

THE EXPERIENCE OF FEMALE JOURNALISTS OF COLOR ON TWITTER

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## **Abstract**

Since pivoting into a micro-blog platform, Twitter has transformed the journalism industry where it's now considered a common job requirement for many journalists in the U.S. While social media brought many perks, including providing female journalists of color (JOC) a platform that is not historically afforded for them, it has also created unprecedented levels of challenges for this group of journalists. Using intersectional feminism theory, this study aims to explore the experience of female JOCs on Twitter: what challenges they face both externally and internally of their newsrooms, and how they navigate these unique and often overwhelming issues.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Twitter has become a professional norm for journalists by providing a new way to communicate and by serving as a useful tool beyond reporting (Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2012). The *Washington Post*'s David Fahrenthold used his Twitter to crowdsource for his Pulitzer-winning coverage on then-presidential candidate Donald Trump's charity efforts (Golshan, 2016). Then-*Boston Globe*'s Wesley Lowery was also recruited by the *Washington Post* to its national team partly because of his use of Twitter in his reporting on Aaron Hernandez's murder trial (*Washington Post*, 2014).

But as Twitter becomes increasingly a requirement and expectation in journalism, journalists from historically underrepresented and marginalized groups (even Lowery himself)—especially female journalists of color—are seeing a dark side.

Female journalists and female journalists of color are disproportionately targeted and harassed on Twitter and other social media platforms to the point they are “afraid to open Twitter (Klein, 2021; Tobitt, 2021). These targeted and vicious attacks often take aim at their gender and sexuality instead of the quality of their work (Masullo, 2018).

Beyond the public harassment, female journalists of color are also facing a new level of scrutiny within the newsroom for their tweets. When Kobe Bryant died in a helicopter crash in January 2020, *Washington Post* reporter Felicia Sonmez tweeted a story about Bryant's sexual assault allegation with no commentary. A backlash swiftly followed: Sonmez received death threats for her tweet, then the *Post* suspended her. The *Post*'s executive editor Martin Baron called her tweet “a real lack of judgement” (Abrams, 2020).

In 2019, Aída Chávez, an immigrant reporter at *The Intercept*, posted screenshots of a lengthy email from her editor Kevin Dale warning her of being unprofessional for tweeting about her immigrant father. Dale called the tweet “inappropriate” and implied such a tweet “may lead to removal from the program” (Hsieh, 2019). According to Dale, Chávez’s lived experience was not considered objective.

The conversation about objectivity and its traditional White- and male-centric ideals reached its boiling point in summer of 2020 when the unrest protests against police brutality swept through the country. In May, then-*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reporter Alexis Johnson tweeted several archival photos showing trashed parking lots, a man passing out in his truck and a sea of broken bottles in the North Shore area. Her caption reads, “Horrorific scenes and aftermath from selfish LOOTERS who don’t care about this city!!!! ..... oh wait sorry. No, these are pictures from a Kenny Chesney concert tailgate. Whoops.”

The tweet went viral, garnering more than 156,000 likes and 46,000 retweets in two days. Because of it, Johnson, who is Black, was taken her off protest coverage, as management said she’d violated the paper’s social media policy (Langmann, 2020) and that her tweet was showing her opinions (Folkenflik, 2020). On the same day the editors suspended Johnson from stories involving protests for her tweet, a White colleague of hers was also reprimanded for calling a man accused of vandalizing and looting “a vulgar slang word” on Twitter; he continued on covering the protests (Folkenflik, 2020).

Around the same time, Twitter also erupted with accounts from Black and brown journalists of color across the country, detailing toxic work cultures that enabled racism, discrimination and microaggression toward them (Jennings, 2020).

This analysis seeks to explore the challenges facing female journalists of color , from both inside and outside the newsroom, as well as the approaches they're employing to navigate these challenges.

To understand these issues, I reached out to 30 female journalists of color working in traditional newsrooms, digital outlets, radio stations, TV stations and trade magazines across the country. Eight agreed to participate. The journalists had career ranging from three to 20 years of experience. Seven of them were reporters, one was an editor. One journalist had their account on private. Four of them belonged to a union in their newsrooms, three had had freelancing experiences. Four journalists identified as Latina, two as Asian, and two as Black. Their identity is shielded to protect them from potential retaliation.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Intersectionality Theory in Journalism

According to *The American Heritage Guide to Contemporary Usage and Style* (2005), the origin of the term “person of color” can be traced back to 1796 in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The term “colored” was used in reference to Black Americans who were enslaved after the Civil War, but it became outdated and offensive by the mid 20th century. In 1988, in a *New York Times* op-ed, William Safire penned, “(b)ut we can all agree that the phrase ‘people of color’ has never been more in vogue.” The term, at this point, “is a phrase encompassing all nonwhites.”

“Politically, it expresses solidarity with other nonwhites, and subtly reminds whites that they are a minority” (Safire, 1988).

The phrase “women of color,” according to Ross (2011), was coined by a group of black women at the International Women’s Year Conference in 1977. The phrase was also used to express solidarity between non-White women politically.

Black feminist and critical race scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) coined the term and theory of “intersectionality” to describe the struggles facing this group of people, especially for Black women. She later expanded on the theory and concluded that intersectionality exists in three forms: structural, political, and representational intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). Crenshaw argues that “feminism must include an analysis of race if it hopes to express the aspirations of non-white women,” as the theory aims to explore the oppression of women of color in society. It also acknowledges that because all women have different experiences and political identities, they face different levels of discriminations (Crenshaw, 1989).



This theory allows for research to further study and understand how Black women—and women of color—face the many levels of systemic discrimination and violence in society that their White peers don't (Runyan, 2018). The theory has since been well-accepted and deployed into a number of disciplines beyond the boundaries established in the 1980s (Cho et al, 2013; Runyan, 2018). For example, Richardson and Taylor (2009) used the theory as framework to point out the one-dimensional definition of sexual harassment that was historically only applicable to White women. The research shows how the sexual assault experience of women of color is often erased and invalidated in the workplace. Gaston and Smith (2018) also supported their research into the inequity for women of color in STEM using intersectionality theory. They concluded that intersectionality helps to challenge the status quo that prevent the advancement of women of color in STEM.

Using intersectionality theory, Nishikawa, Towner, Clawson, Rosalee and Waltenburg (2009) investigated the idea of the “illusion of inclusion” in newsrooms—the idea is that minority journalists aren't able to improve coverage on minority communities because journalists of color are forced to abide to “professional norms” that have been set through the lens of White males. The study concluded that many of these journalists are still able to contribute their diverse background and perspective to the coverage, but it also pointed out the additional burden for them to find a balance between being minorities dissatisfied with mainstream norms and professional journalists—burdens that won't weigh on White journalists in their daily jobs.

Meyers and Gayle (2015) agreed with the additional burden that journalists of color face in their daily work in a study that set out to determine whether African

American female journalists make a conscious effort to increase racial and gender diversity in their coverage. The study concluded, from in-depth interviews with 10 African American female journalists, that these journalists adopt various ways to resist stereotypes of Black people in the news as a sign of resistance. But it also noted that not all Black journalists in all situations are willing to fight against normative news constructions of race and gender out of fear of harming their careers.

### **Online harassment as part of the job**

Even before Twitter, female journalists, especially female journalists of color, are often the target of harassment from their audience (*Media Report to Women*, 2012). This is a phenomenon that is now even more amplified in the age of social media and online comment (Finneman & Jenkins, 2018; Tobitt, 2021).

*The Guardian* analyzed over 1.4 million comments made on its website (2016), concluding that articles written by female journalists got more blocked comments—messages that are either abusive or disruptive—across all sections. The ten writers who got the most online harassment were all either women or people of color (*Guardian*, 2016).

In 2018, Amnesty International released a multi-series project detailing the reality of online harassment toward female professionals and female journalists. It found that one in 10 tweets about Black women politicians and journalists in its sample was abusive. In general, over 1.1 million abusive tweets are sent to women every year. That's an average of one every 30 seconds, the report reads. Black women on Twitter were 84%

more likely to be harassed than White women on the platform, while women of color in general were 34% more likely to be harassed than White women.

In another 2018 study, almost all of 75 participating female journalists reported to face only harassment that “focused on their person, gender, or sexuality,” yet they all felt obligated to continue engaging in social media (Masullo et al., 2018).

### **Twitter as a job requirement**

Twitter has become a professional norm for journalists (Lasorsa et al 2012). Cited over 300 times across Scopus, Web of Science and Crossref, Lasorsa, Lewis and Holton (2012) provided a foundational understanding of the role of Twitter in journalism, validating the importance of social media—and Twitter in particular—for a reporter’s job. The study also provides a view into a possibility for journalists to have more freedom in expressing their opinions and be transparent with their audience. It supports the idea that journalists’ participation in Twitter is an inevitable job requirement in the current climate as journalists have also grown to embrace online comments in their daily routines; though some still felt hesitant to engage, especially with uncivil comments, out of fear of breaching journalistic objectivity (Chen & Pain, 2017)

As journalists normalize Twitter into their jobs and adjust professional norms to fit into the Twittersphere (Singer, 2005; Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2012), new challenges have emerged. One of the examples is that Twitter has enabled journalists to express themselves more freely to their followers/readers. Expressing opinions as a news reporter is defying, if not the exact opposite of, the professional norm of objectivity. But with the increasing demands for journalists to have an online presence and connect with

their audience, being personable and relatable— keys to gaining and maintaining a Twitter following—became a daunting yet essential task for many journalists (Molyneux & Holton, 2018).

Expectations for journalists to promote personal brands and those of their organizations grew in the last couple of years (Holton and Molyneux, 2017; Molyneux et al, 2019). A platform that was once seen as a new tool that allows journalists to be more open with their opinions now poses a new challenge of how to balance between authenticity and professionalism without sacrificing one's identity (Molyneux and Holton, 2018). These studies reaffirm the significant role that Twitter plays in the way journalists find and keep work as insecurity of media jobs continues to grow.

However, with the requirement to be on Twitter increases, the platform has made it easier for trolls to find their next victims (Finneman & Jenkins, 2018). The study concludes that not much progress has been made within the TV news landscape for female journalists. And with the rise of social media and reporters' new level of accessibility, these journalists are now even more prone to face abusive comments (Finneman & Jenkins, 2018). An application with a potential of meaningful audience engagement (Lewis, Holton & Coddington, 2014), Twitter also serves as a double-edged sword for journalists who aren't male and who aren't White.

### **Where is the line?**

Many researchers continue to debate where a perfect balance between authenticity and professionalism is supposed to be, as many papers of record started rolling out social media guidelines in broad strokes. However, one thing is clear: the expectations for such

balance for female journalists of color are not the same for those who are White and/or male.

Before landing at *The Atlantic*, Jemele Hill also clashed with her former employer, *ESPN*, over her tweets. Hill had called President Donald Trump a white supremacist on Twitter. *ESPN* did not discipline Hill for the message. A month later, however, the organization suspended Hill after she called on her Twitter followers to boycott the Cowboys' vendors and advertisers. The team owner had threatened to bench players for kneeling during the national anthem. *ESPN* said that was Hill's second violation of its social media policy (Bogage et al, 2017).

This was are not an isolated incident. In a follow-up interview with student-run newspaper, *The State Press*, Chávez from *The Intercept* shared:

I've been getting a lot of responses from journalists as a whole who are all kind of universally appalled at the email, but I've also gotten a lot of very heartbreaking messages from either Cronkite alumni or current students of color — more women of color — and they say that they feel similarly or they experienced something similar.

Chávez holds her stance firmly, replying to Dale's response justifying his email on Twitter with a meme of a sad clown sitting at a work desk. Hill, who was a national columnist at *ESPN*, also later admitted to the pressure to self-censor on Twitter for the sake of her job. "... I was going out of my way not to cuss some of y'all out because I had a job and a corporation to represent. But now, I don't have one. So I'm good with calling you a fuckboi," reads a 2018 tweet in response to an user who criticized her work for being too political.

In 2013, then Public Editor of *The New York Times* Margaret Sullivan went on an hour-long radio discussion about objectivity, weighing in on two sets of thoughts: those of Tom Kent, standards editor for the *Associated Press*, who believes that objectivity has no room for interpretation; and those of Jay Rosen, a journalism professor at New York University, who argues that objectivity is an “outdated idea.” In an essay earlier that year, Sullivan also took on the issue and ended up supporting journalists to “let readers get to know their backgrounds, their personalities and how they do their jobs,” but with limits.

Ultimately, Sullivan said she aligned herself with the line of thought that seemingly later influenced the *Times*’ official social media policy, which places objectivity as an absolute ideal. One of the policies reads, “In social media posts, our journalists must not express partisan opinions, promote political views, endorse candidates, make offensive comments or do anything else that undercuts *The Times*’s journalistic reputation.” Another policy reads, “Of course, it’s worth emphasizing again that just because our journalists can try new things on social media, that does not mean they have a license to veer into editorializing or opinion.”

Journalists on Twitter were split down the middle: some considered the policy a fair and sensible set of rules (Benton, 2017), while others viewed it as “damage control” (Ingram, 2017) and “a roadmap” for trolls to further harass the paper’s journalists (Uberti, 2017).

But as Richardson and Taylor (2009) pointed out, women of color face even bigger challenges in the workplace, as their objectivity might be questioned more frequently in an industry that has been standardized through the lens of White males (Nishikawa, Towner, Clawson, Rosalee, & Waltenburg 2009).

In an industry that is predominantly White and male, the perspective of a female journalist of color remains outside of the objectivity norm. Their identities are made out to be political. Their opinions and beliefs continue to be perceived as anything but objective. With the rise of Twitter and the increasingly demand to have a social media following, journalists are now more pressured to express their views, and female journalists of color are more prone to unjust reprimand and repercussion than their White male counterparts (*Media Report to Women*, 2012).

Twitter and its use by journalists have been well-studied. The experiences of female journalists—and journalists of color—have also been widely explored in newsroom environments and in the digital sphere in general. However, literature is lacking when it comes to the experience of female journalists of color on Twitter, a newly essential tool for their jobs.

Online harassment can influence, and in some cases—deter, female journalists from pursuing certain stories and certain beats (Pain and Chen, 2019). While newsrooms across the country tout diversity initiatives, female journalists of color are being punished for not being White and male on Twitter by their own news organizations.

It's important, now more than ever, to study how female journalists of color navigate through the many layers of challenges amplified by Twitter. The goal is not only to understand how they decide what to share on Twitter and what they hope to achieve with such tweets, but to illuminate how newsrooms and the journalism industry can better employ this group of journalists.

## Research Questions

Altogether, the literature left me with two specific questions:

RQ1: How do female journalists of color perceive their experience on Twitter?

RQ2: How are female journalists of color responding to their Twitter experiences?

## Method

To answer these questions, I conducted semi-structured interviews with eight female journalists of color. Because participants are asked to talk about their employees and other issues relating to harassment and abuse, their identities are shielded to prevent possible retaliation. A generic description of all participants are listed in this table below:

<b>Name</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>Expertise</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>
Participant A	Newspaper, a union member	Large Twitter following, active and vocal on Twitter	Latina
Participant B	Newspaper	Using Twitter in small, traditional newsroom and in rural market	Latina
Participant C	Radio station	Freelancing experience, working in a digital first newsroom	Black
Participant D	Newspaper	Covering sports, working as an editor	Latina
Participant E	Newspaper, a union member	Large Twitter following, active and vocal on Twitter	Asian
Participant F	Radio station	Freelancing experience, covering arts and culture	Latina
Participant G	Trade magazine	Covering a male-dominant topic	Black
Participant H	Newspaper, a union member	Using Twitter in traditional newsroom	Asian



Interviews were conducted via Zoom, ranging from 40 minutes to 90 minutes in length. The interviews were based on the following interview guide:

1. Can you tell me your name, your job, whether you're a member of a union and your general relationship with Twitter?
2. How important is Twitter to your daily job and your career trajectory in general?
  - a. If you could quit using Twitter without facing any professional impact, would you do it?
3. How important is it for you to have an online presence/a personal brand?
4. What do you consider when you tweet?
5. What does the social media guidelines in your newsroom look like?
  - a. What do you think of it?
  - b. Have you seen it being enforced? What were the circumstances?
6. What's your experience being harassed on Twitter?
  - a. Can you tell me the context of those situations?
  - b. How do you deal with it?
  - c. How do your newsroom deal with it?
7. Twitter fatigue
  - a. Do you experience it?
  - b. What are the reasons for that?
  - c. How do you deal with it?
8. Was Twitter ever a positive place for you?

- a. What would make it a more positive and productive place for you?
9. Is there anything else you would like to discuss?

The transcription was run through Otter. ai and manually edited. Identifiable information such as name and workplace is redacted. I also rephrased or took out details of specific incidents that would trace back to participating journalists. All journalists have gotten a chance to review their conversations prior to the publication of this research.

### Chapter 3: Professional Analysis

Regardless of their work, background and experience, each of the journalists interviewed expressed some levels of frustration using Twitter, as they also acknowledged it as an important and integral part of their daily jobs and career trajectories. “It’s almost vital to my job, beyond just the ability to promote my work or to be a journalist on Twitter,... where I feel like I have sort of a community of people who follow me and who know my work and know who I am,” Participant A said.

Parts of the frustration—and even sometimes, fear—came from the inevitable online harassment and attacks on Twitter. However, many also expressed disappointment and helplessness with their newsrooms’ approaches to Twitter.

Participating journalists described their management and editors to be Twitter-illiterate or simply failing to see the significance of tweeting and Twitter. Journalists believed this has led to the widespread lack of institutional backing that female journalists of color need facing online harassment. “I think a lot of editors are afraid of (Twitter), and of what it would become,” Participant E said of her editors who had told her to not tweet about certain topics.

The failure and non-willingness to understand Twitter, further guided by the fuzzy and vague social media guidelines, has also resulted in unfair and uneven disciplinary actions toward female journalists of color for tweeting on different subjects, participating journalists said. In some cases, journalists believed management only sees their Twitter as a way to monitor them. “(Management) rather look at my tweets than ask me how I am,” said Participant G, who’s the only journalist of color in her newsroom.

The interviews revealed that many participating journalists are taking a defensive approach in dealing with the external and internal scrutiny of their tweets: self-censoring, putting on “a professional mask,” and relying on a whisper network of other female journalists or journalists of color outside of their newsrooms for support. At the same time, some are also taking steps to “reclaim the space” by speaking out about online harassment, calling out issues facing female journalists of color in journalism, having fun with their Twitter and pushing for institutional support through online safety trainings and ongoing dialogue about Twitter.

## **Twitter: A double-edged sword**

All participants described Twitter to be an essential and crucial tool in their daily job. They rely on the social media platform to post and share their work, find sources and story ideas, keep up with the news, and network with other journalists. For Participant G, who's a business reporter, her large Twitter following has also landed her job opportunities and boosted her credibility in her field. "I realized that a lot of editors and publications pay attention to the number of followers that you have," she said. "They see it as you have some sort of platform and they can get more notice, and their branding can go up now that they have this particular person on our staff."

This is also true for Participant F, who did freelancing for several years before becoming a staff reporter at a local radio station. Between networking with others, finding different jobs, pitch calls to sharing her work, Twitter is "a part of my job," Participant F said. While many journalists noted that traffic generating from Twitter was not always high, "it's a selling point, and people were excited to work with me because I have a 'following on Twitter,'" she said.

As a career sports reporter, Participant D also saw how Twitter transformed sports media and learned early on in her career the significance of having "authority" or a following on the platform. This, she said, however, quickly turned into pressure that placed upon journalists not only by themselves but also by their employers. Now as editor, she had offered a reporter to take time off Twitter due to harassment, but "if they want to work anywhere else, if they want to get another job, oftentimes, they'll be evaluated by that level of activity, particularly within sports media."

Furthermore, desirable jobs, such as at The Athletic, often looks to journalists who had strong Twitter followings to recruit. “So it's a clear indication to any sports journalist: I need to have that authority because one of the things they value is how big my Twitter following is and how much people support and come to me for news on this specific topic.”

For female journalists of color, Twitter has essentially become a career booster and provided a platform that was not historically afforded for them, especially for younger journalists, participants said. But these perks come with the heavy tolls on their well-being, having to endure online harassment and face judgement or reprimand by management.

“Twitter is a double-edged sword for me,” said Participant A, a mid-career local journalist. Without it, she said she wouldn't have the reach or the same size of audience. “But on the other hand, it is not great for my mental health... It is a platform where people can just say whatever they want and I do get harassment, likely more than my colleagues who are not women of color,” she said.

Local print journalist Participant E, who has had positive experience navigating the space, agreed. “Like anything else on the internet, there are problems that it creates, and there are problems that it fixes.”

For some, especially those who are in smaller markets or in their early career, Twitter can also be a time suck that doesn't always yield results. “When you look at the way Twitter is used for white men, they can sort of be really mediocre on Twitter, and it can boost their career,” said Participant B, a local print journalist in a rural area. “Women and women of color have to be so much better, many times as good, to have it boosts

their career. ... It really highlights the frustration that we have to work so hard to get tangible results.”

**“No one is immune:” Online harassment comes with the job**

Despite all its perks, participating journalists described Twitter to be an overwhelmingly negative space and that the level of vitriol “had exploded” on the platform over the last four years under the Trump administration. “It was always a source for anonymous feedback, some of which was negative, sexist, racist and misogynistic, you name it,” Participant D said.

Online attacks and harassment come in different forms and levels. Some reported experiencing it on a daily basis, while others said targeted attacks had only happened once or twice in their career. At least two participating journalists had experienced targeted attacks, where hundreds or thousands of accounts would single them out over a story or a tweet.

All journalists agreed that online attacks on Twitter have left them traumatized and anxious, as the experience also contributed to the feelings of discouragement and helplessness in some cases. For Participant D, online harassment, however minuscule, is abuse.

“No matter how much you are able to logically discount what you're encountering, you absolutely are still going to be impacted, at least a little bit by what you're exposed to. And in some cases, it can be brutal ... It's not really who's stronger, who's not. It's just a question of whether you're just really in a positive environment that helps you to deflect it slightly easier, but no one is immune.”

For Participant A, as a local newspaper reporter, online harassment happened often—and across all platforms that “it’s hard to parse out” whether a criticism is meant to be constructive. That’s when self-doubts often crept in, causing her to internalize the abuse that many of her White, male colleagues don’t face, she said. But, she added, “typically, the criticisms are of such bad faith, and are just explicitly racist or sexist.”

Participant E has built a sizable following partly due to her personable tweets. She noticed that the criticism often focused on her tone rather than the quality of her work.

“The criticism that (female journalists of color) get does not come from a place of genuine care about the issue that we're talking about. It's criticism of how we say things, of the specific words we chose. It's not equivalent to the criticism that some of our other colleagues would receive.”

For at least one, online harassment became a physical safety concern last year. Participant F was targeted by an extremist group on Twitter over a story she did. Once the attack started, she said, thousands of accounts flooded her Twitter at once. People were trash-talking and circulating a photo of her with different sexist, unfounded messages. “It was probably the scariest experience,” she said. “They called a friend of mine to threaten them. They also started threatening a friend's daughter because they also (wrote something on the topic).”

In another incident instigated by a White male colleague of hers, his followers started attacking her for criticizing a movie in her tweet. Many tweets told her that “women don't deserve (these kind of movies)” and to “get back in the kitchen,” she said. “Then there was one guy who responded like, ‘I wish you would write your (stories) from



a burning building.’... That's really tough to have to do deal with alone, and to feel like your outlet doesn't have your back.”

Journalists, especially those with verified accounts, said they would maximize all the options available on Twitter, such as putting up filters, restricting comments, blocking, and muting, to weed out most harassing tweets. This has helped them to avoid seeing those comments. Still, these abusive and vicious tweets were visible to the rest of the world — and other female journalists of color. “Watching your peers be brutalized online is really, really hard. It's secondhand trauma,” Participant E said.

“How many more people has this happened to? It feels like this club just keeps getting bigger, but it is,” Participant F said.

### **Lack of resources and willingness: how newsrooms fail female JOCs**

Participant A said she often tweeted out about the vile and vicious messages hurled at her as a reminder to her editors and others in the industry that female journalists of color face this type of abuse every day. “I don't really think they know how bad it is. ... They know it happens, ... but I don't think they know what to do, and I don't think they have time or resources to deal with it.”

Participating journalists expressed a universal frustration with a lack of genuine support system and failure from management to address the abuse they faced online on the daily basis.

When Participant D started as a sports reporter years ago, she dealt with a lot of online abuse on Twitter. When people would attack her look, her gender, and her race over stories they deemed as “controversial,” Participant D said she endured it all without

any institutional backing or support. “I saw a lot of negative comments, it did have an impact. You know, it's tough.” Participant D said.

Since then, a number of studies have come out, detailing the disproportionate impact of online harassment towards women journalists and women journalists of color (Finneman & Jenkins, 2018, *Guardian*, 2016, Klein, 2021, Media Report to Women, 2012, Tobitt, 2021). And yet, the issue about online harassment and attacks continued to be ignored and brushed off in newsrooms across the country.

“There wasn't a conversation about it as a newsroom,” Participant C said, although a colleague of color of hers has been constantly berated and attacked by thousands of people on Twitter over right-wing protest coverage.

“He might be getting that support, personally, from his editor or the news director, but we're not all seeing it as a group. I think that's necessary. We need to see that our coworker is getting supported, because why would we ever want to be in that same situation knowing that we're not having like the entire organization supporting us?”

At Participant B's newsroom, the social media guideline spans three sentences, as “it reflects their understanding of social media, and their willingness to invest in it,” she said. Her editors and colleagues, all of whom are White older men, often scoff at the idea of Twitter, she said. “They don't want to learn Twitter or Facebook. They're nearly Twitter illiterate. So they don't know how it works, and they're bothered when it becomes a problem,” she added.

Even in newsrooms whose coverage is more in tune with what's happening on social media, older editors also often fail to fully understand Twitter and its wrath,

Participant E said. On multiple occasions, Participant E was told by her editors to “exercise heavy caution” on certain topics. Sometimes they explicitly told her to not tweet, especially when she wanted to apply pressure on different public agencies for a response. Participant E said she doesn’t disagree with them all the time, but “there's also this fear that shaming somebody on Twitter is going to make them not want to work with you at all, which sometimes I don't think is founded. ... I think a lot of editors are afraid of it, of what it would become,” she said.

This disinterest and unwillingness to embrace Twitter from management, aided by the lack of time and resources, often leads to an ill-equipped newsroom when it comes to online attacks, participating journalists said. This further translated into a culture of bystanders in newsrooms, many said, where their colleagues would hesitate to step up or speak out against online harassment against women and journalists of color in the newsroom. Consequentially, the responsibility, or “moral obligation” as Participant A put it, to take care of themselves or support other female journalists of color ended up on their already burdened shoulders.

Participant G, in at least one occasion, was catfished to go on a date with a source who wanted to see “if they can use me to their benefit,” after she started gaining a following on Twitter. “My face is now attaching to my stories... and that's to me very concerning, but I don't have the protection from my company. ... You end up having to be very diligent in protecting yourself from being used, or possibly assaulted,” she said.

Journalists acknowledged that management couldn’t stop audiences and readers from sending female journalists of color hateful comments and harassment, but “just even

showing support is a huge step to let the reporter know that they're not alone in this,” Participant F said. Still, that’s a rare occasion, she added.

Out of all journalists interviewed, Participant E has had a unique —and positive — experience dealing with online attacks, where her older White male colleagues would defend younger staff members on Twitter out of united solidarity, she said. That has also translated to real life situations, where White journalists would bring up contentious issues in newsroom meetings on behalf of their colleagues of color. While “it’s nice to see, ... it doesn't address the core problem,” Participant E said.

### **Nebulous social media guidelines and a double standard**

Participant H, a local print journalist, is a vocal advocate of more newsroom diversity, and that had never been an issue at her publication, she said. But when she tweeted about her disappointment of the continuing lack of diversity in the industry and made a general action call to editors and newsrooms to engage in anti-racist practices last year, her tweets were ground for a possible termination. “I get the sense that my editor thought I was subtweeting my own newsroom, ... and he took it very personally, when, in my mind, ... this is not a problem that's specific to the newsroom that I was in.” She was told to not cross the line again and taken off protest coverage.

Two out of eight participating journalists said they faced discipline over a tweet they considered innocuous, but most journalists expressed some levels of dissatisfaction over the social media guidelines in their newsroom.

Some said their guidelines haven’t been updated in years, and some thought their guidelines were too vague and fuzzy that leaves a lot of room for interpretation. While

this leaves journalists “a bit of freedom” on Twitter, many said, the lackluster policy also gives editors no structure or protocols in determining what would be a violation of the policy.

The objectivity question — what is considered bias and what is not — plays a big part in this issue. While objectivity as a concept has continued to be a contention in newsrooms these last few years, Twitter and social media has magnified this issue extensively, as the disciplinary actions often skew toward women and journalists of color, journalists said.

“There’s no uniform. It’s based on gut and what that editors’ values are for reporting and what they believe is correct about news and objectivity,” Participant E said.

Some described watching their White, older colleagues, weigh in different on political issues, tweeting things that “signified (their) political leanings” and being “very transparent about their opinion” without receiving any flags from management, Participant H said. While Participant B was made to make her account private within hours after tweeting about her editor telling her to “find a Mexican family” for an immigration story, a White colleague in the office faced no disciplinary actions posting misinformation about transgender people, people of color, and the election being stolen.

It’s a challenging feat to navigate, participating journalists said. For Participant F, who didn’t go to a journalism school for her undergraduate education, “I had to figure that out on the fly, which was very hard to do.”

As editor, Participant D said journalists, especially those who just entered the industry, need to find where the line is in their newsroom.

“One of the things that you have to learn about the industry is you need to learn your social media policy. You need to learn what is expected and you need to talk with managers to better understand what their line is, so that you are not putting yourself in a tough position.”

The issue around objectivity seemed to come to a boiling point last summer during the height of police brutality protests and a racial reckoning in newsrooms. But little has changed, journalists said. Some, including Participant C, said their newsrooms had made a stance against white supremacy and against violence against Black and people of color, but for her, a Black journalist, she still doesn't feel like she can repeat the same message on her Twitter, “it was unclear, and it still is unclear.” she said.

For Participant G, showing feelings — expressing anger, pain and grief throughout the events following the murder of George Floyd and the recent strings of attacks on Asian communities — was also considered to be “too radical” by her editors.

“It was just supporting the solidarity of trying to discuss this tragic situation that keeps reoccurring, ... But because it's racism, all of a sudden, your editor thinks you're too radical and thinks you're going to mess this up. ... When it comes to women, and people of color, you get slammed anytime you show any emotion on social media, and you get judged for it. You get way more judged than your white male colleagues who expressing themselves in an emotional way over a football game. No one says like, ‘Oh, are you going to be able to appropriately report on the news today, because your team lost and you wrote 10 tweets about how you're upset that they lost?’ They don't get that. They get to come back to work and

everybody understands that they were just expressing their frustration. That was not given to women, and people of color.”

### **A “mindful” approach**

The multitude layers of challenges and obstacles facing female journalists of color on Twitter have led to a “mindful” tweeting approach for many participating journalists. All said they often engage in conversations when it’s a fact-checking matter or when they can back up their tweets with their own reporting or lived experiences.

All often refrained from posting their faces or their locations out of safety concerns. “I have had some weird encounters,” Participant F said. In one incident, a Twitter follower insisted on meeting up with her after seeing she was vacationing in his town. “After that, unless it’s breaking news, I’m not posting where I am.”

While journalists described different concerns when they tweet, three things came up consistently: Is there enough context and nuances in this tweet?; how would this look to my employer or potential employers?; and, what kind of response would I get from this?

Due to the nature of Twitter that only allows up to 280 characters in a tweet, many are careful to not tweet something that could be taken out of context. “It’s a limited platform, and it’s not the place for discussion,” Participant F said. “You’re not getting a full thought (with 280 characters) and that’s what how people are able to misconstrue things and blow things out of proportion.”

Journalists could also get into trouble for participating in different pop culture discourses on Twitter, Participant E said. “Sometimes a tweet can actually be pretty

innocuous, but if you're not following the whole conversation around a topic, that one isolated tweet... could look really bold and inappropriate.”

As a freelancer for many years, Participant F said she was also mindful of how a tweet, or even a retweet, would be perceived by a potential employer. And she’s not alone.

“I’ve thought about what I’m going to tweet when I quit my job 1000 times and how I wanted to be honest about why. But then you hear the advice of, you’re never going to get another job if you do that.” Participant B said. Even if she was to tweet the truth, she added, it’s still a gamble that the right person is going to see it or that the tweet is going to go viral to garner enough support. “You’re sort of just shooting yourself in the foot a little bit for future employment.”

Increasingly, journalists said, they are stepping away from initiating a Twitter conversation because they anticipate the comments and responses to be uncivil or vicious.

Participant C said she intentionally avoided engaging in many Twitter conversation—and even assignments, to curb harassment and attacks, especially during the height of police brutality protests and right-wing protests. When some of the stories from her newsroom gained national attention last year, “I saw my colleagues on CNN and all, and it was just like, ‘Whoa, that could have been me,’” she said. “But I’m fine with it not being me. ... I’m not comfortable risking my own personal safety as a Black woman going out into right-wing protests. I’m not gonna do that. Sorry, it’s not worth it.”

Throughout the pandemic, bad faith arguments and attacks over their coverage have also increased significantly. Many also expressed feeling overwhelmed and



exhausted from consuming “so much bad news all the time” that left them more vulnerable than ever.

While participants believed that, as journalists, they all already practice a certain level of self-censorship, Participant B felt that Twitter has further robbed her the ability to conduct productive dialogues.

“I know some journalists who can just block and leave it unread. I can't do it, I have to read it, because I want to change their mind. I want the facts to bring them to the correct conclusion. ... But it got literally too much that I would be having physical reactions on days where it was really bad. Like, my chest would tighten, and my mom's like, ‘you have to stop.’ ... So not only are we being dehumanized in that way, but we're being robbed of the most basic right to respond.”

### **Professional masks, private group chats and whisper networks: how female journalists of color cope**

In addition to their elaborative approach to Twitter, many journalists have also found different ways to survive the toxic conditions they face online on the daily basis. Participant C said she wore “a professional mask” when she’s on Twitter. “It’s where I post and share stories. ... but I’m not me on Twitter.”

Beyond safety concerns, some participating journalists said they wanted to keep their Twitter somewhat strictly professional, avoiding revealing too much personal information that could somehow be used as ammunition against them.

The fear of being perceived to have a certain bias has also led to some journalists to stop participating in different communities on Twitter. Participant H, who is religious,

said she often stops herself from participating — or even interacting through likes and retweets — in conversations with people within her religion bubble on Twitter. “I feel a lot of fear around being pigeon-holed into a certain kind of viewpoint, based on the fact that I am [following this religion],” she said.

This fear, could sometimes spill over to real life too, Participant C said. “I do have to be hyper aware of what I'm doing in my life and what I'm posting,” she said. “I have to think if something can be negatively impactful to my employer.”

Instead of Twitter, which journalists said is still a vital space to share their experiences and speak out against inequalities in the industry, participating journalists have also relied on private group chats and Slack channels with other women and journalists of color as their safe haven. “Most of the journalists of color and women journalists in the state know each other, so I have like a texting relationship with them,” Participant B said. “We'll also have like random messages like, ‘today is really hard. I hope you all are doing well.’”

Participant C said she has found support among other journalists of color in her newsroom via a private chat. “That’s where our colleagues of color getting the support,” she said.

At least two participating journalists, who are the only person of color in their respective newsrooms, cited a private and off-the-record Slack channel, JOCs Slack, to be “life-saving” this past year. These off-the-record conversations, they said, have been genuine and constructive, allowing them the space that their newsrooms couldn’t afford to process different issues. “I'm comfortable with another journalists of color judging my

emotions and my conversation, because they're coming from a place of understanding,” Participant G said.

Participant F relied heavily on her whisper network when she was a freelancer, especially to warn others of how their tweets are being perceived by certain editors. “I've actually gone back to warn some friends and said, ‘hey, just through the grapevine, you might want to think about toning it down a little bit ... the fact that you say you want to take down a politician, that's going to cost you,’” she said.

Another example was when a mentor of hers told Participant F to stop dying her hair. “She said, ‘it sucks, and this not right, but people are judging you for that.’”

These tactics, while they’re not addressing the core issue in journalism, have empowered many participating journalists to at least deal with the day-to-day obstacles.

“Dismantling this stuff is a very tiresome job,” Participant G said. “(This industry) wasn't designed for a woman of color to be successful immediately. ... it's gonna be a long ride. ... But it’s a worthy battle.”

### **A shifting culture**

Despite the many challenges facing them on Twitter, participating journalists described an underway momentum to “reclaim the space.”

“There's power when people are listening to you and taking in the information that you're giving them,” Participant G said. With her background in social media management, Participant G said she has used Twitter very strategically the last few years by tweeting organic, personable posts along with her stories and commentaries, which

has resulted in a large following that continues to steadily grow. “This is not my personal playground. So I make sure it is very strategic and selective. It is a tool to me.”

On the other hand, Participant G added, she does not shy away from expressing her core values.

“I don't really have a choice, because as a person of color as a woman of color, people automatically assume that you have a certain bias. Like, they would say ‘she's going to be pro woman, she's going to be pro Black,’ I am, and I don't really need to hide that.”

Journalists who belong in a union in their newsrooms also feel that they have more freedom and protection to speak out about different issues in the industry.

Participant A said, for example, she often criticizes the owner of her paper, which she called “a gross hedge fund.” By explaining the differences between the newsroom and its owner on Twitter, she said it has helped demystify the misconceptions that her audience had about the journalists in the newsroom. Participant A said this freedom has allowed her to express grievances that other female JOCs can't because of the culture in their newsrooms.

“I frequently say things that I know other journalists cannot say, and I take that almost as a responsibility. ... I talk about things like burnout, or mental health, or how the journalism industry treats journalists of color. And because I am protected in our union, I feel very free to talk about those sorts of things.”

Participant E, another union member, said she decided to open up more on Twitter roughly two years ago after seeing other young journalists of color have fun with their accounts. Shifting from “playing it safe,” her new approach to Twitter has made the

platform more enjoyable and productive, she said. While she still takes break of it, Participant E said Twitter has become a tool in her arsenal to get better sources and stories.

“It's helped me connect to people because my sources now like when I talk to them, they know other parts of my life and what I'm going through at that moment, or the things that I'm reflecting on, and it's actually been a really good conversation starter. And I think some people have found my twitter and then found my reporting, which is cool. So I think that overall, I've had a pretty positive experience.”

Curating a positive news feed on Twitter has also helped Participant D engage in more productive and pleasant conversations on the platform. Though she acknowledged that, as editor, she's often not hesitant in blocking and muting “unhelpful” people.

“Even for (reporters), I absolutely encourage weeding out some of the most vitriolic, least helpful commentary. There has to be a benefit for why you're following a person or why you're seeing a person's responses. They have to have some redeeming value, and if they don't, then they just they need to go.”

In at least one newsroom, institutional changes are also proven to be possible and within reach — if management is willing to invest in the work. Participant D, having personally experienced targeted attack and harassment before becoming an editor, led the way in 2017 to establish online safety protocol and provide trainings in her newsroom to support reporters.

The protocols, inspired by sports journalist Julia Morales' workshops on online safety, have become a norm at Participant D's newsroom since. In at least one occasion,

Participant D had logged into her reporter's account and scrubbed out the majority of abusive comments when the reporter was facing massive harassment over their coverage. "Even if it seems like a small amount, but if there are more than a handful and that you could use some help, find someone you trust ... and let them clean it out."

The practice was then adopted by the whole newsroom. Training workshops were hosted regularly. As editor, Participant D encouraged her reporters to keep an open dialogue with her about their concerns over Twitter, as she also provided them "all the tools" and different success measures to understand that their work doesn't live and die solely on Twitter. This has helped her reporters to alleviate pressure to perform well on Twitter, she said.

In addition, Participant D has also seen a shift in the industry's culture in the last few years, where more literature and resources are now available through different organizations for women and journalists of color.

"They provide harassment trainings and supplement that you get through your workplace. There's lots of resources and lots of tools available that I just encourage people to use those as well. And if you're struggling with how to talk with your supervisor, your manager, your boss, about how to work through this issue, I think there's a lot of mentoring and advice through those organizations. People are happy to help. And really, if you just reach out to anyone in the industry with a direct message on the platform that is so toxic, a lot of them are eager to help others. There's a lot of openness and sharing that's absolutely available, so I would seek that out. Because it is best to not go through it alone."

## **Conclusion**

Guided by intersectionality theory, these journalists were acutely aware of the unique challenges, including daily harassment, unjust scrutiny and the lack of institutional support, facing them on Twitter and in real life.

All participating female journalists of color acknowledged that Twitter is a vital tool for their daily work and career, but they faced a disproportionate level of abuse and scrutiny compared to their White and/or male peers. While online harassment, hate comments and targeted attacks are not unique problems to female journalists of color, the volume, frequency and level of viciousness of this type of abuse targeting them are often overwhelmingly worse. The harassment also focuses on their identity, their look and their tone rather than the work they do.

These journalists also received little to no support from their newsrooms, even when the online harassment spilled into their real lives. Nebulous and outdated social media guidelines, providing no structure or protocol for fair enforcement, often led to disciplinary actions towards them for being immature, “radical” or “spicy,” but older White colleagues in the newsroom with more newsroom capital could often say what they wish without consequences.

They described being “mindful” in their approach on Twitter, adopting many levels of consideration when they engage in a Twitter conversation. This “mindful” approach takes into account of all the challenges at the intersection of their identities being both people of color and women.

These journalists further developed other coping tactics, including extreme self-censoring, wearing “a professional mask,” and relying on whisper networks, to survive

the widespread lack of support in their newsrooms. Many also felt a sense of obligation to uplift and look out for other female journalists of color. They were generally more concerned of safety and well-being issues than of pressures of building an online brand like other researches have suggested (Holton and Molyneux, 2017; Molyneux et al, 2019).

Regardless, some participating journalists felt the culture is shifting as they are increasingly empowered to “reclaim the space” on Twitter by speaking out, having fun with their Twitter and pushing the boundaries to demand for institutional support. This is specifically true for those with the protection of their unions and those with more newsroom capital.

This study demonstrates the need for newsrooms, management and colleagues alike, to acknowledge and understand the challenges facing female journalists of color on Twitter. For many participating journalists, having their struggles acknowledged and being supported when they are harassed online is a crucial first step that newsrooms and managers could do right now to help mitigate this issue.

Establishing clear expectations and keeping an open, genuine dialogue in the newsroom will also help journalists, especially female journalists of color, better navigate the challenges on Twitter, including the objectivity question, Participant D said. With many resources such as online safety trainings and online abuse protocol available through different avenues and journalism organizations, newsrooms need to start to invest and adopt these practices, making it an industry norm, to further address the core issue.

Another important practice that newsrooms can implement is to stop romanticizing Twitter and its ability to drive traffic. At least three participating



journalists said Twitter often is not the highest traffic driver on the daily basis in their newsrooms, and editors should be realistic about their expectations and avoid putting additional pressures on journalists to perform on Twitter. A recent example of this would be Insider's "impact points" system, where a story's success is measured by being retweeted by social media accounts with large followings, among other things (Moore, 2021).

These are the first steps for newsrooms to head into a more equitable, safe and inclusive future for this group of journalists and all journalists in general.

This study does not encompass all female journalists of color's experience on Twitter, as it lacks perspectives from journalists working in broadcast journalism, who often face more criticism and harassment for their appearances and other superficial aspects (Finneman & Jenkins, 2018).

More research is needed to identify and understand systematic changes to further support female journalists of color on Twitter and free them from the sole burden of having to support themselves and those in their community.

Future research could also explore the links between how willing a female journalist of color is to talk about their experience and how big of the reach they/their employers have. For example, this study was unsuccessful in recruiting journalists with more than 50,000 followers and those working at national/international newsrooms.

This study supports the intersectional feminism theory, as it explores and details the many layers of challenges facing female journalists of color on Twitter.

Understanding these obstacles and how this group of journalists are fighting back is

essential to a better and more comprehensive approach to help them thrive and succeed in this industry.