed by Studer (Interviewee 9) who acknowledges

that you can be funny and approach serious topics in a light and hilarious way. Hersi (Interviewee 8), adds that

**“comedy is like adding a dollop of honey to the truth, so it goes down easier”**

and can set the foundation of the workshop to harbour trust and ensure that trust is maintained throughout the entire program. Hersi (Interviewee 8) acknowledges that humour is great when delivering the news in a very funny and truthful way.



"Comedy is like  
adding a dollop of  
honey to the truth, so  
it goes down easier."

- Hoodo Hersi, Canadian Stand-Up  
Comedian



**Are designed and catered to the respective level of the employee who is attending the workshop.**

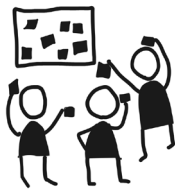
The internet is the only place you can follow a lot of people you don't know, according to Han (Interviewee 5), to consume material that relates to your personal preferences and feel connected to others. In an organization, employees are led by the leadership team, but more directly by their managers, who have a greater accountability to implement cultural empathy for their direct reports daily. By ensuring that managers are the ones spearheading the change for all employees, they bear a greater responsibility when it comes to the overall organizational change, and as Varughese (Interviewee 4) puts it, they are responsible for bridging the challenges that may occur between the executive leadership's mandate to implement cultural empathy and their employees reluctance to adopt these changes. Varughese (Interviewee 4) further acknowledges that people don't leave jobs, people leave people, and for this reason, the leaders in the organization must be onboard and design and cater "content" that fits the "preferences" of their employees.



"[Cultural Empathy]  
is our opportunity to  
build a bridge versus  
building a wall."

- Tina Varughese, President, tWorks

### **Step 3: Organization leverages design thinking when designing cultural empathy within their organization**



The main tenet of design thinking is its iterative nature to solving complex problems, while maintaining five key steps: empathize, define, ideate, prototype and test. It is important for the organization to lean into this very human-centric approach when implementing cultural empathy into their organizational design. This can be done by:

#### **Adopting human emotions when navigating cultural empathy.**

As Nguyen (Interviewee 10) puts it, “Toronto is diverse as a fact. We don’t have to try that hard to fix that”, thus organizations operating in the Toronto landscape have a greater responsibility to navigate cultural empathy as it’s a reflection of the city in which they are operating. A huge part of using design thinking is keeping an open-

mind, while ensuring everyone who is a stakeholder is included in the conversation. According to Han (Interviewee 5), a lot of what makes online media platforms effective is the connection is fosters and how we as humans connect with each other, allowing us to bridge our differences. Varughese (Interviewee 4) explains it as the opportunity

**“to build a bridge versus building a wall”,**

and by implementing cultural empathy into organizations, everyone has an opportunity to be a part of building this bridge with respect and humility, kindness and of course being comfortable with discomfort.



"Coming from that place of empathy and understanding that our experiences shape who we are, but we always have a choice in how we react."

- Eleni Han, Founder, Nuance Magazine

**Ensuring the organization constantly reassesses itself and monitors what cultural empathy programs work and which did not.**

According to Han (Interviewee 5),

**“Coming from that place of empathy and understanding that our experiences shape who we are, but we always have a choice in how we react”,**

and the leadership team has the responsibility to constantly assess the impact of the training programs and changes that must be made. Online media platforms do not circumvent negativity, as Nguyen (Interviewee 10) puts it, and it is up to the owner of the platform and in turn the greater online community to assess and self-moderate the content. Organizations have the resources to extract insights in the form of reports and improve on what did not work and continue with parts of the program that were successful, and according to Maillet Brownscombe (Interviewee 2), this is only achieved when organizations constantly reassess themselves.

**Maintaining cultural empathy as the core organizational design change.**

As with any large organizational change,

Hazra (Interviewee 3) maintains that the employees at an organization,

**“need to be willing to be different and mull in the uncomfortable”.**

It is important to maintain an empathic point of view when using design thinking and by maintaining cultural empathy as a day-to-day employee mandate adopted by the entire organization, will this be achieved. The way that looks for each organization will be different, as the culture that exists differs organization to organization, however Aman (Interviewee 7) says that,

**“Sometimes you get different ingredients in a recipe that tastes good on their own, but you have to figure out which recipe makes all the ingredients’ flavours come out”,**

and it is up to the organization to figure out the optimal recipe that works in the context of their culture after multiple iterations.

After an organization implements these steps, they will be able to say that everyone in the organization: is familiar with the term, “cultural empathy”, feels they have a role to play, and has the appropriate behaviour and attitude to implement the changes required to achieve cultural empathy in the long-run.



"[Organizations] need  
to be willing to be  
different and mull in  
the uncomfortable."

- Tej Singh Hazra, Director Diversity &  
Inclusion, BMO Financial Group

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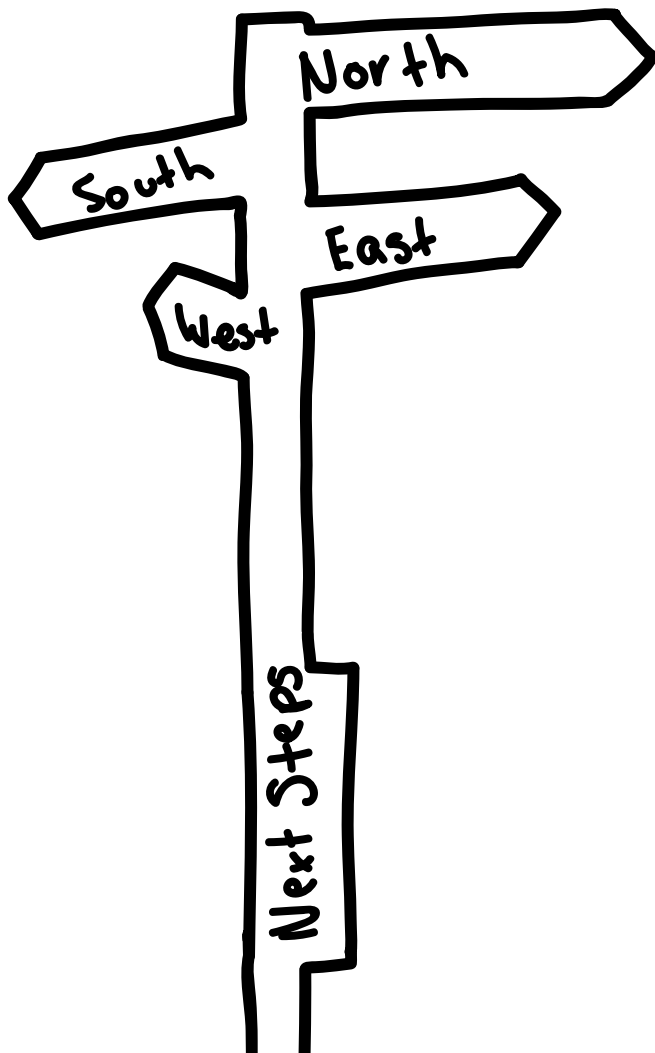


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# CONCLUSION

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# Conclusion



The President of Ariel Investments, Mellody Hobson articulated the heightened discomfort individuals have when speaking about race openly and expressed how by sharing personal experiences “maybe we could all be a little less anxious and a little bolder in our conversations about race” (Hobson, 2014). I thought about places in my own life where I immersed myself wholeheartedly into conversations about race and culture issues and most of these places were on online media platforms. It was with this lens that I attempted to answer the research question:

**“How does cultural empathy occur in online media platforms, and what lessons can be applied to organizational HR training contexts?”**

After collecting and analyzing data, I was left with concrete recommendations that organizations can leverage in their organizations to achieve cultural empathy. These recommendations were informed by experts who were both online and organizational experts and takes on the form of a three-step process with elaborate actions the organization can take to implement cultural empathy within their unique organizational culture.

The three-step process maintains that the executive leadership sets the tone from the top while adopting a human-centric approach when designing cultural empathy within the organization. The first step is the **organization’s leadership team proactively takes ownership to build cultural empathy**

**within the organization**, which was heavily informed by the concept of Social Media Influencers found across online media platforms. These influencers have a passion or interest online, garnering followers and allowing for user engagement as online media platforms allow for comments (Emory et al., 2018). The leadership existent within an organization play the role of influencers and can address change based on the following they garner by their employees. The second step is the organization invests in training programs that **educates all employees on how to achieve cultural empathy**, which focuses on the explicit information organizations should be sharing with their employees to allow them to be better informed about cultural empathy. Online media platforms are accessible forms of media where information can be shared to anyone with working internet connection across the globe (Brock, 2009). Organizations have an opportunity to mirror this accessibility by providing employees with the resources and the proper transparency about the cultural empathy programs and training options available to them. The final step is the **organization leverages design thinking when designing cultural empathy within their organization**, which allows the organization to understand what is desirable from a human point of view with what is technologically feasible and economically viable (Brown, 2019) based on the organizational culture. Online media platforms allow complete strangers to connect and have conversations, often allowing those conversations to foster deep understanding about a topic with various perspectives shared in the process. These sorts of conversations can be mirrored in an organizational context to co-create solutions with the experts that know the



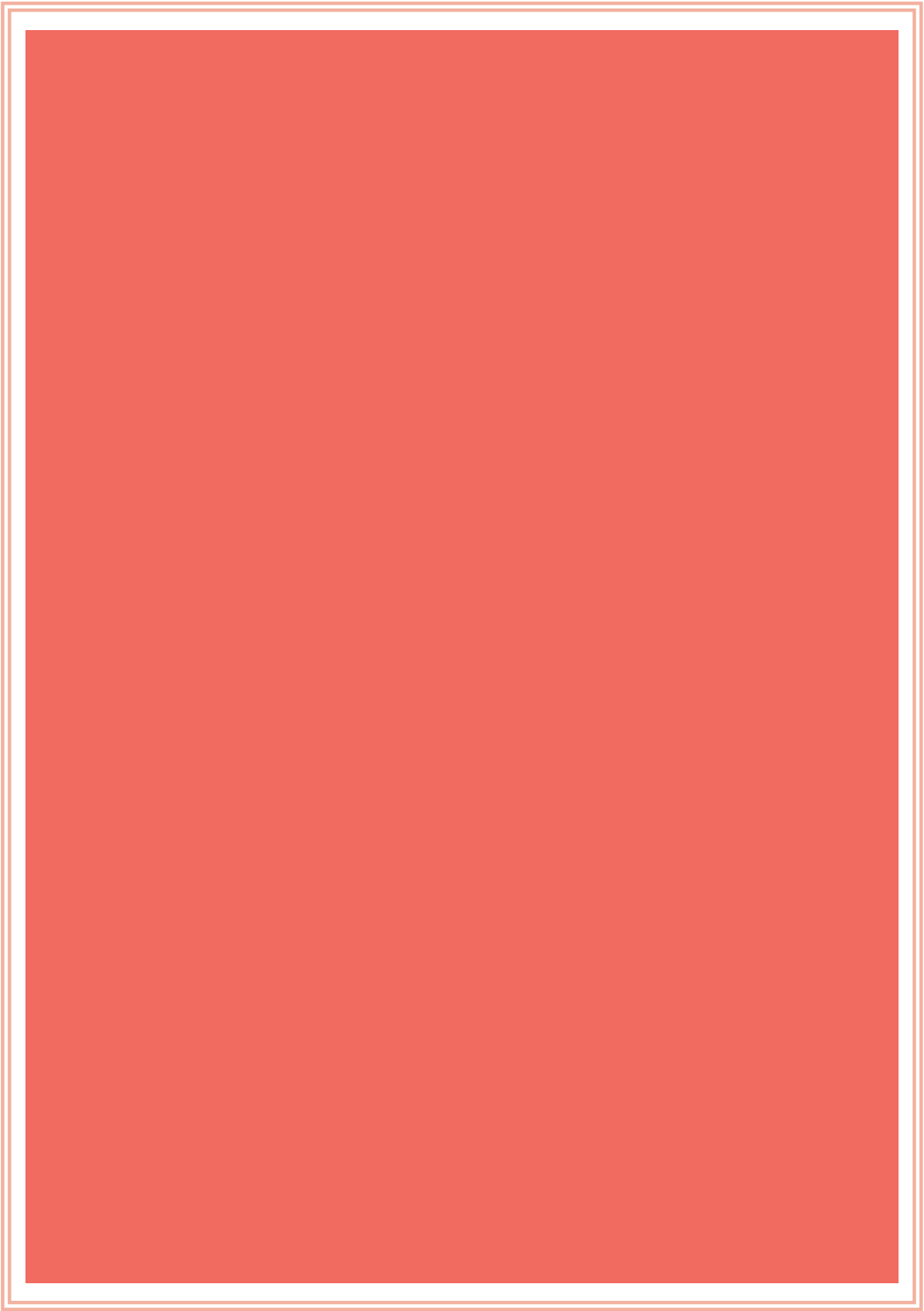
"Sometimes you get different ingredients in a recipe that taste good on their own, but you have to figure out which recipe makes all the ingredients' flavours come out."

organizational culture better than anyone external, the employees. The executive leadership has the responsibility to monitor the effectiveness of the training programs implemented to assess and adapt to changes required over time, similarly to how online influencers monitor their online media platforms to grow their brands and cater to their followers.

By adopting these steps, organizations have an opportunity to no longer have a black box known as Diversity & Inclusion, but rather have solutions that fit their unique organizational culture. It is apparent that these recommendations have not been co-created with organizational experts, and therefore have not been tested within an organizational environment. The next phase of this research would involve an opportunity to co-create with organizational experts as well as implement the insights and findings within an organization. The opportunity to spread the concept of “cultural empathy” amongst organizations and allow Human Resource departments, managers with direct reports and executive leadership teams aware of the term is one I look forward to undertaking.

I am aware that there will be critics of the concept of cultural empathy and whether achieving cultural empathy is even possible, however as the research suggests cultural empathy is an infant term that has far-reaching rewards. Currently, the research is in its preliminary stages, however, this major research project can successfully articulate how cultural empathy can be applied across

organizations and potentially society as a whole. The goal of this research is very much to build awareness and acknowledge organizations’ need for cultural empathy. As I look forward and recognize the implications this research has on my career, I hope to continue to define myself as an organizational design expert, with a focus on cultural empathy. With a renewed arsenal of design tools to further explore this topic creatively and that too with the right experts at the table, this research serves as the first part in a long series of research enquiries I will pose in the future to further build on this topic.



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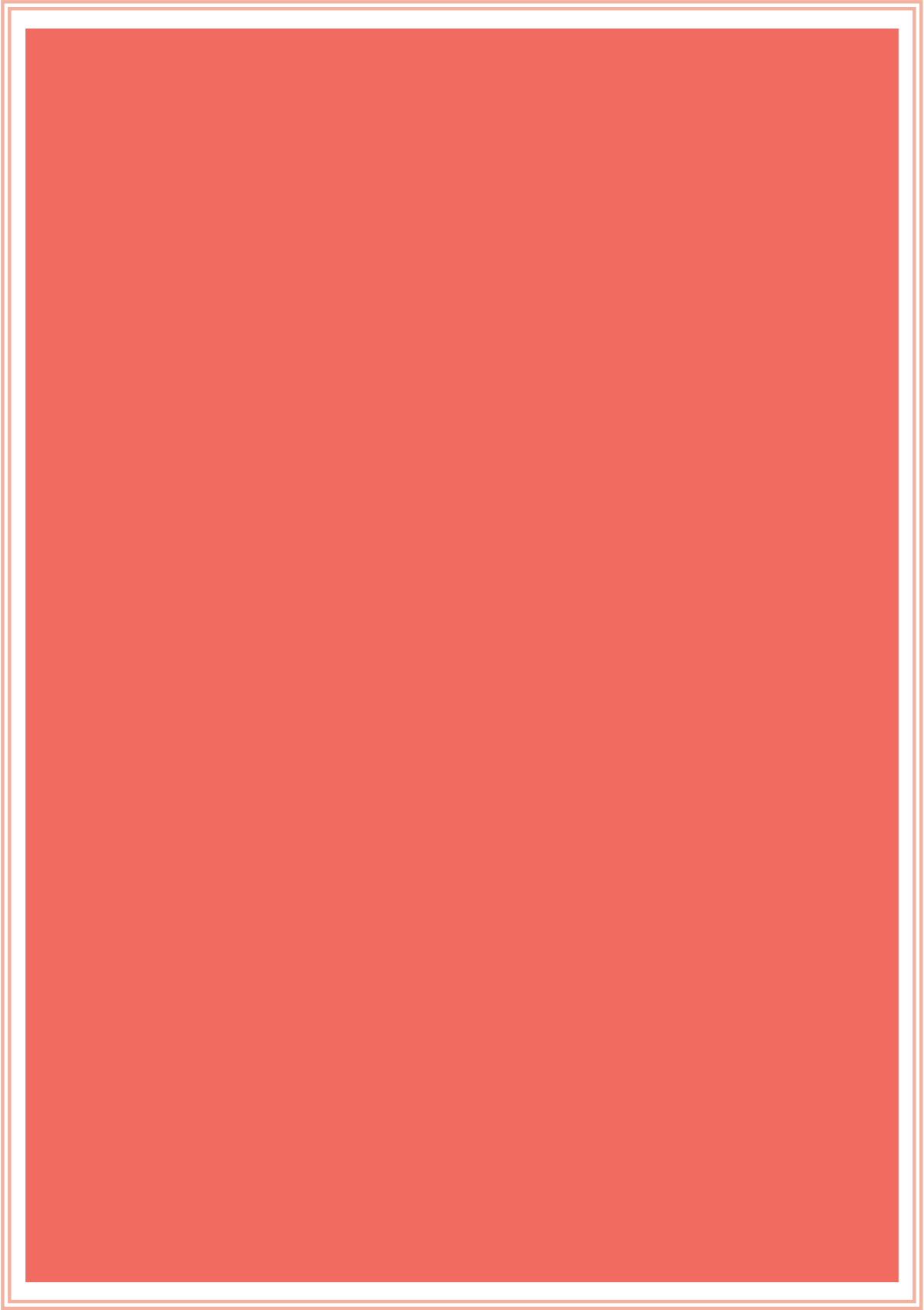
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# APPENDICES

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# APPENDIX A

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## **Appendix A: Expert Interview Guide - Online Influencers**

### **Introduction**

Thanks for agreeing to chat with me today. I just want to take about an hour of your time to talk to you about your experience when it comes to cultural empathy and how you use the power of online media to propel your vision and opinions about how we speak about cultural empathy.

I won't disclose any identifiable information based on this interview. If I do consider including any specifics in my final Major Project Research report, I will ask for your permission first.

If you're comfortable with me recording this call for note-taking purposes, I'd like to do that now. If not, that's not a problem. Let me know if you're unable to answer any questions, and I will move on to the next one.

### **Questions**

#### **BACKGROUND**

1. What is your current role? Academic background and professional background?
2. Is your current role related to culture and race issues, how so?

#### **PERSONAL MOTIVATION**

3. Why are you interested in culture and race issues and how did this interest begin?
4. Have you ever experienced racism? In what form and where?
5. What can be done about racism and prejudice, in your opinion?
6. What motivated you to begin your platform, online?

#### **CULTURAL EMPATHY**

7. How do you define race in your own terms?
8. How do you define culture in your own terms?
9. How do you define empathy in your own terms?
10. Are you familiar with the term cultural empathy? If so, how do you define cultural empathy in your own words (as broad or narrow a definition as you think is appropriate)?

11. What sort of media and technology do you find yourself consuming to gain a greater understanding about topics related to cultural empathy?
12. What sort of voice do you put out in the world regarding cultural empathy? Is this voice online or in-person?
13. What medium do you prefer to use when discussing themes and topics related to cultural empathy?
14. What is an effective use of media and technology when it comes to cultural empathy?
15. How do you measure impact of the message you share online?

#### **SUCCESS & CHALLENGES**

16. How do you define success when it comes to your online platform?
17. Tell me about a challenging instance when your voice was not heard when speaking about cultural empathy on your platform?

#### **APPLICATION**

18. How do you define a successful example of cultural empathy? Give an example of this and where and how it was achieved?
19. How do you define a failed example of cultural empathy? Give an example of this and where and how it was achieved?
20. Do you have “comments” enabled on your media platform? If so, what are your thoughts about the comments received on your platform?
21. Are these comments positive or negative? Do you respond? If so, how?
22. What skills and/or resources are required to achieve cultural empathy?
23. What sort of role do leaders and influencers online have to play in order to encourage cultural empathy online?

#### **CONCLUSION**

24. In an ideal world, what would you wish to achieve when it comes to cultural empathy?
25. What skills do we need to achieve cultural empathy?
26. Is there anything else you would like to share about this topic?

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# APPENDIX B

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## **Appendix B: Expert Interview Guide - Organizational Experts**

### **Introduction**

Thanks for agreeing to chat with me today. I just want to take about an hour of your time to talk to you about your experience when it comes to cultural empathy and how you use the power of online media to propel your vision and opinions about how we speak about cultural empathy.

I won't disclose any identifiable information based on this interview. If I do consider including any specifics in my final Major Project Research report, I will ask for your permission first.

If you're comfortable with me recording this call for note-taking purposes, I'd like to do that now. If not, that's not a problem. Let me know if you're unable to answer any questions, and I will move on to the next one.

### **Questions**

#### **BACKGROUND**

1. What is your current role? Academic background and professional background?
2. Why are you interested in this space and how did your interest begin?

#### **PERSONAL MOTIVATION**

3. What are your most important values?
4. How important is diversity to you, and what value does it bring?
5. What are you doing to make sure everyone feels included?

#### **ORGANIZATIONAL INFORMATION**

6. Can you share data on the organization's diversity?
7. How diverse is the executive team?
8. Is the leadership team committed to diversity?
9. Are the company's recruiting efforts supporting a diverse culture?
10. What diversity, inclusion, and cultural competence training do the direct managers have?
11. Who holds direct managers accountable to diversity and inclusion measures?



12. Does your company have any diversity programs in place?

#### **CULTURAL EMPATHY**

13. How do you define diversity in your own terms?
14. How do you define culture in your own terms?
15. How do you define empathy in your own terms?
16. Are you familiar with the term cultural empathy? If so, how do you define cultural empathy in your own words (as broad or narrow a definition as you think is appropriate)?
17. What sort of media and technology do you find yourself consuming to gain a greater understanding about topics related to cultural empathy?
18. What is an effective use of media and technology when it comes to cultural empathy?

#### **SUCCESS & CHALLENGES**

19. How do you define a successful example of cultural empathy at an organization you have worked at? Give an example of this and where and how it was achieved?
20. How do you define a failed example of cultural empathy at an organization you have worked at? Give an example of this and where and how it was achieved?

#### **APPLICATION**

21. How would you like to see cultural empathy practiced in the workplace? What does this look like?
22. What skills and/or resources are required in an organization to achieve cultural empathy?
23. What role does leadership have to play when creating a culture in an organization that is culturally empathic?

#### **CONCLUSION**

24. In an ideal world, what would you wish to achieve when it comes to cultural empathy?
25. What skills do we need to achieve cultural empathy?
26. Is there anything else you would like to share about this topic?

# APPENDIX C

## Appendix C: Thematic Framework

1.0 Concepts				
1.1 Diversity	1.2 Inclusion	1.3 Empathy	1.4 Culture	1.5 Cultural Empathy
1 - Human difference 2 - Every time you have two different people in a room 3 - Diversity of thought, perspective and innovation	1 - Most powerful feeling you can give to a child or adult is being included 2 - Importance of inclusivity workshops across Canada 3 - Bridge groups of mainstream Canadians to indigenous people	1 - Compassion 2 - Being able to be in someone else's shoes 3 - Acknowledging person's lived experience and understanding where they are coming from	1 - Shared sense of values and often involve a lot of customs and values 2 - evolves and changes 3 - fluid and ever-changing 4 - norms and behaviours created by a collective group of people	1 - Getting to the root of and unifying culture 2 - Humanity & Inclusion 3 - Being able to understand the things that make a person who they are due to their culture 4 - Ability to accept another culture's point of view 5 - someone who is totally different and still being able to connect with that person

2.0 Role of Social Media		
2.1 Global Reach	2.2 Anonymity	2.3 Social Media Influencers
1 - Global platform 2 - Reach more people and realize that experience is not unique to Canada 3 - Able to relate to different people and make connections	1 - Online trolls who harass and threaten 2 - Your message is prominent when people don't know where it is coming from	1 - Using community guidelines on social media 2 - Online community has evolved organically 3 - Zero tolerance for troll comments

3.0 Organizational Culture		
3.1 Human Resource Practices	3.2 Role of Leaders & Influencers	3.3 Attitudes & Behaviours
1 - It is not enough to put money to a program, but initiate systemic changes in the organization 2 - Setting up appropriate workshops & training 3 - Reverse Mentoring 4 - Investment in education and youth initiatives creates jobs	1 - Who gets to play in the boardroom? Who gets to play in decision-making? 2 - Setting the tone from the top 3 - Leaders have a responsibility to amplify voices of minorities & marginalized groups 4 - Leadership must be passionate about the change 5 - Strategically look ahead	1 - Break down barriers to create a more inclusive, tolerant environment where people think, behave, act, communicate with intention 2 - Unlearning prejudice, combating stereotypes, promoting acceptance, education around appropriate terminology

#### 4.0 Engaging in Conversations

4.1 Storytelling	4.2 Highlight similarities
1 - Use my own stories when I speak 2 - Passionate about storytelling and using stories and other mediums to make people understand and empathize 3 - Use a personal approach and open up about us with a personal story	1 - Create a common ground and recognize what is the same 2 - Intersecting diversity and see what people have in common and focus on similarities, not the differences 3 - People have more similarities than differences and focus on these similarities

5.0 Human-centric approach to cultural empathy		
5.1 Looking within	5.2 Everyone has a role to play	5.3 Attitudes and Behaviours
<p>1 - First acknowledge the work you must do on your own first</p> <p>2 - Everyone should go through some type of personal work to acknowledge other cultures and their own experiences relative to other cultures</p> <p>3 - Connecting with your own roots and histories</p>	<p>1 - Dominant culture cannot turn a blind eye and remain silent</p> <p>2 - Depends on who you are and what you are comfortable with in respect to being an online influencers</p> <p>3 - Some people straight up do not know and this Politically Correct culture does not help</p> <p>4 - Allyship: supporters of marginalized groups</p> <p>5 - Takes other ethnic groups to encourage and build each other up</p>	<p>1 - Everyone is human and this should come across on my online platform</p> <p>2 - Using humour to talk about cultural empathy is high risk and high reward</p> <p>3 - Laughter is the best medicine</p> <p>4 - Need to be willing to be different and mull in the uncomfortable</p> <p>5 - Removing unconscious bias</p>



# APPENDIX D

## Appendix D: Descriptive Accounts

2.0 Role of Social Media		
2.1 Global Reach	2.2 Anonymity	2.3 Social Media Influencers
2.11 Making connections 2.12 Creating an impact 2.13 Amplifying others' voices 2.14 Accessibility	2.21 Hate speech and trolls 2.22 Call-out culture 2.23 Safety and security	2.31 Online community culture 2.32 Moderated discussions 2.33 Strict privacy settings

3.0 Organizational Culture		
3.1 Human Resource Practices	3.2 Role of Leaders & Influencers	3.3 Attitudes & Behaviours
3.11 Employee Training Programs 3.12 Recruitment Practices 3.13 Reporting and Analytics	3.21 Skills 3.22 Setting Organization's strategy	3.31 Executive Leadership 3.32 Human Resources 3.33 Managers



5.0 Human-centric approach to cultural empathy		
5.1 Looking within	5.2 Everyone has a role to play	5.3 Attitudes and Behaviours
		5.31 Free of unconscious biases 5.32 Mindfulness 5.33 Humour 5.34 Comfortable with discomfort

# APPENDIX E

## Appendix E: Explanatory Accounts

3.0 Organizational Culture		
3.1 Human Resource Practices	3.2 Role of Leaders & Influencers	3.3 Attitudes & Behaviours
<b>3.11 Employee Training Programs</b>	<b>3.21 Skills</b>	
3.111 Unconscious Bias 3.112 Mindfulness 3.113 Internal/External Facilitator	3.211 Accountability 3.212 Authenticity 3.213 Open Mindedness 3.214 Respect & Humility 3.215 Comfortable with discomfort	
	<b>3.22 Setting Organization's strategy</b>	
	3.221 Strategy 3.222 Planning 3.223 Execution	





RACHNA KUMAR