

Online Learning as a Safe Space: The Experience of Racialized Students in Postsecondary Classrooms

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The accelerated shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed unexpected benefits for racialized students in postsecondary education. This research examines the experiences of racialized students in online learning environments, focusing on feelings of safety, authenticity, and belonging. A mixed-methods approach, incorporating surveys (N=132) and interviews (n=10) with undergraduate and graduate science students at a Western Canadian university, identified key themes, including the creation of "safe spaces" in online learning. Participants noted that reduced visibility of their racial identities—achieved through features such as camera-off functionality and name changes—minimized exposure to microaggressions and biases. While some students found online learning isolating, they valued its anonymity and freedom from discrimination. However, the data also highlight broader systemic issues, such as institutional racism, profiling, and the emotional labour required to navigate academic spaces. The findings underscore the need for inclusive and equitable online and in-person learning practices.

Keywords: Online learning, Racialized students, Safe spaces, Equity

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Introduction

During the pandemic, there was an accelerated shift to online learning. While this was a difficult shift for most students, the pivot to online learning revealed some unexpected positive attributes for racialized students. In my research, racialized refers to all people who identify as non-white or not part of Canada's dominant culture or group (Adams, 2020; Ngo, 2006). From the survey responses in my Master of Arts (N=132), some students (n=5) noted that online learning made their racial identities less visible; for example, they were able to turn off their

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cameras and/or change their names, which meant they were less subjected to microaggressions from classmates and instructors. The guiding research question that informs this paper is: What are the experiences of racialized students regarding online learning?

In this research brief, I will explore the topic of online learning environments for racialized students, noting mainly how safe racialized students report feeling in online learning spaces and to what degree they feel that they can show up as their authentic and whole selves (Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2019; Sublett, 2020; Turner, 2022). Education that is inauthentic or transactional depersonalizes the learning experience of many students and perpetuates the dominant power structures of white institutions and executives in postsecondary learning, leaving racialized students unsupported and their experience undervalued in their education journey (Gomez et al., 2011; Paredes-Collins, 2012; Sublett, 2020). Authenticity in learning is present when students believe they are behaving congruently with who they “really” are or what they are “really like.” However, there is some contention about whether authenticity can be quantified or measured (Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2019, pp. 133-134). In my research, I define safe spaces as a place where racialized students feel secure, supported, and able to be themselves. These safe spaces could be physical, visual, or conceptual (Turner, 2022). Without authenticity and safety, racialized students are unable to bring their whole beings into the classroom and contribute to a robust learning environment (Deol, 2013). Race impacts feelings of belonging and can negatively impact student learning (Sublett, 2020). Creating an online and in-person environment that is inclusive and supportive of racialized students is necessary to increase students’ sense of belonging. Students who feel like they belong to the learning culture are more likely to complete their post-secondary education (Turner, 2022). The importance of safe online

spaces becomes more critical as many learning institutions embrace online learning (Sublett, 2020).

This research brief should be of interest to those involved in equity, diversity, and integrity (EDI), and equity and social justice work, and those working to move the conversation beyond compositional diversity (increasing diversity through visual or numeric components) in postsecondary research (Paredes-Collins, 2012).

Background of the Problem

A current review of students' postsecondary online learning experiences highlights the need to build virtual learning spaces that allow students to share their authentic selves, regardless of race, gender, or sexuality (Turner, 2022). While racialized students may report feeling safer in online settings; some studies suggest that this sense of safety is often achieved through an inauthentic or partial sharing of students' whole selves (Avraamidou, 2020). Researchers have shown some online environments to be heteronormative and sexist (white, male, and neurotypical) as the norm of a successful student, which further perpetuates inequalities (Eaton & Turner, 2020; Swauger, 2020). Sublett (2020) and Deol (2013) note that racialized students must hide who they are to have a good experience, also known as 'code-shifting'. One student noted the difficulty they found in participating in their in-person courses: "It's certainly easier to speak out in the online setting as chat functions can be used at any time, whereas in-person classes can be difficult to contribute" (Survey Participant #1). Racialized students in STEM must navigate others' perceptions of their value and ability in their chosen fields. To deal with this, students protect or hide their authentic selves by learning the 'right' ways of being in an academic space in ways misaligned with their authentic selves (Habig et al., 2020).

Methodology

My research is qualitative ethnography with a critical theory focus. Critical theory allows power structures to be problematized and challenged, while qualitative ethnography grants the researcher a narrative format in sharing students' experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

There were 132 survey respondents, and ten interviews were conducted with undergraduate and graduate science students at a Western Canadian university who identified as racialized. Five themes were noted during the data analysis: Representation/Recognition, Emotional Labour and Emotionality in Science, Safe Spaces, Geographical and Historical Identity, and Navigating University Norms. For this paper, only safe spaces will be reviewed, as they fit the theme of the special issue (Turner, 2022).

How Racialized Students Navigate Online Spaces

As previously noted, safe spaces are places where racialized students feel secure to be themselves, and the space can encompass multiple modalities (Turner, 2022). A safe space allows students to feel comfortable exploring who they are in all aspects of their lives, in and outside their role as students (Avraamidou, 2020). It may provide access to others with similar interests (Deo, 2013). Sublett, 2020 notes that valuable energy is wasted dealing with microaggressions and impacts a student's degree progression. Racialized students benefit from and thrive in environments that allow them to share their culture and experience (Sublett, 2020). The students interviewed expressed that they often felt unsupported and targeted during their studies, and some even felt that safe spaces did not exist on the postsecondary campus:

“I do not look west Asian physically and have had students make insensitive/ racist comments about Afghan people in front of me. I feel that my voice is not heard because

my peers view me as undeserving of my place as a student. I am not assuming this opinion, I have had 2/30 students in my cohort say this to me directly” (Survey Participant #2).

“Main thing that comes to mind is that for years (I did my undergrad here as well), I would get stopped by security on a fairly regular basis. I once had them block in my car and call the cops because they accused me of driving away from security on a day I wasn't even on campus -- they thought I was homeless. Security would follow me off campus to my car. They would stop in and ask me questions if I was there late at night. It didn't stop until a white friend who worked for another security company confronted them about it. Things have been fine since then but none of that should've happened” (Survey Participant #3).

These two excerpts reveal experiences of isolation, helplessness, and demoralization by peers and leaders alike. Safe spaces on campus can help reduce violence against racialized students (Deo, 2013). Profiling and bullying by security are concerns that give some context as to why racialized students may feel safer online and were noted as concerns by other students when sharing their experiences in the survey and interviews (Turner, 2022). Other students noted how turning off their cameras gave them distance from any biases their instructor might have:

“Now that classes are online there is no way for profs to know what I look like. That takes away any personal bias that may exist. The only thing that could affect it is if they made accusations based on your name” (Survey Participant #4).

“Yes. It's far more isolating but has been helpful in reducing the amount of hostility I am encountered with. I find it more peaceful to be able to focus on my studies online, and

become a good scientist, free from criticism based on my experiences as a Person of Colour or appearance” (Survey Participant #2).

The above examples show how some racialized students find online spaces isolated but will embrace the isolation to experience safety because their identities can remain anonymous, and they remain free of discrimination (Turner, 2022).

Conclusion

In considering racialized student experience, it is important not to essentialize (or assume) that their experiences are all the same. However, similarities did show up when reviewing interviews and survey data from my research (Adams, 2020; Ngo, 2006; Turner, 2022). Had it not been for the pandemic, this facet of racialized student experience might not have been readily visualized or observed at this particular institution. Institutional leaders need to work harder to shift the culture to include student voice in decision-making so that racialized student experience is valued and included in the work being done. While these students may find places to feel safer, they still lose out on positive student experiences within the larger campus community (Deo, 2013). This relates to why some students from my research study saw online learning as a safe space in their education journey. Instead, as educators within an institutional setting, we need to create spaces for students to feel free to share their true selves. When universities listen to the experiences of racialized students and use this to enact meaningful policies and practices, the culture can shift towards spaces of belonging, including online environments. Institutions that do not value their students' voices and experiences leave them powerless and disengaged from their education journey (Turner et al., 2022). Thus continuing the cycle of harmful or damaging experiences on campuses for racialized students.

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