@BlackAtAuburn: A Preliminary Content Analysis of Social Media Counterspaces

Alethia Russell
Indiana University Bloomington

ABSTRACT

Following the surge of the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial justice movement spurred by the police-involved murders of unarmed Black individuals in the summer of 2020, Black students and alumni of predominantly white institutions (PWIs) began to share personal narratives of their experiences with racial trauma on their campuses. In this preliminary analysis, I examine the posts of the @BlackAtAuburn Instagram account to explore themes that may illuminate why these students organized an online counterspace to navigate racial trauma at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. I explore preliminary findings pointing to student distrust in using university resources during heightened racial tensions.

Keywords: resilience, counterspaces, COVID-19, racial justice, social media

Following the murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor, Black students had to navigate secondary trauma associated with watching racialized violence against their community and the responsibilities of being a student (Hernández & Harris, 2022). Senior administrators at colleges and universities received backlash after releasing statements disavowing racialized violence and restating community values (Batty, 2020; McKenzie, 2020). The university statements rarely addressed the core problem – its campus' contributions to systemic racial trauma.

Considering these events, Black students and alumni of predominantly white institutions (PWIs) moved online to share personal narratives of their racialized experiences on campuses. On June 1, 2020, Auburn University's president released a statement committing the institution to "confronting systemic racism" faced by the Black community (Whitaker, 2020). The first @BlackAtAuburn anecdote was posted

on July 7 of that year. There was no direct response or acknowledgment from the university for approximately one week during which time more than 50 student anecdotes were shared and tagged.

This study uses content analysis to interrogate how Black students created and collaborated on institution-specific Instagram accounts (i.e., "@BlackatUniversity" pages) to unpack their individual and collective experiences with racial trauma on campus. In this preliminary analysis, I examine the posts of one such Instagram account to explore how students organized an online counterspace to navigate racial trauma at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. I ask what themes are present in the @BlackAtAuburn account to illuminate why students organized the digital counterspace.

DEFINITIONS AND FRAMEWORK

Case and Hunter's (2012) counterspace framework aligns with the core tenet of Critical Race Theory that amplifies the unique perspectives and lived experiences of people of color (Harper et al., 2009). Counterspaces are physical or online spaces that allow in-group members to employ resilience strategies (Case & Hunter, 2012). Black students' experiences with racism and race-related stress positively encourage them to seek racial cohesion by fellowshipping in ways that support their psychological resilience (e.g., building community in residence halls, Black Student Unions, multicultural centers, etc.) (McDougal III et al., 2018; Patton et al., 2011). However, the COVID-19 pandemic prevented these culturally relevant gatherings in the summer of 2020. Thus, Black students may have developed alternative modes for gathering as a defense mechanism and a means to cope with or challenge their experiences on campus (Case & Hunter, 2012; Solórzano et al., 2000). Although social media safely maximizes access to information and community building (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Linder, 2019), it also heightens exposure to more explicit racial violence and hatred (Duggan & Brenner, 2013; Tynes et al., 2013).

I look at @BlackAtAuburn as a counterspace to see how Black students creatively used digital community building to respond to racial trauma. Research on the normalization of violence inflicted on marginalized communities - for example, the murder of unarmed Black citizens - is scarce in the trauma literature (Hernández & Harris, 2022; Imad, 2022). This type of violence represents chronic trauma, or repeated, prolonged encounters with stressful and dangerous situations. However, the term vicarious trauma captures trauma that people indirectly witness or experience and may be especially salient when the witness and victim have a shared racial identity (Hernández & Harris, 2022). In the summer of 2020, Black students were exposed to chronic vicarious trauma following the highly publicized murders of Black people and recurring images of police brutality (Schumann, 2022).

@BlackAtUniversity pages were critical counterspaces that responded to perceptions that institutions' public statements of support were disingenuous and were similar to other student social media campaigns that localized conversations about racial inequity. For example, in 2014, students across the nation used the hashtag #StandWithMizzou in solidarity with Black students at University of Missouri following months-long protests exposing the toxic racial climate on campus (Bayer,

2015; Pearson, 2015). In the same year, the Harvard University student social media campaign #ITOOAMHARVARD featured images of students with handwritten examples of the microaggressions they experienced on campus (George Mwangi et al., 2018). In each of these examples, Black students turned to social media to share their experiences and build cohesion.

METHODS

In this project, I employed content analysis to identify intentions, focus, trends, and patterns in communication (Kleinheksel et al., 2020) among the 144 posts to the @BlackAtAuburn Instagram account which were made between June 1, 2020, and August 31, 2020. Data collection on this account began in February 2022. I reviewed and adhered to Instagram's privacy and use agreements, adopting Paulus and Wise's (2019) recommendations on identity protection, ethical considerations, and informed consent recommendations to Instagram. The data's public nature voided the need for IRB approval and informed consent. However, data were used in alignment with the account's stated mission. Instagram's Privacy Agreements make these data unsearchable in search engines since @BlackAtAuburn only fits one of Instagram's three indexing criteria (Instagram on the Web, n.d.). An Instagram account is required to view the entirety of its content.

While these data are public, the identities of the account administrator(s) and submitters are unknown. The administrator(s) minimally credited submissions to reflect the submitters' university affiliation (e.g., student, alumni), likely as a safety precaution. Preliminary limitations come with working with anonymized data; for example, it is unclear if the 144 posts reflect unique individuals or result from multiple submissions from a vocal minority. Data analysis began by reading and rereading the testimonials. My positionality as a Black woman and alumna familiar with the institutional context informed my analysis. Because content analysis favors the researcher's interpretation of the themes and anecdotes (Kleinheksel et al., 2020), it is important to note that some submissions on the @BlackAtAuburn account chronicle events that occurred during my time as a student. I therefore can provide personalized context. The remaining analysis consisted of inductively reviewing each post for themes that could account for why this account built an online counterspace to discuss traumatic racial experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Future analysis will continue to expand the preliminary findings in this article.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

@BlackAtAuburn was created for Black students to voice concerns when their university inadequately addressed the racial climate at the height of the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and violence against Black people. The account provided an anonymous avenue for counter-storytelling that mitigated the risks of contracting COVID-19 and potential institutional retaliation (Linder et al., 2016). The account administrator(s) requested attention from university stakeholders by tagging relevant Instagram handles such as @auburnoid_ and @auburnstudents, which are the official accounts for Auburn University's Office of Institutional Diversity and Division of

Student Affairs respectively. Captions were used as a forum to encourage comment section dialogue and solicit feedback (See Figure 1).
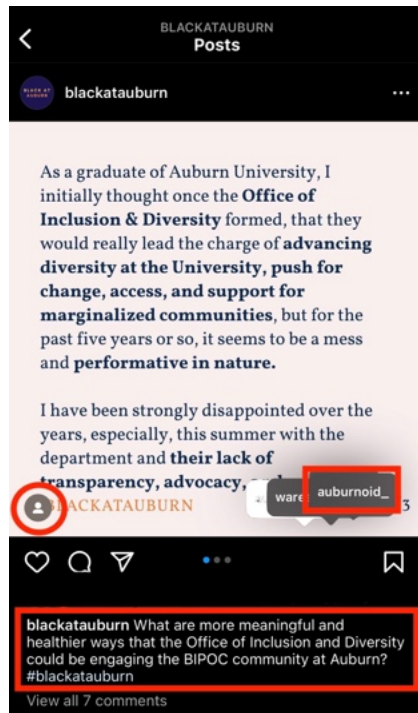

Figure 1: August 19th Post to @BlackAtAuburn

Note. The image highlights key elements of posts to @BlackAtAuburn - the tagging icon and respective account handles (bottom left and bottom right), and the caption. This image was edited to redact usernames/photos from the comment section. From @BlackAtAuburn. https://bit.ly/BAAUAugust19

Respondents used @BlackAtAuburn to share their experiences with racial trauma on campus and detailed how negative peer and faculty experiences prevent them from trusting or utilizing university reporting resources.

Distrust in Campus Staff and Resources

The @BlackAtAuburn anecdotes demonstrate how respondents navigated a lack of trusted supervisors and faculty members on campus. For example, a Black student videographer was asked not to film the Confederate regalia and portraits in the background of the Student Government Association (SGA) president's fraternity residence when completing an assignment for his on-campus job. He reported feeling "a huge sense of anxiety" and "didn't want to speak up about it" in fear of retaliation but spoke through the @BlackAtAuburn account in hopes of improving others'

experiences. In another post, one student shared how the university's counseling center failed to assist them following prior racial incidents:

> After experiencing racial violence on campus, I made an appointment with the Student Counseling Services to get help after the incident. After my intake, I was assigned a counselor who was White. That was fine with me, but when I told the counselor that I wanted to discuss what had happened to me, they said: "they weren't equipped to talk about that" ("that" being race, I guess) and asked if we could focus on other things in our sessions.

Another post shared how faculty did not support or empathize with them during the political unrest as suggested in university outreach.

> Being Black at Auburn is sitting in your doctoral seminar class and the professors don't acknowledge the social climate of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Tony McDade, and Elijah McClain, but expect you to write and meet deadlines like there isn't civil unrest, a cross [was] burned less than 10 miles from campus . . .

These testimonials illuminate stark contrasts in the actualized experiences of Black students despite claims of support and commitment to fostering inclusivity. The anecdotes also depict how attempts to seek assistance following the university's prescribed resources had lasting negative impacts on students' college experiences. As one alumnus' submission shared, "We chose to [thrive] at Auburn, but most of the time, Auburn didn't choose us back."

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Despite the risks associated with digital spaces (Tynes, 2013), they can be important counterspaces for Black students (Case & Hunter, 2012; George Mwangi et al., 2018). This study extends the literature by identifying @BlackAtUniversity accounts as digital counterspaces. The mere creation of such an account effectively carved a unique space for Black students to connect and debrief unashamed and unidentified. Relative to activism centered on issues outside of the institution, students who protest the policies and culture of a university face additional backlash from administrators and fellow students (Linder et al., 2016). The intentionality to anonymize respondents' stories mitigated distrust in formal reporting and fears of retaliation creating a more flexible, accessible pathway to a safe space. Tagging relevant departments to increase visibility was important during the pandemic since many institutions limited operations without considering what the lack of physical counterspace would mean for Black students in the height of political unrest (Shaw Bonds & Callier, 2022).

In the last two years, Black students were continuously exposed to vicarious trauma linked to Black people being killed while performing the same mundane activities as them – like jogging or wearing a hoodie – and then had to return to campuses that would create more wounds.

Assess and Adjust Institutional Responses

In practice, campus administrators should look to these @BlackAt pages for guidance on how to develop more holistic, trauma-informed responses to environmental racial stressors (Shaw Bonds & Callier, 2022). They should assume that racial incidents are occurring, even when there are few or no formal reports. Engaging students who organize counterspaces can assist in research, crisis response, and evaluation efforts.

Digital counterspace organizing communicates the importance of offering more thoughtful, accessible connections and outlets to support Black students on PWI campuses. Practitioners assessing campus climate should evaluate hidden data-rich spaces such as these social media accounts. Administrators should build connections with counterspaces by consistently reviewing and responding to students in the avenues that appeal to them to restore students' trust in formal reporting channels.

Digital counterspaces allow institutions to improve their crisis response by encouraging activism and engaging students in a safe feedback loop. Administrators should examine every space their students seize to voice their needs and promptly respond with actions. The findings of this preliminary analysis raise a few questions:

1. How does mishandling one student's case impact the reporting habits of their peers?

2. What support has our most vulnerable populations asked for in times of crisis, and how can we actualize that need?

3. Are institutions offering adequate resources to respond to students experiencing racial trauma without retraumatizing them?

This preliminary study illuminates how institutions can leverage online counterspaces to disrupt the cycle of racial trauma occurring on their campuses. Start by reading the testimonials and comments on the @BlackAtAuburn account. Determine if your student body has organized similar counterspaces. Then, seize this opportunity to center seemingly hidden student voices in your campus climate and programmatic strategies.

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ALETHIA RUSSELL, MA, is a PhD student in the Department of Education Leadership and Policy Studies at Indiana University Bloomington. Her major research interests lie in the areas of high-ability Black women postsecondary education, resilience, and Black students in postsecondary honors programs. Email: aleruss@iu.edu