



University of  
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Amherst

## **Tweeting The Black Travel Experience: Social Media Counter-Narrative Stories as Innovative Insight on #TravelingWhileBlack**

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Authors	Dillette, Alana;Benjamin, Stefanie;Carpenter, Chelsea
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# **Tweeting The Black Travel Experience: Social Media Counter-Narrative Stories as Innovative Insight on #TravelingWhileBlack**

## **Introduction**

Domestic and international exploration has long been an area of interest for academicians and industry professionals alike. However, these travel journeys have historically been plagued with significant barriers for African-Americans or Blacks in the United States<sup>1</sup>. “No Negros allowed...We serve Whites only...No coloreds allowed...Coloreds must sit on the balcony...” These are just a sampling of some of the well-documented captions that Blacks had to endure during the segregation-era of Jim Crow. During this time, Blacks in the U.S. faced major roadblocks while traveling and continued threats of violence induced by the deeply embedded history of racism in the country.

Fast-forward 30 years, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 ended the legal discrimination of Blacks in public spaces, including travel venues such as hotels, restaurants, recreation and amusement parks. Currently, the African-American travel market is witnessing sustained and continued growth. According to Mandala Research firm (2011), 17% of African-Americans take one or more International trips a year and account for \$48 billion of the U.S. travel market. Although this market continues to experience upward growth, the relationships African Americans have with travel are still complex and multi-faceted and research in this area is severely lacking (Alderman, 2013; Carter, 2008). Therefore, the goal of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the Black travel experience from a traveler’s perspective. Analyzing over three hundred tweets using the hashtag *#travelingwhileblack*, qualitative content analysis was used to answer the research question: *In what ways do Black travelers use Twitter to express their travel experience?*

## **Literature Review**

Amongst the small archive of research on African-American tourism, some important studies to note include that of Phillip (1994), Carter (2008), and most recently, Lee and Scott (2017). Both Phillip (1994) and Carter (2008) conducted studies highlighting the differences between Black and White travelers using household travel survey data. Unfortunately, both studies found that Black travelers continue to participate in many of the travel behaviors established during Jim Crow segregation. For example, both studies found that Black travelers are more likely (than White travelers) to visit destinations solely based on the recommendations from family and friends (Carter, 2008; Phillip, 1994).

Carter (2008) found that Blacks travel more frequently in large groups in comparison to Whites. Black travelers have also been considered to be less adventurous when it comes to trip itineraries, activities and accommodation choices (Phillipp, 1994). In 2015, Tucker conducted a qualitative study amongst 12 African-American tourists which provided information suggesting that marginality, ethnicity and issues related to discrimination impact their travel attitudes and behaviors. Similarly, Lee and Scott (2017), through a Vignette technique, identified four major themes: racial discrimination during travel, fear of racism, storytelling and safety instructions, social reproduction of the fear of racism, and race-related travel choices that affect African-Americans travel behaviors.

Existing studies have paid relatively little attention to the racism that today’s Black travelers experience in tourism contexts (Lee & Scott, 2017). However, recently Willis (2015)

explored how African-American female college students deal with macroaggressions and intersectionality of their study abroad experiences. From this qualitative study, Willis found that the women were the targets of macroaggressions, isolation and other negative interactions from their host countries providing an example from a study abroad trip to Italy:

The White people would stay to themselves ... And the rest of the people that were not White, we would be in a group ... And so we would kind of discuss amongst ourselves as ethnicities, as the minority in a way ... that 'How come they just don't hang out with us?' And we would invite them and they don't come. (Willis, 2015)

Although the women felt like race affected their study abroad experiences, they also felt other factors, such as gender, language ability, and sexual orientation influenced their trips (Willis, 2015). Willis posits that the idea of "intersectionality" is an important factor to consider when examining African-American students' experiences and argues for more research around African-American study abroad experiences in order to draw attention to the quality of these programs for marginalized students.

African-Americans showed their resilience through creating travel agencies and personal retreats (Foster, 1999). Recently, Blacks showed their resilience through the preservation, promotion and use of cultural heritage sites. For instance, Gotham (2011) explored the strategies that tourism organizations and influencers have used to revitalize and reconstruct New Orleans into a cultural heritage site for African-Americans. Gotham posited that creating a cultural site that emphasized racial heritage tourism can be a tactic of resistance against marginalization and provide a proactive strategy to affirm African-American culture (Gotham, 2011).

## **Methodology**

Qualitative research methods were chosen for this study due to the shortage of research about this phenomenon. Additionally, using a qualitative approach allowed in depth exploration of the data, leading to the discovery of unique stories and interrelated themes among the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Data for this study was collected through the social media platform Twitter™ using the hashtag #travelingwhileblack to locate tweets discussing the phenomenon of interest. Criteria for analysis included publicly shared tweets only, tweets written in the English language, and tweets published within a one-year period from September 2015 to October 2016. These criteria were chosen to protect the privacy of those users who chose to tweet privately, the familiarity of the researchers with the English language in addition to sourcing tweets that covered a full 12-month time span. The data collected included 328 tweets all including 140 characters or less that was inputted into the software NVivo.

## **Data Analysis**

Exploration of the data collected for this study followed the steps of Braun and Clark's (2006) thematic analysis using an inductive approach. Utilizing an inductive approach allowed the data to drive the themes identified, rather than attempting to identify a priori themes within the data (Saldana, 2016). Critical race theory (CRT) was used as a theoretical framework as a means of understanding the phenomenon at large. The foundation of CRT begins with the idea that race and racism are endemic and permanent rather than a marginal factor in defining and explaining the lived experiences of individuals, therefore, racism looks ordinary and natural to

persons in the culture (Bell, 1992; Russel, 1992; Delgado & Stefancie, 2017; Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009). Beyond this foundational pillar, CRT suggests the following propositions:

- (1) White supremacy and racial power are maintained over time.
- (2) Race is a social construction of society.
- (3) Different minority groups are racialized at different times.
- (4) No one person has a single, unitary identity such as “Black” or “White”.
- (5) The experiences of people of color are critical to understanding, analyzing and teaching about race.

Although CRT was used as a theoretical framework, it does not prescribe specific a priori themes that could be used to *fit* the data. Instead, CRT provided a context that aided in the analytic process that first involved rich description of semantic themes followed by an attempt to speculate at the significance of latent meaning and relationships amongst the data. Therefore, in order to strengthen the trustworthiness of the data analysis, a process of blind coding and comparisons was undertaken. The process of analyzing the data included the following six phases of inductive thematic analysis adopted by Braun and Clark (2006) familiarization, generation of initial codes, search for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report. The act of storytelling has provided CRT with a highly effective mode of framing “lived experience of racialization in America and the sharing of others” (Price, 2010, p. 159). Whereas counter-storytelling, which invokes an oppositional narrative practice, is also part of CRT. Utilized by underrepresented voices, counter-storytelling narrative is used to “build up, as well as break down, community, shared understandings, and deeply held beliefs” (Price, 2010, p. 160). The influential power of storytelling is strategically deployed by CRT to elicit empathy, to convince, and to change opinions (Delgado, 2000; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Furthermore, CRT, and CRT methodologies are now globally informing data collection and analysis within academic research across disciplines. For example, CRT was first applied to the field of education in 1995 by Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate.

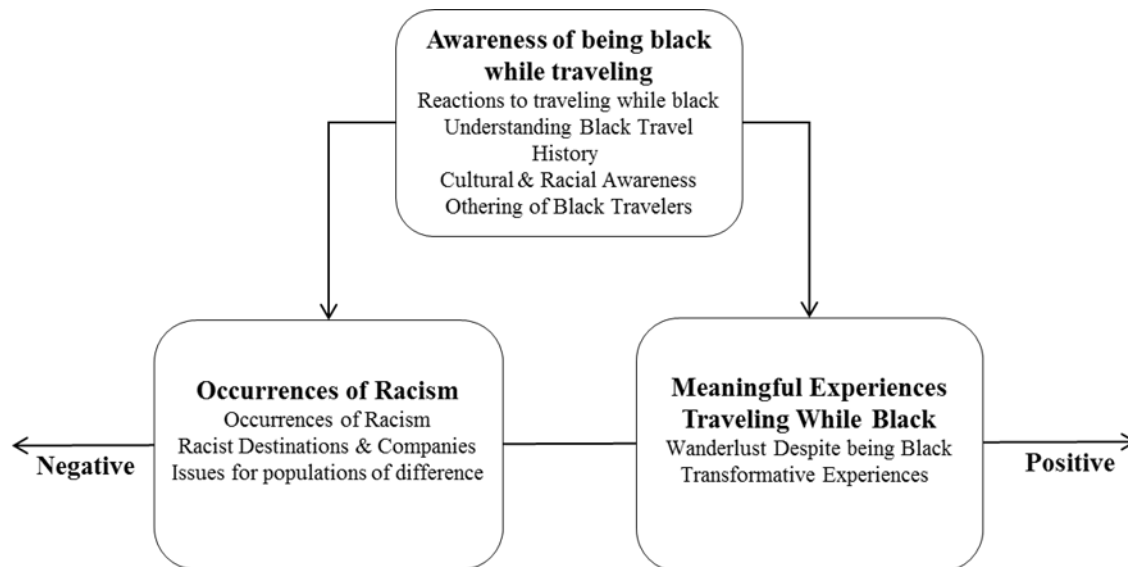
Working separately within the same dataset, we used NVivo 11 (a qualitative text mining software) to generate a preliminary list of codes across the entire dataset. A coding comparison query was tabulated using a tool provided by NVivo 11. Across all 38 codes, the agreement percentage amongst all researchers ranged from 95.8-100%, which well exceeded the minimum percentage needed to determine inter-coder reliability. Tweets assigned across the 38 codes were further examined to aid in identifying operational definitions to describe each code assigned to the data set. Each separate code was reviewed for similarities with other codes. Amongst the 38 codes six were re-named and combined with other codes of remarkable similarity, resulting in a final list of 30 codes along with their operational definitions.

Together, we sifted through each code, identifying an overarching theme for groups of codes. For the first cycle of coding methods, each author individually analyzed and coded each tweet from Twitter users (Saldana, 2016) using In Vivo and Value Codes. Codes were grouped together in themed categories based on similarities. Resultant from this process, nine initial themes were developed to represent thirty thematic codes. Based on the revised list of codes, and the nine initial themes, we reviewed their list of themes and worked together to refine the specifics of each theme, thus creating a synoptic theme chart representing the overall story of the analysis.

## **Results**

The data gathered from this research revealed three major emergent themes: (1) occurrences of racism (2) awareness of being Black while traveling and (3) meaningful experiences traveling while Black (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: The relationships between the lived travel experience of Black Travelers**



Within this figure are intertwined relationships among the three themes. At the center, the theme ‘*awareness of being Black while traveling*’, exposed both positive and negative experiences among Black travelers. We discovered that this theme encompassed a deep-rooted fear of travel, embedded in the history of travel for Blacks in addition to the vulnerability, anxiety and worry felt about traveling while Black. However, we found that this theme also encompassed positive experiences of cross-cultural exchange fueled by racial and ethnic differences. As a result, this awareness of deep-rooted fear and vulnerability was confirmed by occurrences of racism. Conversely, this awareness was also the catalyst for meaningful and transformational experiences among Black travelers.

### Category 1: Occurrences of Racism

The theme ‘*Occurrences of Racism*<sup>ii</sup>’ included a total of 173 coded instances including *incidences of racism* (n=131, 27.5%) incidences with *racist destinations or companies* (n=33, 6.9%) and instances around issues for *populations of difference* (n=9, 1.9%). Travelers expressed several instances of frustration and racial profiling that included issues with hospitality and tourism companies like Spirit Airlines and Airbnb, issues with travel destinations that evoked hostility and fear, issues related to police brutality in the United States and its effect on travel and lastly, issues related to the intersectionality of gender and sexuality amongst Black travellers. Select tweets below reveal some of these frustrations amongst Black Travelers.

“7 passengers kicked off Spirit Airlines flight at LAX; Some claim racial discrimination #travelingwhileblack.” – Twitter User 1

“Vaca's off to a pleasant start... but trying to unsee the confederate flag flying outside a home 5 min down the road #travelingwhileBlack.” - Twitter User 3

*“Bahamas issues a #USTravelAdvisory Caution: beware of #TravelingWhileBlack in the U.S. This is a first: Bahamas warns travelers to U.S. about ‘shootings of young black males by police officers’.” – Twitter User 5*

*“And unfortunately in some places my disability overshadows my race or even my gender. Other Black travellers get treated badly but I’m seen as this disabled fragile thing. I’ve noticed it outside of big cities. #TravelingWhileBlack.” – Twitter User 7*

## **Category 2: Awareness of being Black while traveling**

The theme ‘*Awareness of Being Black While Traveling*’ included a total of 136 coded instances including *reactions to traveling while Black* (n=59, 12.4%), *understanding Black travel history* (n=33; 6.9%), *cultural and racial awareness* (n=22, 4.6%) and *othering of Black travellers* (n=22; 4.6%). Black Twitter users shared various stories detailing their awareness of how tourists, residents, and other people reacted to their traveling. Further to this, the Green Book was a major reference when referring to Black travel history. Numerous twitter users reflected on their experiences of ‘*othering*’ because of their skin color. The tweets extracted from the data exemplify the exasperation and frustration Black people felt when traveling.

*"You're American? You look African." Duh. I'm sick of having to teach strangers in various countries about the trans-Atlantic slave trade. #travelingwhileblack – Twitter User 8*

*#TravelingWhileBlack #DiningWhileBlack both remain serious realities. Traveling While Black: Is it Time to Bring Back the Jim Crow-Era 'Green Book' for Black Travelers? - Twitter User 12*

*“Look at this (crowd of people in China taking unsolicited photos of a group of black men)... so many people trying to take photos of us.” - Twitter User 13*

These snippets of stories provide just a glimpse into the lived experiences of Black travelers. Although ‘*Awareness of Black Travelers*’ cannot be directly attributed to racism, the idea that Black travelers have to deal with this kind of attention and intrusion from strangers presents an issue for the travel and tourism industry at large. The question becomes, how can destinations attract Black travelers while these types of experiences are being shared across social media?

## **Category 3: Meaningful experiences traveling while black**

The theme ‘*Meaningful Experiences*’, included two main categories, *wanderlust despite being Black* (n=70, 14.7%) and *transformative experiences* (n=98, 20.5%). These experiences encompassed a range of reflections shared regarding excitement and wanderlust for travel, cross-cultural exchange, the Black travel community, learning and education through study abroad, empowerment and transformation through travel.

*“First time away was to Ethiopia and Nigeria while at Howard. Incredible experience that sparked my wanderlust #travelingwhileblack.” - Twitter User 19*

*“Seeing other cultures, values (and) ideals, made me think a lot more critically about the life I want to live #travelingwhileblack.” - Twitter User 21*

One of the main tenants of CRT commits to transforming and liberating marginalized groups through social justice reform and non-traditional methods of storytelling (Atwood & López, 2014). These findings lay important groundwork for understanding the rise of the Black travel movement itself, and its connection to CRT.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

The relationship between African-Americans and travel and tourism is a complicated and disputed one given the segregated and discriminatory history in the U.S. However, the Black tourism market is growing fast yet still under-represented within academic research. Thus, it is our goal to explore how Black travelers are experiencing travel and tourism currently in order to become social justice advocates. The use of counter-narrative storytelling, as a means of data collection, challenges dominant claims of meritocracy within the travel and tourism landscape. Thus, using Twitter as our platform to collect data, along with the fairly new phenomenon of hashtags, we found that we were able to gain access to the ‘*counter-narrative*’ of a group that has not normally been heard in the past.

The CRT counter story telling method adopted in this study helps to illustrate the process by which the travel and tourism atmosphere reinforces a White-male gaze. By analyzing how Black tourists are traveling, we reveal how experiential knowledge of Black travelers can contribute to the learning environment of the tourism industry. CRT suggests that experiential knowledge of travelers of color brings different perspectives that will hopefully, move toward eliminating all forms of subordination and create a more just society (Villalpando & Delgado, 2002). Thus, travel and tourism can become a vehicle for greater racial understanding providing a glimmer of hope for race relations in the travel and tourism sphere (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Although there were major themes extracted from the data that suggest issues around discrimination, racism, and othering, there were still discussions around meaningful transformational experiences. These counter-narrative stories helped to paint a different picture around the Black travel experience. Twitter users expressed that, unfortunately, occurrences of racism while traveling are not a thing of the past, and in fact, still present a serious issue for many Black travelers. These findings support the notion argued by critical race theorists that racism is built into the fabric of our society, and maintained by officers of the law who are trained to profile people of color as criminals, out of place, or suspicious (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Continuing to share these narratives online will help strengthen the community and educate travelers about the world around them. Above all, Black travel narratives demonstrate that writing, particularly self-writing in transnational contexts, in many ways reflects commitment to self-possession through evolving definitions and shifting perceptions of the world (Evans, 2014). Through narratives, tweets, forum posts, videos, blog posts, photos and



other media, Black travelers can show each other, as well as the world, how important the Black travel movement is. Karia Talley, a contributor on Blavity, writes about using Black travel on social media as a form of resistance against doubts and oppressions, "It's saying I can take on and explore the world without anyone controlling my body, my freedom of movement nor my freedom of choice to go wherever I please" (2017). Hopefully, Destination Marketing Organizations and hospitality and tourism marketing/advertising firms can hear the experiences of people of color, and like CRT, help to teach other travelers about the issues marginalized groups face while traveling.

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<sup>i</sup> Black Americans, Black, and African-Americans will be used interchangeably. These terms refer to American citizens of African descent but in differing ways that citizenship has been achieved. Black Americans is an older encompassing term for African-Americans, and immigrants from the continent of Africa, the Caribbean, and other locations through the African diaspora. While Black is a political identity that acknowledges an understanding of a shared experience of injustice. By extension of this identity, APA, MLA, AP and other format styles have slowly embraced the respect that should be given to various racial and ethnic groups and how they wish to be labeled. Thus, any mention of those groups ought to reflect this respect and distinction through the capitalization of their group name (i.e. Black, White, African-American, Latinx, Syrian, or Lakota).

<sup>ii</sup>Populations of difference refers to marginalized groups including women, people of color, LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Bisexual and Queer), and disabled populations.