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Recent Zoom bombings prompt reflection on the handling of hate crimes on-campus



Written by Shruti Rajkumar

Junior Santana Coste was drawn to Emerson because of its LGBT+ friendly campus. But, during her freshman year, she realized the lack of intersectionality within the LGBT+ cultural organizations on campus made her feel out of place as a gay Latino. In September, she created Spectrum, a cultural organization dedicated to fostering a space for BIPOC LGBT+ students who may have felt uncomfortable in predominantly white spaces.

But in their first meeting, that space was violated. On Sept. 24 at 6 p.m., Spectrum members experienced a Zoom bombing where three unknown people using aliases invaded the space and hurled homophobic and racist slurs. Three additional bombers were waiting to be admitted into the Zoom until Coste removed the offenders from the meeting.

"I am a very hyper visible queer person, so I deal with a lot of harassment [and] I'm kind of used to [it], but the fact that it's not just one person, but a group of people put in the effort to invade a virtual space that I created made it feel a lot worse," Coste said in an interview with The Intersectionalist. "To come into that space with the planned intention to cause harm..it was just such a shock."

The use of online platforms such as Zoom for remote learning and virtual meeting has spurred a new form of trolling referred to as Zoom bombing, a new type of hate crime. According to a [recent article](#) by Vice, Zoom bombings have become an increasing issue where members of marginalized communities such as the Black community and the LGBT+ community have been disproportionately targeted at virtual gatherings.

After the Spectrum hate crime, Coste informed Jamaica Siroky, the Assistant Director of Intercultural Student Affairs for LGBTQIA+ Student Services, about the bombing. She also reached out to Director of Student Engagement and Leadership Jason Meier and Executive Vice President of Student Government Association Jehan Ayesha-Wirasto in hopes of tracking down the Zoom bombers.

"I heard about the Spectrum Zoom bombing via social media. I emailed [Santana] to get more details and figure out how we can support Spectrum and the larger community of students of color who identify as queer as well," Ayesha-Wirasto said in an interview with The Intersectionalist. "I'm very open to admitting that SGA has failed students of color. We could have done better."

A second Zoom bombing occurred on Oct. 8, during a Zoom Karaoke Night event hosted by Asian Students In Alliance, the cultural organization for Asian-identifying students. Ayesha-Wirasto, who was at the meeting, said a group of unknown individuals joined the Zoom event, shared pornographic videos and yelled out anti-Black racial slurs.

The following day, Dean of Campus Life Jim Hoppe sent an email to the Emerson community acknowledging the two Zoom bombings and providing suggestions from the Informational Technology Help Desk regarding [how to keep meetings safe](#) from Zoom bombings. Some of these tips include passwords to access the meetings and locking the meeting once everyone has joined.

"The truth is, when you connect to Zoom, you're connecting to the Internet. And unless you use security controls like waiting rooms, disabling screen sharing..theoretically, if they have the link they can join," Frankie Frain, the Director of Information Security and IT Infrastructure said. "Security controls are not trivial. They're really important to your safety and to the safety of the attendees of your meetings."

Frain and other IT staff have looked into both Zoom bombing incidents to try to identify the bombers. Based on what they uncovered, Frain said the Zoom bombers for the ASIA event likely weren't Emerson students, as their IP addresses were located all around the world due to the usage of a virtual private network. He is unsure of whether they were the same Zoom bombers in both incidents.

"It's so much more likely that it's one of several billion people who is looking to attack this sort of thing, than it is somebody within our own community," Frain said. "They're gonna get caught, because they're probably not hiding their IP address successfully."

Frain said IT cannot identify an individual solely based on an IP address. Police authorities are only capable of doing so after the College sends them the municipality and the Internet Service Provider for a specific IP address. At the time this article is being written, Emerson's IT help desk does not have the IP addresses from the Zoom bombing of Spectrum but they do have them from ASIA. IT won't be able to obtain the IP addresses from the Spectrum Zoom bombing due to the meeting being held through a non-Emerson Zoom account. The security controls Zoom offers for a personal account and student account are different, Frain

said.

Student Government Association held a Student Assembly meeting on Sept. 29 to continue drafting a legislation in response to hate crimes on campus. This process falls under a new branch of SGA known as the Legislative Review Board, which was created as a result of the new constitution.

Ayesha-Wirasto, who is also the chair of the Legislative Review Board, said the legislation so far includes calling for organizations to have an internal review of their constitutions from an intersectional lens, asking the college to address community healing and develop a form of prevention for such hate crimes and microaggressions.

"I feel sometimes [that] the things I do [are] small, but if we can just change the language in the handbook and [clarify] what is labeled as a hate crime and explicitly saying that the college does not condone this...I think it will be symbolic," Ayesha-Wirasto said.

These Zoom bombing incidents are subsequent to multiple on-campus hate crimes that happened spring 2020, which were brought to the community's attention via email from administrators.

One of the incidents involved an Asian stereotype written on the door of an Asian student's dorm room, while the other involved pencil-drawn swastikas on the walls of a stairwell in Little Building. The administration did not disclose the identities of the offenders or if they faced any consequences.

Ayesha-Wirasto said although the incident that targeted the Asian community happened first, the college addressed these hate crimes only after the anti-semitism incident.

"A lot of people like to vilify the college as if they're not doing anything, but they are, they just could be doing more," Ayesha-Wirasto said. "But I wonder what kind of communication from the administration would matter. I just keep going back to the question of, 'what am I expecting from my peers and the college?' or 'what kind of change will come out of that?'"

Coste said she feels that the college hasn't taken strong enough action against incidents that harm BIPOC students in the past.

"They'll accept us into the school, they'll use us for advertising, they'll hold us up on a pedestal, but then when it comes to protecting us, and taking care of us in the wake of traumatic situations, all of a sudden, they can't be too mean, they can't be too harsh," Coste said. "It feels like our trauma isn't worth putting a consequence on a white person. If you don't want us raising absolute hell, then do your job and get rid of the people who are traumatizing your marginalized students."

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