



TRUE MOSAIC RACIAL RECKONING SERIES

# LIFE BEYOND THE LABELS

*The Role of Intent and Inclusion in Authentic Brand Connections*

SEPTEMBER 2021

  
FLEISHMANHILLARD

TRUE  
**MOSAIC**

# FOREWORD

---



We adopt labels at an early age. It's part of how we discover patterns, learn naming and grouping, and generally what guides our communication and understanding with everything around us, from objects and events to feelings and people.

When it comes to how we describe and define who we are — complex, multidimensional beings — our deep and rich personal identities can pose a challenge in terms of how we navigate a world filled with labels that don't always fit.

We can't live entirely without labels. We depend on them as a source of knowledge, to inform, to categorize, to simplify, to set expectations, and sometimes even to rationalize understanding and decisions. But it's also true that when we use labels to describe human beings, or a group of people presumed to be the same, we can lose sight of how commonalities and differences coexist to uniquely shape people and different points of view.

I'm bilingual and multicultural, and how I self-identify and connect with my heritage has changed over time because of life experiences, greater self-awareness, increased sense of purpose and even behavior changes. I am certain it's ever-shifting, and I live those nuances every day in the work that I do and the relationships I have with my colleagues across our global network and in our FH Hispania and True MOSAIC practices.

As you read through this report, you'll discover not just the dynamics of the multiracial, multiethnic and diverse cultures that make up the U.S. Hispanic and Latino communities, you'll recognize that identity for all human beings is complex and sometimes contradictory. There are a multitude of dimensions beyond a family tree that influence our upbringing, feelings and the experiences that shape how we see ourselves, how others see us and how we think others see us.

It's never been more important for companies to authentically engage with their employees, customers, communities and other audiences. To do this, we must be intentional in leaning into the complexity, creating room for the questions, and allowing inclusion to inspire curiosity, critical thinking, imagination and the pursuit of deeper understanding.

If we challenge ourselves to look beyond the labels, to search for inclusive answers and to believe in the power of perspectives, we are empowered, in the process, to be more inclusive and to create genuine connections.

**Isabel Abislaiman,**  
*Senior Vice President & Senior Partner*  
*FleishmanHillard New York*



# KEY FINDINGS

---

**41% of Hispanic respondents identified as bicultural, compared to 17% of the general population.**

*Why This Matters: Hispanic and Latino identities in the U.S. are multifaceted and defined by lived experiences that regularly shift across cultures, languages and everything in between.*

**More than three-quarters (76%) of Hispanic and Latino respondents reported being told that people of Hispanic or Latino origin are "all the same." Of these respondents, 74% indicate being frustrated when this occurs.**

*Why This Matters: Recognizing and embracing the multiracial, multiethnic and multicultural composition of Hispanic and Latino identities is essential to true inclusion and genuine connection.*

**While only 6% of surveyed respondents self-identify as Latinx, 34% feel proud and 35% feel happy when others use it to refer to them.**

*Why This Matters: How people self-identify may not be a precise reflection — nor does it have to be — of their reaction to how other people identify and perceive them.*

**Hispanic/Latino respondents indicated that feeling safe was the most important factor to feeling supported.**

*Why This Matters: Employers have an important role to play in creating connections to ensure employees feel they can trust their surroundings and bring their true selves to work each day.*

**56% of Hispanic respondents say they have deeper relationships with brands based on how they address Hispanic-focused issues compared to 41% of the general population.**

*Why This Matters: Connecting with diverse communities goes beyond tailoring messages and surface-level outreach. Demonstrating that you care about what's important to them matters just as much.*

*FleishmanHillard TRUE Global Intelligence conducted an online survey conducted within the U.S. among 1,008 general population and 1,001 Hispanic/Latino community members. The research was fielded from August 18 to September 1, 2021. The survey collected feedback around the perceptions of the Hispanic/Latino community specifically on topics of identity, culture, social issues and brand expectations.*

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

When Labels Don't Fit.....	5
The Impact of Inclusion on Research and Intelligence.....	8
Behind the Data: The Uncomfortable Truth.....	11
Language to Support Hispanic/Latino Inclusion.....	14



# WHEN LABELS DON'T FIT

---

*By Daniela Velázquez, Vice President  
FleishmanHillard St. Louis*

One box does not fit all.

People are complex, with manifold ways of looking at the world and how they view themselves. For Hispanics in the U.S., the words we use to define ourselves are associated with our personal stories, experiences and when we, or our families, immigrated to the U.S.

FleishmanHillard's research for this report reflects what many Hispanics already know: Identity is multifaceted, and culture is important. Forty-one percent of Hispanic respondents identified as bicultural, compared to 17% of the general population.

Companies that develop a nuanced, culturally authentic understanding of this community benefit: 56% of Hispanic respondents say they have deeper relationships with brands based on how they address Hispanic-focused issues compared to 41% of the general population. More telling is when people misunderstand: 74% of Hispanic respondents who hear comments about Hispanics being "all the same" find such comments frustrating.

## **When Descriptions Are Personal**

If descriptions of identity shape who we are, what happens when they don't fit? In Spanish, there is a phrase, "Ni de aquí, ni de allá." It means "not from here, nor from there." It describes a feeling Hispanics share of being perpetually misunderstood. Much of our daily existence is adapting to a world that refuses to see us or acknowledge us fully: Our survey found 33% of Hispanics have their names mispronounced at least weekly.

In our survey, we identify our respondents as Hispanic/Latino. However, these words are incomplete descriptions for us. Our research found 73% of the respondents describe themselves as "Hispanic," and 42% describe themselves as "Latina/Latino." Only 3% describe themselves as "Latine," and 6% describe themselves as "Latinx."

# WHEN LABELS DON'T FIT

---

## An Evolving Language

Language evolves to how we use it, and Spanish speakers are developing different ways to be inclusive.

The Spanish language has a gendered construction. Activists have advocated for the use of the letter “e” to move beyond the binary of the masculine “o” or feminine “a.” In 2020, The Royal Spanish Academy said the “e” was “[artificial and unnecessary](#).” The academy, founded in 1713, is mostly male and mostly white.

The reason for the “X” in “Latinx” is to be nonbinary and gender-neutral. However, critics of the “X” say that it’s an imposition of the English language on Spanish.

## The Origins of Cultural Complexity and Colorism

The 20+ countries across the Americas and the Caribbean that are considered Hispanic have one thing in common: They were Indigenous civilizations colonized by Europeans and were part of the transatlantic slave trade.

When the Spanish arrived in 1492, there were about 15 different [Indigenous empires](#). Traders brought enslaved Africans from at least seven large regions in [West Central Africa](#) and from 48 distinct [ethnolinguistic groups](#). The Indigenous, European and African cultures mixed across two continents, with topographies that ranged from the mountains of the Americas to the tropical archipelagos in the Caribbean Sea.

In colonial Latin America, the Spanish classified people by race and class in a social system known as “Sistemas de Castas,” or [caste system](#). It’s where words like “[mestizo](#)” and “[mulatto](#)” come from. This system described how people looked, governed how they should act and how much they should pay to the monarchy in Spain. In today’s Hispanic community, colorism occurs when those with darker skin experience discrimination.

## Afro-Hispanics and Anti-Blackness in the Hispanic Community

In the U.S., 24% of Hispanic/Latinos identify as Afro-Latino, Afro-Caribbean or Latino with African descent, according to a [2014 survey](#) from Pew Research Center. This was the first time a nationally representative survey in the U.S. asked the Latino population directly whether they considered themselves Afro-Latino. This is not new in Hispanic culture, where Blacks contribute greatly to traditions.

# WHEN LABELS DON'T FIT

---

Afro-Hispanics toggle between perceptions of Blackness in the Hispanic community and in the broader U.S. The Black Lives Matter movement was a catalyst to face colorism in the Hispanic community.

## **Yes, It's Complicated. That's No Reason to Shy Away.**

We acknowledge there's no way to capture all the experiences that shape Hispanic identity in the U.S. succinctly, and for many, this truth can be difficult to comprehend. It can feel too complicated, too hard to wrap your mind around. But the truth is that complex doesn't have to be difficult if you bring the right perspectives and intentional focus to the table.

Embrace the unfamiliarity and lean into the nuance — it's the intersection that we urge you to drop into. Your company will make better decisions and create stronger connections if you do.



# THE IMPACT OF INCLUSION ON RESEARCH AND INTELLIGENCE

---

*By Rachna Mulchandani, Research Director  
FleishmanHillard Chicago*

Research gives us the intelligence and tangible data to paint a holistic picture about attitudes and behaviors of specific groups, communities and markets. This data can inform the actions companies take to better reflect the needs and values of their key stakeholders. When research is gathered correctly — that is, with inclusion factored in on the front end — companies can leverage targeted and more accurate intelligence.

Inclusive research — by which we mean research that is representative of and accessible to all involved, including researchers and research participants — starts with putting people at the center of the research rather than simply making them objects of the research. Directly obtaining feedback from the target audience(s) provides a truer grasp of their views and preferences and represents their lived experience(s) with greater depth and dimension.

When you approach research inclusively, you are showing your audiences that you celebrate who they are — their identity, abilities, culture, community and beliefs — and that you're invested in understanding their challenges and needs. This facilitates deeper connections with audiences that may, in turn, influence their attitudes, behaviors and perceptions.

With research insights that go beyond a one-dimensional view of the audience, companies can create products or positions that cater to existing customers and reach new ones through inclusive representation that resonates. An inclusive approach also works to drive employee engagement and talent acquisition, with an in-depth understanding of the identities and experiences that people bring with them into the workplace and that impact their sense of belonging at work.

The intent in both cases is to assist companies and leaders with gathering culturally relevant information that leads them to make more informed strategic decisions. This, ultimately, creates a more memorable and personal experience for customers and employees, while also highlighting the brand's sensitive approach to issues or specific communities.

# THE IMPACT OF INCLUSION ON RESEARCH AND INTELLIGENCE

---

But what does it mean to truly make research more inclusive?

- **Sampling:** As researchers, we need to be mindful of the shifts in general population trends as these have a direct impact on how we sample populations. Monitoring demographic trends informs how we should design the research sampling plan to ensure it is representative of the target audience. Setting parameters on criteria such as age, sex/gender and region, as well as other variables such as race, ethnicity and sexual orientation, so that the sample represents the specific group at large.
- **Questionnaire Language:** The vocabulary you use in research plays a role in shaping how people engage and respond. We want to ensure that, as researchers, we're using the most inclusive language possible to show sensitivity and reflect a greater range of communities and experiences. In keeping with that, the response choices we provide should always strive to be as all-encompassing as possible, so respondents don't inadvertently feel excluded. As an example, when asking about family structure, use "parent, guardian or caregiver" instead of "mother/father" to be inclusive of single parents or same-sex families.
- **Localizing:** When designing research in global markets, it's especially important to use terminology that's culturally relevant and offer the survey in languages appropriate for that market. It is also important to have a native speaker or an expert for the target market localize the survey questions, so they are applicable to the respondents in that market.
- **Equal Access:** Researchers have an important opportunity, and responsibility, to challenge traditional approaches and commit to accessible and inclusive research practices. The majority of surveys today are conducted online, which in some cases can exclude the opinions of those who have no access to internet connections or limited bandwidth in their home. If this is a significant portion of the audience, alternative methods of data collection should be offered such as surveys over the phone or in person. Inclusive research takes a multimodal approach to ensure that the audience is truly represented.

Having and cultivating an inclusive viewpoint should be part of every step in a company's decision-making process — from the insight that informs strategy to the execution that delivers impact.

# THE IMPACT OF INCLUSION ON RESEARCH AND INTELLIGENCE

---

At FleishmanHillard, through TRUE Global Intelligence, our insights and analytics practice, and True MOSAIC, our global diversity, equity and inclusion practice, these inclusive research principles guide us to question assumptions, remove bias, and strive harder to understand the context and nuances that shape what audiences think and how they behave. The intent to include makes us better humans, communicators, researchers and partners.



# BEHIND THE DATA: THE UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTH

---

*By Lauren Winter, Global Managing Director Consumer Culture  
FleishmanHillard UK*

Let's start with the fact that we need data — there's no room for gray there. In its simplistic form, data gives us somewhere to start — a proof point of what needs to change, what's needed to change and ultimately what was then changed. But it's in those black and white numbers where we can sometimes get lost and fail to see the finer and all-important shades of color that make the picture of life.

In our need to feel comfortable, we seek patterns, apply the numbers in ways that make us feel good and persuade ourselves about the realities they reflect. The numbers are our security blanket, comforting us with objectivity and filling in gaps that can feel uncomfortable or inconvenient to face.

Let's look at comfort. What a pleasing word that describes a soothing state of being. However, our penchant for comfort may be holding us back from truly digging deep beyond data and facing the reality of other experiences that reflect a more uncomfortable picture. Ultimately, we can run the risk of inhibiting the personal growth necessary to connect with a more diverse range of audiences.

You can start with a data point that, on its own, is accurate, but without the right voices and perspectives to bring it to life, the execution can fall flat. Think of any number of recent brand campaigns that missed the mark. Odds are, the human stories data can't illustrate and emotionalize weren't factored in, resulting in work that lacked nuance, perspective and consideration.

The impact of these missteps can range from a campaign or a brand being dismissed as irrelevant to a swift and sustained public backlash with long-term damage done to brand reputation. Working within culture, we aim to look at more than the numbers. What drives people, what makes them tick, considering what they've been through and therefore how they feel.

For instance, when FleishmanHillard surveyed members of the U.S. Hispanic/Latino community,

# BEHIND THE DATA: THE UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTH

---

we weren't only trying to find out what impacts the ways they perceive a brand. We were looking to explore how they relate to their cultures and heritage. Seeking clarity and understanding of the experiences that frustrate them and the social issues they care most about. Among their range of insights, they told us:

- They firmly believe in keeping and cultivating their cultural heritage (83%)
- Microaggressions, assumptions and discrimination based on stereotypes, even if they aren't experienced often, are extremely or somewhat frustrating:
  - 48% have been told to "go back to your home country" (76%)
  - 56% encounter people who assume they don't have an education
  - 68% have heard comments about people of Hispanic/Latino/a origin being "all the same"
- Racism (81%), violence against women/#MeToo (79%) and gun control (78%) are three of the issues they are most concerned about

Now, imagine a brand wants to reach this audience starting with another finding from our research: 32% of Hispanic/Latino respondents would look at brands more favorably if they showed Hispanic/Latino people in their advertising.

Without the context of the insights above to prompt nuanced thinking, there's likely to be a severe lack of understanding on the different lived experiences present across Hispanic and Latino communities. It would be all too easy for a brand to fall into the traps of stereotypes and incorrect assumptions by latching onto an easy-fix data point.

The key here is brands connect and enable communities when they dig deep into culture and tap into the human truths that resonate. Getting specific and drawing on individuals and organizations can help bridge you closer to the true human experience of these communities. Surface-level understanding doesn't cut it — being seen to care is no longer just cool, it's a must!

# BEHIND THE DATA: THE UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTH

---

As humans, we have a choice: follow our natural inclination for what's comfortable or challenge it. To do the latter, we have to embrace the complexity of the human picture. Our experiences, multifaceted and unique to every individual, demographic and cohort, cannot be solely explained by data.

Data is the black and white that helps frame and bring the picture into focus. But the deepest truths and most impactful insights can be found in the combination between the data and our experience. That gray matter, the combination of the data and how we actually behave and experience life, is where the true colors and vibrancy of life in all its glory are actually found.

It's important that our analysis goes beyond the quantitative points and dives into the qualitative roots of why things are the way they are. Doing so leads to real human truths and accurate data-driven insights that elevate brand impact and create opportunities to make lives better through the work we do every day.

And that means knowing more than just the numbers. That steady effort of service to make lives better through the work we do means hearing and listening to those who've had that lived experience. It means supplementing the numbers by looking at the underbelly of culture — the



# LANGUAGE TO SUPPORT HISPANIC/LATINO INCLUSION

---

Inclusive language is critical in light of harmful phrases and rhetoric that have perpetuated systemic inequality. Many of the common phrases used to describe the Hispanic/Latino community in Spanish and English, and even a mix of the two, stem from a deep history of systemic oppression, yet some have unfortunately become so normalized.

As brands and leaders, the words we use both in the workplace and to engage with our audiences have a profound impact on how successful we are in becoming truly inclusive. While some of these terms are used to reference the past, we should be more careful about the terminology we use in the present and moving forward.

In our True MOSAIC Inclusive Vocabulary Workshop and Inclusive Language Guide, we highlight the importance of precision to create a culture of inclusion and leading with deep knowledge about your audience and how they prefer to identify. For example, with the nuanced nature of the Hispanic/Latino community, leading with terms like “biracial” or “multiracial” when referring to someone of two or more racial backgrounds is important. Understanding the differences between Hispanics, Latinos (Latino/Latina) and Latinx, and leading decisions with an audience’s identity preferences in mind is key.

We encourage clients to take the time to learn and understand what is behind the words we use, as context in language is critical. For more information on the Inclusive Vocabulary Workshop and Inclusive Language Guide, please reach out to Jennifer Atkinson: [Jennifer.Atkinson@FHhighroad.com](mailto:Jennifer.Atkinson@FHhighroad.com).

True MOSAIC, FleishmanHillard's global diversity, equity and inclusion practice, brings lived experience and professional expertise that spans geographies, cultures and contexts in order to counsel organizations on how to navigate an increasingly complex operating environment centered on questions of equity and inclusion. We'd love to start a conversation with you — please reach out to Adiya Mobley ([adiya.mobley@fleishman.com](mailto:adiya.mobley@fleishman.com)) and Leela Stake ([leela.stake@fleishman.com](mailto:leela.stake@fleishman.com)).

*Special thanks go to Adiya Mobley, Alyssa Alamillo, Annie Piasecki, Ana Hernandez Quiros, Bia Assevero, Caleb Dawkins, Chelsey Watts, Daniela Velázquez, Elliot Rylance, Isabel Abislaiman, Lauren Winter, Leela Stake, Marina Stein Lundahl, Olivia Biele, and Rachna Mulchandani, for their contributions to the research, perspectives, counsel and design featured in this report.*