

# Experiences of Harm, Healing, and Joy among Black Women and Femmes on Social Media

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## ABSTRACT

This project illuminates Black women and femme’s experiences with unwanted behavior and harassment on social media, and how they (re)claim and transform their experiences to cope, heal, and experience joy. This work situates Black women and femmes’ experiences within extant social media research, and examines how their unique identity creates multiple forms of interlocking oppression. In our focus groups, participants (N=49) described harms they experienced through racism, misogynoir, ableism, and sexual objectification, and their complex labor of protecting and transforming their experiences online. Despite the harmful effects of unwanted behavior online, participants described a Black feminist transformative politic, in which they cultivated healing and joy through various methods offline and online. Using a transformative justice lens, we discuss their experiences of harassment from white women and men, as well as the complexities of cultural betrayal when experiencing harassment from Black men.

## CCS CONCEPTS

• Human-centered computing → Collaborative and social computing.

## KEYWORDS

Online harassment, Black women, gender, racism, misogynoir, justice, joy, healing

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Black women experience myriad kinds of harassment, harm, and unwanted behavior online [29, 33, 34, 45, 75, 88]. This can include racism, threats, stalking, insults, unsolicited sexual photos, and other harmful behaviors. Such experiences are endemic across a

wide range of online experiences. Black women experience misogynoir on Twitter—intersecting misogyny and racism that compromise their ability to participate safely [4, 67]. Black women gamers experience hate speech, sexual harassment, and racism on video games and livestreaming [45, 46]. Black women journalists and politicians are 84% more likely than white women to be targeted by online abuse, and one in ten tweets mentioning Black women journalists and politicians were found to be abusive or problematic [66]. Online harassment relies on underlying hierarchies of power, privilege, and discrimination, based on characteristics like sex, race, and gender. In the U.S., these hierarchies are rooted in violent inequities from the human trafficking and exploitation of Africans and subsequent economic and social inequality and discrimination. These historical trajectories are important for contextualizing online harassment not as a contemporary issue caused by technology, but as existing structural inequalities that are boosted and bolstered by technology.

Scholars of digital critical studies have developed a rich understanding of the interplay between identity and technology and have made visible the effects of digital spaces on identity, particularly for those of marginalized identities such as Black women and femmes. A growing canon of scholarship has documented how social media and their affordances exacerbate harmful legacies against Black people (e.g. [4, 7, 22, 29, 36, 55, 67]). However, this scholarship also highlights how Black people use social media platforms as a place for their collective and personal liberatory expression: digital scholarship, activism, communality, unapologetic Blackness, caretaking, joy, and laughter [4, 13, 14, 22, 67, 74, 77]. In HCI, such attention to Black experiences has come together more recently, focusing on the lack of Black representation in HCI scholarship and the corresponding lack of Black scholarship and ways of knowing in technology design and evaluation (e.g. [16, 35, 36, 53, 54, 91]).

Inspired by scholars working at the intersection of technology and race, such as Ruha Benjamin, Sheena Erete, Kishonna Gray, Lisa Nakamura, Tawanna Dillahunt, Christina Harrington, Moya Bailey, and many others [4, 7, 36, 46, 54, 88], this work traces lineages of racial history and oppression to the present-day study and design of social media platforms. The current work was motivated by our desire to bring transformative justice frameworks together with a focus on Black women and femme’s experiences of harm and healing online. We build on HCI scholarship that focuses on racism, intersections between justice theories and race, and intersections of gender and race [20, 32, 99, 100, 103, 112, 114], but in our work, like the scholars of race and technology listed above, we place Black women and femme’s histories and experiences at the center.

In this paper, we draw on Black feminist thought and transformative justice frameworks as analytical lenses to describe experiences of harm and healing from our participants. We draw on restorative

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justice practices as an approach to conducting our focus groups. We conducted 18 focus groups with 49 Black women and gender diverse people, including those who are femme and non-binary, to learn about their experiences of unwanted behavior online and to examine experiences of healing, coping, and joy. We decided to focus on “Black women and femmes” as an inclusive category of people who have experienced oppression for their Blackness and their gender. While Black femme is a term that may resist socialized expectations and labels, it embraces feminist roots, revolutionary potentials, queer life, strength, power, and visibility [111]. We draw from transformative justice frameworks [31, 39] to explore the ways Black women and femmes transform harmful and oppressive online spaces into sites for their healing and community. This study explores Black women and femme’s presence and participation on social media platforms as a space and place for what Marie Johnson calls cultivating their “digital femme love practice” [79]. From their digitized love practice, Black women and femmes initiate a digital alchemy that transforms their digital experience for themselves and, thus, for every person as the Combahee River Collective proclaims [1, 4]. The paper contributes insights into the nature of harassment and unwanted behavior experienced by Black women and femmes, accounts of what healing and joy look like to them, and a discussion of the complexities of experiencing harassment within cultural groups.

## 2 RELATED WORK

We first describe Black feminism. We then review scholarship on online harassment and harm in HCI and adjacent fields. Finally, we review intersections of justice frameworks with concepts of Black joy and healing.

### 2.1 Black Feminism

I am a feminist, and what that means to me is much the same as the meaning of the fact that I am Black: it means that I must undertake to love myself and to respect myself as though my very life depends upon self-love and self-respect.” -June Jordan [70]

Black feminism is a theoretical approach that engages the multiple and intersectional personal, social, and political identities (gender, race, class, sexuality, and disability) of Black women [26]. Black feminism recognizes the subsequent interlocking systems of oppression Black women experience as a result of historical legacies of subjugation from the economic organization of capitalism in the United States [24, 26]. Black feminism, as theory developed by Black queer women to conceptualize their lived realities and challenges, describes hegemonic, hierarchical, industrialized, and heteropatriarchy standpoints that can serve as a form of knowledge production, as bell hooks has told us [62]. Black feminism as practice is the transformation of that theory into generative action in service to a liberatory (love) politic towards self-actualization, self-definition, self-love, and respect. Black feminism creates opportunity for further generative action in service to a relational liberatory love politic [63]. Black feminist liberatory politic is as personal as it is a commitment to beloved community and politics of sisterhood as a force against oppression, carceral logics, and the hegemony [62]. Several frameworks align with Black feminism and

open diverse possibilities, ideas, and ways of life including Black queer feminism, critical race feminism, transformative justice, and radical Black feminism [25, 39, 59, 68, 86]. As a part of its ethos, Black feminism acknowledges its predecessors’ and elders who advanced scholarship and activism including, but of course not limited to, Ntozake Shange, Angela Davis, bell hooks, Toni Morrison, June Jordan, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, Ella Baker, Harriet Tubman, Assata Shakur, the Combahee River Collective, Patricia Hill Collins, Joy James and many more.

Black feminism as a theoretical framework is and should be subject to critique. As an identity politic for and by Black women in their multiple, intersectional and dynamic identities, well-intentioned and careful critiques are important in progressing the framework to keep its promise as a liberatory (love) political praxis for Black women and, subsequently, everyone. In this spirit, Barbara Smith, Black lesbian feminist and founder of the Combahee River Collective, in her 1983 essay (1983) *Black Feminism Divorced from Black Feminist Organizing*, reflects on bell hooks’ *Ain’t I A Woman; Black Women and Feminism* (a transformative manuscript hooks began at age 19 while still in college) [61, 107]. Smith first agrees with hooks’ assertion that because of the intersectionality of Black women’s identity, Black women suffered more than Black men during slavery; however, Smith raises the concern that the essay insufficiently attends to Black men’s subjugated experiences with slavery, coloniality, and oppression as if their masculinity protected them [107]. Smith argues that situating Black men as oppressors towards Black women equal to the hegemony is problematic and should not be aligned with Black feminist theory.

More recently, scholar Jennifer Gómez has developed the framework of cultural betrayal theory to explain ingroup harms. Gómez proposes that societal trauma, like racism, sexism, and inequality, creates the context for interpersonal trauma among Black Americans and other minority groups [44]. Gómez explains how (intra)cultural trust develops as a within-cultural group experience of connection, attachment, and interdependence as a way to protect oneself and each other from social trauma [48]. Indeed, later in her career, hooks writes *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* where she explores heteropatriarchy’s negative impact on men and calls out the feminist movement’s exclusionary practices and perpetuation of toxic masculine tropes [64]. Additional critical engagement with the Black feminist framework come from Joy James and her perceptive class analyses and Jennifer Nash’s critical analysis on Black feminism’s engagement with intersectionality [68, 89]. In summary, critique is part of Black feminism’s liberatory love politic; as James Baldwin said, “If I love you, I have to make you conscious of the things you don’t see” [5].

Patricia Hill Collins’ book, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Engagement* proposes standpoint theory to describe Black women’s experiences with dominance, power, and oppression and the tactics Black women create for resistance [26]. Collins’ matrix of domination framework asserts that the dominant hegemony assumes itself as an all-encompassing truth to maintain multiple levels of power, violence, control, and privilege in society [25, 26]. As Collins explains, this organization and maintenance of power in society is structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal in its effect on human actions and relations [26].

The matrix of domination has been applied in various fields to explain how power restricts marginalized groups, specifically Black women. Within the field of computing, scholars have documented how the matrix of domination is reproduced in HCI research when producing technology-based solutions for marginalized populations. They note that the matrix is present within the field of HCI which “confines Black women who conduct HCI research to the peripheral” [95]. In *The New Jim Code*, Ruha Benjamin explains that technologies reflect and reproduce inequalities because of the long-held perception that technology is objective and progressive [7].

Black women continue to play a dynamic and pivotal role in the progression of U.S. society despite generations of institutional, physical, and psychological harm the country has imposed on them. One legacy and aftermath of harm Black women endure in the United States are negative tropes popularized in cinema, on television, and in the media [4]. Tropes weaponized to marginalize Black women include, but are not limited to, the mammy archetype, the sapphire caricature, and the jezebel [4]. The mammy archetype refers to stereotypical portrayals of Black women who worked in white homes during slavery, often portrayed as obese and happy in their roles as slaves. The term jezebel hypersexualizes Black women, attempting to portray them as promiscuous and seductive by nature, in opposition to how white women were meant to be viewed as having sexual purity and modesty. The sapphire caricature is where the stereotype “angry Black woman” derives from and relates to caricatures of Black women as rude, ill-tempered, malicious, mean, or aggressive. There is heavy and unseen labor from Black women in fighting and redefining these pervasive textual and visible representations of themselves [4, 8, 48]. Unfortunately, new forms of pop culture have not been spared in replicating these harmful tropes; in fact, they have exacerbated their pervasiveness [4, 28, 67, 116]. On social media, for example, platform design and norms are now at the center of culture creation, replication, and dissemination globally [121].

## 2.2 Online Harassment and Harm

Harassment is widespread online and can include insults, shaming, embarrassment, hate speech, doxxing, non-consensual image sharing, and many other harmful behaviors [34, 66, 102]. These behaviors can be one-time events or they can take the form of sustained harassment over long periods [41]. Harassment that is networked—i.e. coordinated by many people—may be especially damaging to its targets [81]. Online harassment has been documented across platforms, including social media like Twitter and Instagram, game platforms like Xbox and Twitch, in journalism, and elsewhere [9, 19, 45, 46, 119]. While the harms to harassment targets are harder to assess, they can include psychological harm, economic or financial harm, physical harm, relational harm including cultural betrayal, and self-censorship and chilling effects [2, 18, 21, 38, 41, 69, 101, 102]. Victims of harassment report being worried, scared, angry and/or annoyed by their experience, and these experiences make them hesitant to engage or post further [76].

To address online harms, social media platforms typically rely on community guidelines that indicate what kinds of content is

appropriate on their platforms. This is a two-phase process that requires adjudication and then sanctioning—that is, deciding whether content violates guidelines and if so, deciding what sanction should be enacted. Platforms adjudicate content through a process called content moderation, where content passes through automated filters and, if flagged or manually reported, through manual filters [40, 97, 106]. Automated filters rely on machine learning models that attempt to identify content that violates guidelines [20]. These models tend to perform well on some kinds of spam and on extremely harmful content like child sexual abuse content; they tend to struggle with more nuanced content like humor, ingroup jokes, or communication (e.g. use of the n-word) [65, 80, 117]. For this reason, some content flagged by a machine learning model may result in false positives (where appropriate content is deemed as in violation of guidelines) or false negatives (where violating content is overlooked). Manual content moderation is performed by human workers who review individual pieces of content and similarly try to assess whether the content violated guidelines. These human workers tend to be underpaid, asked to review psychologically traumatizing content (e.g. violent images), and are typically outsourced workers via third party firms without the resources and benefits of employees [97].

When content is found to violate community guidelines, platforms typically rely on a few types of sanctions [43]. One is a warning to the account owner, which is used for relatively mild violations and first time offenders. A second is removal of the offending content with a notification to the account owner. A third is temporarily disabling a user’s account and a fourth—the most severe—is a permanent ban of the user’s account. Some other possible sanctions include shadow-banning—an opaque algorithmic response that decreases the likelihood of content showing up in other users’ news feeds. These remedies are generally punitive in nature—they punish accounts for violating guidelines rather than seeking to rehabilitate them [103]. While punishment may be an effective response, it is also possible that restorative responses like apologies, mediation, or compensation could be effective alternatives [103]. Shamed-based approaches have also been proposed as a formed of gender-based justice [112]. A second challenge with punitive remedies is that they rely on content deletion, which introduces concerns about rights to freedom of expression and censorship [21, 102].

Social media platforms and their affordances enable harassment which targets users with vulnerable and marginalized identities, especially against women, Black, Brown, and Indigenous people, disabled people, religious minorities, dissidents, and LGBTQ people. In the United States, younger people, Black people, and lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are more likely to experience online harassment [33, 76]. LGB respondents reported being twice as likely (57% vs 26%) as heterosexual respondents to not post online due to a fear of harassment [76]. In India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, women experience widespread online abuse, especially cyberstalking, impersonation, and personal content leakages [100]. Specifically, in Bangladesh, gender-based harassment is widespread and women often seek justice by unveiling harassing content and users to other [113]. A study by Pollicy, an Ugandan feminist collective of technologists, data scientists and academics, showed that 28% of 3,300

women interviewed in Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Senegal and South Africa experienced some form of online harassment [72].

Though gender-based violence is documented in many countries throughout the world, content moderation policy and enforcement has been largely enacted by a small population of people in Western technology companies, typically led by men who are white or Asian [121]. Taking a global, universal approach to content moderation may result in hegemony, where value systems are enacted by those in power [60]. This concern is exacerbated by the fact that content moderation is an opaque process [94]: scholars have raised concerns about inequities in moderation policies, such as Black accounts being sanctioned for engaging in anti-racist speech while accounts that shared the racist speech are not sanctioned [80]. While extensive work in HCI has now focused on online harassment and content moderation, little of it has focused on Black women and femme's experiences in the United States, a pattern of oversight documented in recent years by scholars of race and technology in HCI [16, 54, 56].

Lineages of harm, violence, and trauma offline have made their way into digital spaces where myriad studies show that Black women experience harassment and toxicity [4, 45, 80, 90]. Brandeis Marshall proposes the concept of “algorithmic misogynoir”, building off of Moya Bailey’s “misogynoir” [4, 80], to describe the double standards associated in content moderation where Black women are more likely to be banned or moderated for “hate speech” while users who spread hate speech may have their content kept up. While racist or anti-Black content may sometimes be explicit online, it can also be deceptive. In 2014, Shafiqah Hudson uncovered a far right extremist movement online, manifested as a fake Twitter account impersonating a Black woman and feminist. The account generated a hoax campaign calling to #EndFathersDay that regurgitated harmful stereotypes about Black men. Hudson noted that, “they tweeted about collecting welfare checks and smoking weed, with an occasional screed against white people... all while using a seemingly forced version of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) that no real black person ever uses” [49]. Hudson and l’Nasah Crockett began using the hashtag #YourSlipIsShowing to flag faux Black feminists Twitter accounts. Meredith Clark describes the dichotomy that exists within social media platforms as places and spaces for Black women to heal, while recognizing there is no safe space online for women of color [23]. Racial capitalism and the resulting discrimination and injustice that happens to Black life persists while social media and media channels inflate narratives of violence, anger, and loss associated to Black life [82].

### 2.3 Transformative Justice, Healing, and Joy

Transformative justice (TJ) refers to a set of frameworks and a movement designed to seek justice, collective liberation, healing, repair, safety, community accountability, and resources in response to systemic oppression and state violence. Similar to Black feminist movements, transformative justice is grounded in politics of liberation [6, 37, 57]. The contemporary movement of transformative justice emerged from Black, Indigenous, Hispanic or Latino, disabled, low-income, queer, and transgender abolitionists and activists whose work addressed the structural, interpersonal, and state violence within and against their communities that stems from

historical lineages of colonialism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy [31, 71, 73]. TJ expands on grassroots movements resistant to violence of Black and Brown communities, centering a vision where we are all resourced with “everything we need: food, shelter, education, health, art, beauty, clean water, and more things that are foundational to personal and community safety” [71].

According to Mia Mingus, TJ practitioner and disability activist, prevention is an important facet of transformative justice’s ability to transform, abolish, and/or wholly eradicate root causes of harm and violence [85, 86]. TJ recognizes that all stakeholders (family, community, traditions, and institutions) have the capacity to replicate dominant power dynamics and harm. As TJ scholar and activist Mariame Kaba says, TJ looks at the conditions that allow harm to become normal [71]. Accountability for harm in TJ consists of two parts: divesting from current punitive models of accountability, like police and prisons, and investing in community-based systems of support. Scholars have recently started to bring TJ principles into computing scholarship to advocate for computing that encourages Black and Latina girls [37], to repair harm after online harassment [104], and to build interventions that support healing while minimizing harm [3].

This notion of accountability is also a part of restorative justice (RJ), an adjacent theoretical praxis to TJ [11, 50, 83]. RJ is a philosophy that centers healing and accountability to repair harm and wrongdoing, strengthen community, and build relationships between victims, those who caused harm, and their community [120]. RJ begins with the acknowledgement of harm and the desire to take responsibility by those that committed or facilitated this harm in order to begin the accountability, forgiveness, and healing process for all involved parties: victim, community, and those that committed harm. Whereas RJ often focuses on interpersonal relationships and communities’ experiences of harm, TJ address the interlocking systems of oppression that enable and encourage violence though both share commitments to recognizing harm and asking for accountability. Both also share roots in addressing experiences of sexual violence within communities.

While Black feminist thought and transformative justice recognize oppression, inequality, violence, and harm in communities, they also give space for accountability, healing, and joy as parts of collective liberation. As scholar and journalist Imani Perry states, “joy is not found in the absence of pain and suffering. It exists through it” [93]. Digital studies scholars are also turning to frameworks around joy, refusal, and reclaiming in online spaces. André Brock’s book, *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*, encourages the examination of Black technoculture in joy as it is situated within libidinal practices online [13]. Scholars have referred to the concept of “sistah circles” where “digital Black femme love practice” is centered [30, 79]. Catherine Knight Steele, in her book *Digital Black Feminism*, posits that Black and African American-orientated blogs play host to (intra)group covert alternative publics in the forms of enclaves and satellites—emulating offline Black barbershop and Black salons [110].

Enclaves and satellites designed by and produced for Black women on social media platforms become intimate containers for what Bailey refers to as a Black femme digital alchemy, “a praxis designed to create better representations for those most marginalized through the implementation of networks of care beyond the

boundaries of the digital” [4]. Digital alchemy speaks to the ways Black women and femmes are recreating and redefining representations of themselves that are “explicitly for their own communities, affirming their own values and beliefs outside the mainstream” [4]. Black feminists interrogate issues and resist oppression outside the traditional and hegemonic online public [108]. Steele and Lu describe how traditions of orality like storytelling are rhetorical strategies in online spaces for resistance, expressions of grief, creativity and joy, mutual care and aid, and amplifying and celebration of each other [77].

Numerous scholars have documented how Black women leverage, configure, and master tools that were not created for them to master. These reconfigurations are prominent on Twitter where Black Twitter has fomented activism and social movement [67]. Clark’s study of Black Twitter highlights the way Black women academics leverage Twitter as a source of intimate and reciprocal communities of care and healing, aka “help in a hashtag” by way of a hashtag like #FirstGenDocs or #SisterPHD, or share syllabi on Twitter as a strategy to disrupt white supremacy in the Ivory tower [23]. Klassen et al.’s study shows how Black Twitter responds to racism with community-based networks of resistance, empowerment, and joy [74].

Black women embody knowledge of transformation into digital alchemy in service to their kinship and intellectual networks, self-actualization, activism, protection, joy, spiritual care, and all around #blackgirlmagic [4, 12, 109, 115]. In the speculative fiction narrative tradition, Black women are cyborgs mediating between becoming repressed technology to being transcendent technology capable of overcoming harm and violence [15, 47]. Black women’s relationship to digital spaces as a Black femme digital practice is “the creation of methodologies for witnessing and mourning... It is precisely the intellectual and kinship work Black women and femmes engage in across time and space” [79]. Black women and femmes curate their digital lives, shaping social media platforms to evoke their dynamic self and collective expressions of healing, communality, self-care, personal reflection, creativity, joy, culture and knowledge production, and digital alchemy [4, 77, 109]. At times, this digital practice becomes visible to the hegemony—the wider online public sphere—who can witness, relish in, or reject the expressions of the Black femme digital practice [108].

Joy is so many things to Black women and femmes—it is the embrace of life, kinship, justice and care in a world drenched in inequities and violence; it is what they make of it. The Combahee River Collective statement put forth the understanding that Black feminists, in their shared but diverse experiences, “evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters, and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work” [1]. Brooks describes choosing joy as “living [in] embodiment of our innate birthright of love”; “breathing free from chains” (citing [42]); and living abundantly, with love, advocacy for social change, rest, breathing, and full embrace [14]. Thus, the examination of Black joy on social media platforms is an acknowledgement of the fully human Black experience [13, 77].

### 3 METHODS

We conducted semi-structured focus groups focused on Black women and femmes experiences of unwanted behavior on social media and their responses to those experiences. Below we describe the focus groups, recruitment procedures, data analysis, and ethical considerations in planning and performing this study.

#### 3.1 Participant Recruitment

During our recruitment, we solicited basic demographic information from participants to determine eligibility. We asked about gender (“What is your gender”) and race (“What is your race?”) as open-ended questions and about age as a dropdown range. We asked what country participants lived in and how long they had lived there (to focus on U.S. Black experiences). We asked about social media experiences including what platforms participants used and what platforms they had experienced or observed unwanted behavior on. The recruitment criteria for our study was that participants must identify within the broad categories of Black or African American, must identify as a woman, femme, or nonbinary person, must be living in the U.S., and must be active social media users. We also selected for participants who had experienced unwanted behavior themselves or observed it among other Black women. We chose to include observation as a criteria because observing harm of others can be harmful for people from similar identities and groups. Our recruitment materials noted that the focus groups would be conducted by two Black women/femmes, and that the research team consisted of two Black women/femmes and one white woman collaborator.

We recruited participants through the following online channels: social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, LinkedIn), digital flyers, via organizations that focus on Black women, LGBTQ women, and/or transwomen, and email listservs. As part of our recruitment strategy, we created a recruitment website with a design evocative of restorative justice practices and Black women and femme’s identities and an About Us page to introduce the research team. We also recruited using physical fliers, personal networks, and local organizations supporting Black women in the Detroit, Washington DC, and Baltimore regions. These locations were a convenience sample based on physical locations the project team had access to and that have large populations of Black communities. Bloomberg’s CityLab study on What ‘Livability’ Looks Like for Black Women shows that Washington DC and Baltimore have above-average overall outcomes (calculated by income status, health conditions, and educational accomplishments) while Detroit was below median for overall outcomes [87]. We stopped recruiting participants when we started to hear consistent themes. In our communication with research participants, we attached a “digital care package” which included a welcome message, date and time of research appointment, compensation plans, consent form, and a welcome letter. The welcome letter centered on restorative practice of transparency, mutual care and safety, and self- and after-care tips.

We conducted 18 focus groups with 49 participants during a two-month period in 2021. Our participants primarily identified as African and Black American and first and second generations of the African, Brazilian, and Caribbean diaspora who live in the U.S. Some

identified as mixed race, such as Black and Native American or Black and Pacific Islander. Their ages ranged between 18-70 years old. Participants reported using social media platforms to post, comment or just look: most of the day (N=16), multiple times a day (N=21), a couple times a day (N=6), a couple of times a week (N=6) and rarely or never (N=1). Participants primarily identified their gender as female (N=33) or woman (N=10), while some were gender fluid (N=1), non-binary (N=3), or gender abolitionist (N=1). Participants expressed experiencing or observing unwanted behavior on social media a couple of times a day (N=4), a couple of times a week (N=8), a couple of times a month (N=17), or once a month (N=11).

Participants reported an average of 3 social media platforms each where they have experienced unwanted behavior or observing a Black women/femme receiving unwanted behavior. The social media platforms that were reported from our sample of participants include: Facebook (N=39), Instagram (N=32), Twitter (N=31), YouTube (N=16), TikTok (N=15), Snapchat (N=10), Tumblr (N=7), Reddit (N=6), LinkedIn (N=6), Twitch (N=3), and Bumble (N=2), Tinder (N=2), WeChat, Medium, and Nextdoor (all N=1).

### 3.2 Focus Group Protocol

We drew on restorative justice practices in the design of the focus groups. Specifically, we drew on restorative justice circles, a practice with Indigenous roots where communities come together to discuss harm and repair as described above [50, 96, 98, 120]. RJ circles are often used in cases of explicit harm from one party to another where both parties come together along with family members and community members (typically referred to as “conferencing”). In conferences, victims can talk about the harm they experienced and how it impacted them and offenders can discuss what they did and maybe why they did it. Offenders should hopefully express remorse and an intent to repair harms caused. Circles can also be used for more general experiences of harm—as was the case in our study of Black women and femmes experiencing online harassment—as a way to come together in a communal context. Our study bridged Black feminist and restorative practice, drawing on Jennifer Richardson’s *Black Women’s Liberatory Pedagogies: Healing Circles as Black Feminist Pedagogical Interventions* [92]. In this work, Richardson calls attention to “the Black feminist tradition of radical self-care and well-being” through communal and kinship healing circles amongst Black women as an effective way to transform the impact of media violence on Black women’s consciousness and humanity, collective knowledge production, and a place to cultivate healing and pleasure politic [92].

Our focus groups followed elements of RJ circles where the lead researcher played the role of circlekeeper, facilitating the conversation and monitoring wellbeing of participants while centering restorative values of transparency, mutual care, respect, truth, and safety. While this approach deviates from common approaches to interviews and focus groups in HCI, we chose to center our methods in Black feminist and Indigenous practices. Because we screened participants for experiences of online harassment, we could assume that most or all had experienced or witnessed harassment in our design of the RJ circles. This assumption also shaped our approach to the focus group questions, which were not built on assumptions of neutrality or freedom from bias—a principle that

aligns poorly with Black feminist thought—but instead on one of exploring what harm and healing look like in the tradition of oral storytelling and testimonial authority [27, 91, 95]. All focus groups were conducted on the Zoom platform which prevented a physical circle, though the small group size allowed all profiles to be visible on the Zoom screen and a natural conversational flow amongst participants. We revised the protocol iteratively, reflecting on the protocol after each of the first few focus groups and revising questions as needed. We ended up with five guiding questions, each of which had follow-ups and prompts to foster conversation. The five guiding questions, developed iteratively in the first 3-4 focus groups and used subsequently, were:

- (1) How would you define your relationship with social media platforms that you use?
- (2) What are your experiences with unwanted behavior on the social media platforms that you use?
- (3) How have these harmful incidences of unwanted behavior and online harassment negatively impacted you?
- (4) Do you think it’s possible to cope, heal, or even experience joy after experiencing unwanted behavior online?
- (5) How do you cope, heal and experience joy after experiencing unwanted behavior online?

The focus groups were conducted by two researchers. We began with an opening ceremony by a researcher, followed by a consent process, welcoming introduction, explanation of the values and practices associated with circle processes (an approach used in restorative justice), an overview of the topic, setting ground rules, participants and researcher introductions, and welcoming questions or comments. We then moved into the five guiding questions. The focus groups were roughly 90 minutes each, and each participant was paid \$40 for their participation. Throughout the guiding question discussion, the two researchers acted as focus group facilitators, following up with deeper questions and/or rewording of guiding questions, if needed. At times participants also asked each other questions about their experiences or added virtual or oral affirmations such as, “I feel you,” “Yasss.” The two researcher-facilitators disclosed their personal experiences with social media platforms and their experiences with interlocking oppressions. Our decision for the researcher-facilitators to shift between researcher, facilitator, and participant identities was intentional to nurture self-disclosure and feelings of support, as well as to resist assumptions of objectivity or neutrality which may be associated with norms and defaults of whiteness.

At the close of the focus group discussion, in alignment with restorative ceremonial processes, a researcher led a breathing exercise to decompress from the discussion, shared a statement of gratitude and appreciation to participants, and then acknowledged participants’ willingness to participate and for their vulnerability and disclosures in recollecting of possibly bad or traumatic experiences. Finally, the researcher posted a link for participants to receive the \$40 compensation.

Each focus group had between 2-4 participants, with a maximum of 4 invited to any given focus group slot. For many of the groups, we sought to cluster participants by shared identity by gender, social media use, or age. For example, two focus groups had participants who were in the age range of 51-70 to encourage them to discuss

**Table 1: Participant Demographic, including gender, race, age range, social media use, and experiences or observation of unwanted behavior on social media.**

Gender	Race	Age	Social Media Use	Unwanted Behavior
Non-binary & femme	Black	18-30	Multiple times a day	A couple of times a day
Female	Black	18-30	Most of the day	Once a month
Female	African-American	18-30	Multiple times a day	Once a month
Female	Black	18-30	Most of the day	A couple of times a week
Female	Black	31-50	Multiple times a day	Once a month
Non-binary (AFAB)	Black	18-30	A couple of times a day	A couple of times a month
Cis woman	Black, Haitian American	18-30	Multiple times a day	A couple of times a month
Gender fluid	Mixed	18-30	A couple of times a week	A couple of times a month
Woman	Black	18-30	Most of the day	A couple of times a month
Female	Black	18-30	A couple of times a week	Once a month
Female	Black	18-30	Multiple times a day	Multiple times a day
Female	Black, White and Native	18-30	Multiple times a day	A couple of times a month
Cis female	Black Nigerian American	18-30	Most of the day	A couple of times a month
Female	Black	31-50	Multiple times a day	Rarely or never
Female	African American/Black	18-30	Multiple times a day	Multiple times a day
Female	African American	18-30	Multiple times a day	Once a month
Female	Black	31-50	Most of the day	A couple of times a month
Female	Black	18-30	Most of the day	A couple of times a month
female	Black	18-30	Most of the day	A couple of times a month
Female	Black	18-30	Most of the day	A couple of times a day
Woman	Black	18-30	Multiple times a day	Once a month
Female	Black	18-30	A couple of times a day	A couple of times a month
Woman	Black (Biracial)	31-50	A couple of times a week	Once a month
Woman	Black	18-30	Multiple times a day	A couple of times a month
Female	Black	51-70	Multiple times a day	A couple of times a week
Female	black	18-30	Multiple times a day	A couple of times a week
Female	African American	31-50	A couple of times a week	Rarely or never
Cis woman	Black	18-30	Multiple times a day	A couple of times a week
Female	BLACK African American	31-50	A couple of times a day	Rarely or never
Female	Black	18-30	Most of the day	A couple of times a month
Gender abolitionist	Black/African-American	31-50	Most of the day	Once a month
Female	Black	31-50	Most of the day	A couple of times a month
Female	Black	31-50	Multiple times a day	Once a month
female	Black	18-30	A couple of times a week	Rarely or never
woman	black	18-30	Multiple times a day	A couple of times a week
female	Black/African-American	31-50	Multiple times a day	Multiple times a day
Female	Black	51-70	Most of the day	A couple of times a day
Woman/Female	Black	18-30	Most of the day	A couple of times a month
Woman	African American	18-30	Most of the day	Multiple times a day
nonbinary	jamaican/filipino/ tuvaluan	18-30	Most of the day	A couple of times a week
Female	Multicultural/Black dominant	51-70	Most of the day	Most of the day
Female	Black	18-30	Multiple times a day	A couple of times a day
Cis woman	Black Pacific Islander	18-30	Multiple times a day	A couple of times a month
female	Black	31-50	A couple of times a day	Once a month
Woman	Black	31-50	Multiple times a day	A couple of times a week
Female	African American	51-70	Rarely or never	Rarely or never
female	Black	51-70	A couple of times a week	Once a month
female	Black	31-50	A couple of times a day	A couple of times a month
Female	Black	31-50	Most of the day	A couple of times a month

their online experiences while recognizing their experiences might be substantially different from those in early adulthood.

**3.2.1 Data Analysis.** We audio and video recorded the focus groups and stored them in a shared, secure digital folder. We transcribed the videos afterwards using a combination of automated methods via Otter.ai and a paid undergraduate research assistant. The research team watched and listened to the recordings and read transcriptions. We debriefed regularly, after every 1-2 focus groups, among the research team. We took a thematic analysis approach to our analysis of the transcripts where we iteratively identified patterns in the data using open coding and memoing. The open coding process involved identifying themes of interest from each participant, including descriptions of harassment, experiences of harm, and ideas about joy and healing.

We discussed the patterns in the context of prior work we were building off to identify relevant themes in our data. We also discussed emergent themes that we had not looked for explicitly. We shifted which theories and frameworks we would be drawing from over time as we conducted the focus groups and analyzed the data; for example, we decided to draw on cultural betrayal trauma theory [48] as it became clear that participants distinguished between white and Black men's harassment as unique experiences. We relied on the open coding to iteratively memo and identify higher level themes to focus on in this paper. We chose not to conduct interrater reliability because it was not aligned with the nature of the focus groups conversations and the communal, RJ approach [84]. Our data analysis approaches drew from recent scholarship in HCI focusing on Black people's technology use (e.g. [52]) that bridge coding and memoing with reflections on ideological stances of the nature of the data and topic.

### 3.3 Approach and Positionality

The study was exempted from full review by an institutional review board. Though not required with an exemption, we created consent forms similar to what are used in full review studies and emailed them to participants at least one day before each focus group was conducted. The research team then orally described the study and asked participants to consent to participation during the recorded session. We invited participants to participate with their video on when possible, but also encouraged them to participate in ways that are comfortable and accessible for them. Most participants had their videos on while some did not or alternated between on and off, either because they were calling in from a mobile phone or because they expressed a desire to have video off for their own comfort.

The focus groups were conducted by two Black women/femmes. As in our recruitment messages, at the beginning of each focus group we communicated our team's identities to participants—the two Black women/femmes and the white woman—including that the three team members would be reviewing recordings and transcripts of the focus groups. A subsequent assistant was hired to transcribe the focus groups who was a Black non-binary person. Throughout the study design and analysis, we tried to build closely off of scholarship and practices advocated for in Black feminist scholarship, including centering participants as experts in their lives, decentering whiteness as a baseline or reference point, and interrogating assumptions about how research should be done that

may be perpetuated in historically non-Black scholarship. We also tried to reflect on our own positionalities while demonstrating self and relational accountability throughout the research process. For example, we chose to have the two Black coauthors conduct the focus groups because of their shared identities. However, after the first focus group the third coauthor, who is white-presenting, watched the video and felt that participants should know more clearly that she might be watching the video so we added an explicit statement to the oral opening script. The Black coauthors bring educational expertise and lived experiences to how they approached the study design and analysis and where possible we prioritized those over perceived norms and expectations of a "typical" CHI paper or of the white-presenting coauthor.

## 4 RESULTS

Results are grouped into three themes. In the first section, we present a selection of stories of unwanted behavior. We chose this style to bring the richness of participants' online experiences into prominence as is common in Black feminist oral traditions; these stories may resonate personally with some readers while they may introduce new perspectives to others. The second section describes the impact of these unwanted experiences on participants. The third section discusses what healing and joy does, or could, look like for participants.

### 4.1 Experiences of Unwanted Behavior and Online Harassment

In this section, we share seven stories from our participants. The experiences detailed by our 49 participants were similar to these stories and we chose these stories as a sampling of the wider group's experiences. In our first story, Mariah, describes her experiences of racism on Facebook and Instagram, which led to her deactivating her Facebook account. In our second story, Tamia describes hypersexualization and stalking on her hobby-centered Instagram profile. In our third story, Amery discusses being called an angry Black woman on Facebook. In our fourth story, Shera describes her experiences discussing race online—both negative and positive. In our fifth story, Tiffany describes two incidents of unwanted behavior on her Facebook page. In our sixth story, Brianna describes her experiences being sexually harassed online by Black men. In our final story, Toya discusses her experiences as a Black disabled person online.

*Story 1: Mariah.* In 2019, Mariah deactivated her Facebook account because she no longer wanted to feel as if she needed to police herself by worrying about what she posts and if she would have the emotional energy to defend herself. In 2014-2015, she said, it was particularly challenging to be on Instagram and Facebook platforms during the height of so much contention offline and online in American society. In her own words, "I would post pictures of Black Lives Matter marches that I had gone to in New York City when I was living there, and about how I went to the Million Man March in Washington DC, I was really excited posting about things that were going on in Flint and, um, and then like, larger, more abstract, like, ideas about racism, like where it where it comes from, and just kind of really trying to examine and call out people who I saw to be participating only performatively in



the activism. So I would get a lot of questions, especially about the Black Lives Matter stuff.” For her, her posts were about calling out racism, white supremacy, and performative activism by white folks that she personally knew were not “being real.” She says, “now it seems like liberal and progressive white people have forgotten that there was a time where not all of them were in support of BLM.” Mariah received a lot of defensive and aggressive remarks on her posts, from mostly white women and white men: “Why do Black Lives matter?” or “How am I supposed to respect a movement made up of thugs and those willing to demolish other people’s property?” or “Why as a white person can’t I say the N-word?” These questions and remarks were posted underneath her status update and comments, and sometimes under photos of marches that had been posted by the same exact people. Mariah received some support from others via “Likes” on her comments; however, nobody ever apologized or was accountable, so Mariah left Facebook.

*Story 2: Tamia.* Tamia had three distinct Instagram profiles for food, weight lifting, and personal use. Tamia had recently gotten into weightlifting and used her Instagram profile to track her process and engage with the lifting community. She told us, “When I lift I wear a t-shirt and shorts or spandex, even though that doesn’t matter, people will find a way to oversexualize bodies regardless of what they’re wearing.” Tamia came to the realization that it would be mostly male weightlifters following her account and they would rarely be accounts she followed back. A few months ago, a Black man followed her on Instagram, went through and “liked” a bunch of her photos then slid into her DM’s complimenting her. She thanked him and tried to go about her day, but he continued to try to get her attention. Tamia “played the boyfriend card” but he didn’t care and continued to contact her asking questions trying to get her time and attention. Finally, he sent an unsolicited picture of his genitals to her Instagram direct messages. Tamia blocked him, however, he found her personal Instagram account, she believed through the suggested accounts feature, and continued to send her messages. Tamia remembered his last message, “you didn’t have to block me?” She blocked him again. Tamia told us she did not go through the reporting process because it had not worked for her before.

*Story 3: Amery.* Amery described herself as not really a social media person now but when she was on social media more she would spend time there observing other people’s opinions. She had stopped using social media earlier in 2021 because she had lost interest due to the amount of disrespect she observed between people online. She used Twitter mostly for professional purposes and Facebook for personal ones—mostly family photos. On Facebook, her disappointment started around discussions about police officers killing Black people. A family member made a post on the topic and Amery commented about media being evil and promoting good officers rather than bad. “And for some reason, they started telling me that was an angry Black woman and, and I didn’t even, you know, just all this disappointment. And at first I tried to defend myself like I didn’t even mention anything about I’m angry.” Other people also commented on the post but nobody apologized; a long string of what she described as unnecessary conversations led her to being “done” and she logged out. Amery describes herself as a biblical person—she is Christian—and spending less time on social media helped her to keep her faith and sanity intact. In her own words,

“So for me, I just take myself away, to stay healed. And spiritually in tune, I just keep myself away from those negative and evil spirits. And to me, it was enjoyable looking at the photos of my family members, my great nieces and nephews. That was very enjoyable. But then I said to myself, you know, what did we do before this existed? I mean, so I tell my family members, you know, pick up the phone and call me, come see me... Let’s get back to that, you know, I think the social media is dividing us to have that physical contact with each other... if you happen to have an angry tone, you just say something and then automatically you’re angry Black person. So those were some of the things that just, just discouraged me from even being on social media.” She felt that social media contains negative and evil spirits and she wishes things could go back to more physical contact so that maybe people wouldn’t be so divided.

*Story 4: Shera.* Shera told us she was active on social media. Though she had sometimes taken breaks, her breaks didn’t typically last more than a week because she wanted to be connected to family and friends. Someone had posted about a jazz music program on Facebook but the post showed mostly white men. She commented that it was interesting to hold such a program in Detroit and have not Black people. A white man started harassing her in the comments, asking why she was bringing race into the discussion. She told us that she normally doesn’t respond with anger because she knows social media thrives off negativity, but their discussion turned into an argument. Still, a lot of people liked and co-signed her comment. Sheera noted that on Nextdoor someone had complained about young people using bike lanes “doing young people stuff” and she commented, “I’m sure they don’t do this in Grosse Pointe [a nearby wealthy region].” Here the conversation did not spiral out of control the way it had on Facebook. She reflected with us that she had become more cautious about the words she uses online—she would rewrite posts, adjusting her vocabulary, so that it would not spark other people to twist her words. However, she clarified that she didn’t feel she was “walking on eggshells” or “being less authentic”—she was not changing the meaning of her message just the words.

*Story 5: Tiffany.* In 2016, Tiffany wrote a Facebook status showing her support for Korryn Gaines, a 23-year old mother who was killed by Baltimore County police, writing “here is a Black woman practicing her sovereign rights and she was murdered.” Black men that Tiffany went to college with commented on her Facebook post that Korryn deserved to die because she was putting her son in danger and other harmful statements. Tiffany shared with us that she felt disbelief—just a month earlier she had co-organized her first-ever march in support of Black men murdered by police. This was the first time she experienced the paradox that when Black women defend themselves against police violence or stand their ground, a lot of Black men justify the police violence. She told us this led her into a deleting and blocking spree, and the entire experience remained vivid to her because of how disturbing it was. Tiffany continued to be in an activist community on Facebook along with other men (particularly, Black men), where she continued to notice and confront them about their misogynistic and toxic Facebook posts.

*Story 6: Brianna.* Brianna had been on Twitter for nearly a decade. Her account was unlocked—i.e. public—from 2010-2016 and she

posted regularly about her identity and sexuality. She regularly was harassed on Twitter, primarily by Black men who would send her unsolicited nude images. She never asked for nude photos and explained that her being comfortable with her sexuality was not an invitation for that behavior. In her words, “And I wouldn’t block them because I didn’t understand the power of the block, you know, back in the day on Twitter. And then I just started blocking people. And then my account became private [in 2016]. And so then that kind of stopped the unsolicited dick pics. So that’s that, I don’t really get that that doesn’t happen to me anymore on any platform, really not unsolicited, or people who are strangers. It just shocked me because it reminded me so much of just street harassment, like unprovoked, like, Who are you? How do you even know me? You know, where did you come from? So that would be weird and bizarre?” She had appreciated being able to come to terms with her identity online because Black women were always fetishized and sexualized to the point of not being comfortable in their own skin. Her online experiences contributed both to experiences of sexualization but also to her being able to develop her identity.

*Story 7: Toya.* Toya identified as a disabled Black Nigerian-American. She said she had an “unhealthy relationship” with social media. She had multiple accounts—with both her real identity and with pseudonyms—for safety reasons. She had not been active on social media lately due to its toxicity. Earlier in 2021, she had posted on Twitter about a disabled Black folks campaign and received backlash from ADOS (American Descendants from Slaves) who stated that she wasn’t allowed to post about Black history month because she didn’t descend from slaves. A Black man wrote “A bitch here on a Visa thinking she can tell us our history.” She explained to us that being disabled already created a disconnection from others and the pandemic exacerbated the loneliness. However, while she shared that she didn’t know how to heal from those experiences, finding other disabled people online brought her some elements of joy.

## 4.2 Impact of Unwanted Behavior and Online Harassment

In this section, we describe responses to the guiding question: How have these harmful incidences of unwanted behavior and online harassment negatively impacted you? Our participants cumulatively expressed emotional, physical, mental, relational, and spiritual impacts associated with unwanted behaviors online. We heard this articulated in their word choice and vocalized in their tone and expressions. Terms they used included: distrust, trauma, hurt, frustration, anger, disbelief, depression, exhaustion, mental and emotional drain, stressed, divided, biased, fear, disappointment, anxiety, confusion, disgust, sadness, rage, betrayal, worry, caution, weariness, fear, self-blame, self-hatred, stuck in a box, shocked, unfulfillment, questioning my technological skills, self-betrayal, causing me to be negative, physical health strain like insomnia and rumination.

*4.2.1 Distrust of People and Platforms.* A common theme that emerged was distrust. Distrust was experienced in several ways, including distrust of the social media platform, particularly in reporting incidences of harm. Participants said that Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook have unreliable reporting mechanisms, which impacted their sense of trust, safety, and belonging on these social media platforms. For example, Janine had experiences on Instagram

reporting homophobic pages that were never taken down because the people who posted them, “had freedom of speech” according to the response she received from Instagram’s investigation. Several participants felt that social media algorithms deprioritized Black-centered content, activism, and social justice content, especially on Instagram and Twitter. A couple of our participants expressed having their accounts deemed in violation of community policies which led to warning or permanent suspension of the account. As Val quipped, “like, what are the community guidelines? White supremacy or what?” Several participants communicated being weary of their overall experience on social media platforms. Tamia said “... it may improve my social media experience but I can’t keep blocking or muting people or muting words. Social media can be a tough place sometimes.” Amery expressed that social media divides people and divides her as well. She felt angry and developed biased opinions in the process. Toya said social media platforms need to “get less racist moderators” because they unfairly punish Black creators.

Distrust online for some participants created distrust in their offline experiences, Toya expressed how their online experiences and suspicions resulted in offline distrust, “I now record my doctor’s visits because I was tired of being discriminated against, I trust doctors less because I have seen their bias in black and white online.” Suspicion and caution were common themes in participants’ experiences online that informed their offline lives. Taneshia shared, “I am introverted by nature, social media is my way of opening myself up and putting myself out there without too much risk, and when these negative experiences happen... it’s like I knew it I should’ve stayed in the house, sat on the couch, not look at my phone.”

A common theme among participants in the younger age ranges of our sample (18-50) was harmful experiences with men that created distrust. Lexi explained: “I don’t trust men. The opinions that are shared on social and world issues are much more hurtful than the sexual harassment that I experienced... All punishments [men] cannot exact upon us in real life, whatever they can’t do in real life, they will find a way to do to us online.” Distrust also emerged when participants felt too emotionally divested in arguing with men who were “taking energy from them” and were “negative individuals who don’t want to change.” As above, these experiences impacted participants not only online but also physically and emotionally. Cameron said the impact mentally drained her and she started to be cautious around Black men—they were the reason why she made her page private. A common experience expressed by several participants was the experience of defending Black women who were killed by police, like Korryn Gaines and Breonna Taylor online. Tiffany said the amount of Black men defending the police in that situation was shocking to her. “It could’ve been Korryn Gaines or any other Black woman. Black women are always on the frontlines for Black men but it’s barely the other way around.” Audria had told her husband, a Black man, about the online harassment she experienced online. She spent most of her time on Black Twitter so did not receive a lot of interaction from men, only from other Black men. Her husband’s response was of disbelief because he did not know about these interactions, though she was careful to note that he believed her.

Sexual harassment on social media platforms was a common experience for participants in the 18-50 age groups, especially in

the form of visual images. For example, Alanna, a non-binary participant, said, “if I feel like I want to subject myself to [harassment] than I’ll just hop onto any dating site ever, anytime—my harassment experience jumps 80%.” They noted that this dynamic happened when they matched with cis-het men on dating platforms. Several participants experienced sexual harassment in the form of unsolicited sexual comments and direct messages from men on the Instagram platform. As described above, Tamia told us about sexual harassment she experienced on her hobby-centered Instagram account. A person who presented as a Black man approached her by complimenting her on her hobby; when she tried to deflect by saying she was in a relationship and uninterested, he then aggressively and sexually commented on her physical appearance and sent a “dick pic” to her direct messages. When Tamia blocked him, he found her other two personal Instagram accounts and continued harassing her there. Another participant shared, “And then I’ve also had another white guy who had done that. My response is just to disengage immediately and block them like on everything and just kind of try to distance myself like block their number, block their account, report their account. And then typically on platforms like Tinder or Instagram, like you can report them for a specific reason. And I’ll just say like, unsolicited. We’re just sexually harassed.” Zariel said that social media had led her to feel more suspicious towards Black men and she would bring up controversial topics to “test the waters.” She has removed Black men on Facebook and does not follow them back on Instagram, noting that she does not want to be overly distrustful but also wants to protect herself. Vanessa experienced street harassment in her hometown via a prior boyfriend when she was younger, who periodically contacts her on Facebook. For her, this “unwanted behavior online and online harassment stirs up past worries of this... I have two beautiful daughters and worry about their safety, and hate to post stuff about them online.”

**4.2.2 Relationships and Outlooks.** Throughout the focus groups, it became clear that participants’ relationships with themselves and others were negatively impacted by unwanted behavior online and online harassment. About one-third of participants expressed personal distress which led to as anxiety, self-blame, self-hatred, self-betrayal, comparison, shame, depression and internalization of harmful commentary. Rae said, “when I was [on Facebook], it negatively affected my mental health. [I was] often depressed and anxious, the depression came with self-blame.... If I can’t make them see that we matter, I am a terrible person.” Tanisha said, “Everyone talks about how hard it is to trust people after you’ve been hurt, but rarely... no one talks about how hard it is to trust yourself after having your gut instincts undermined by someone.” Destiny told us, “connecting people’s potential thoughts about you from the real world to online is anxiety-inducing. It really takes a toll on your mental health when you think about others’ opinions of you. My anxiety increases from these unwanted interactions online that affect me in real life.” Sharelle spoke of grief from the lack of safety and privacy in participating on Tumblr, while Whitney experienced residual aggression and anger that permeated offline from the combativeness on Twitter. Deja said, “People are committed to misunderstanding you.”

Several participants explained the relational costs of explaining and defending themselves. Mariah described men who used social media to spew ignorant and racist commentary. She described feeling rage and betrayal. Whitney exclaimed “I may be more aggressive due to the inability of not having a small discussion online because it’s not just you and the person, it’s anybody on [Twitter].” The residue of toxic online interactions like being called a “bitch” on Twitter caused Audria’s anxiety to worsen to the point where it triggered more arguments with her partner offline. Iesha expressed sadness over the divisiveness and conflict among her Black arts community online. Quintarra pointed to the ridiculous things people say on Facebook groups from her hometown about sexuality and the LGBTQ community, which she said highlights their underlying fear, shame, guilt and the coercion to conform out of fear. Katrina was a frequent churchgoer but after experiencing racialized political comments by her predominantly white church community on Facebook—folks she had considered friends—she left the church.

Another common theme was participants not wanting to share their experiences or fully participate on social media platforms out of fear that it would be taken out of context and to avoid conflict among their offline and online community. Veronica witnessed conflict on Facebook between family members who were able to make amends offline; however, she felt fear for them based on the conflict. Oli adjusted how she presented herself on Facebook to satisfy her traditionally African family members.

Participants also referred to visual societal norms and expectations that impacted them. For instance, Arianna identified as a Black plus-sized woman and said that on social media, smaller skinnier women with large butts are praised. She asked, “How do we build confidence while hourglass women are the standard?” Comparison to others was common among our participants, not only physically, but by comparing personal success or non-successes. Mikayla (and Iesha) both experienced depression and as creatives they “didn’t want to show anything because I didn’t really have anything to show.”

Many of the participants were working and linked their social media use to their careers or businesses. Niema expressed feeling ashamed of her drive and desire to increase being known in her career with the knowledge of the potential harms that she could put her family through. Two participants described being harassed by coworkers on Facebook. In one incident, a post created by a participant was printed and sent to her place of employment which triggered an investigation: “The situation around my job was very stressful. I became more cautious with the words that I use. Rewriting posts and using different vocabulary so it doesn’t spark others to twist my words.”

Participants also shared more political and global outcomes of harassment. Alanna engaged with political commentary on Facebook and felt that some Americans had this belief that we’ve reached a post-racial society, “away from racism, but we are in the same spot. This is particularly frustrating and depressing.” Nishara expressed that social media had taught her that people outside the U.S. are not necessarily better because they harass her too; she looks at people from some European regions differently because of her experiences with some of their ideas and racist actions online. Toya described the identity turmoil that she experienced as a Nigerian-American

journalist and disability advocate, “within the Black community, I’m not Nigerian enough to be Nigerian and I don’t feel accepted and in the Black American community I am too African to be Black. Reminding me that I don’t fit into any box.”

### 4.3 Healing and Joy

The final guiding question asked participants how they experience joy, healing, or coping from unwanted behavior online or online harassment. One focus group generated a concise delineation we will share here: “to heal means to fully address harm. However, coping is working towards healing.” From our data, coping with unwanted behavior online and online harassment included weekly and monthly social media breaks, limiting time on social media, using private and blocking functions, and “always block the men harassing and their followers.” Andrea noted that it required building mental strength “...like celebrities because they take a beating every day. Their lives are posted everywhere.” Alanna said it required “laughing to keep from crying.” Zariel said she found joy from talking to other Black women who had shared perspectives and experiences. She noted that some Black men had apologized to her, but for her, unless it came with behavior change it was not meaningful. Auja experienced joy from her “personal curated space”—what she allowed or didn’t allow is what made her space enjoyable.

Healing from online harassment for our participants was facilitated online and offline. The majority of our participants agreed that healing was an ongoing process, “you learn from the pain but it’s gonna still be present, the ongoing battle equips you for the next battle” (Quinteya). Several participants expressed being involved in online community forums for Black women and femmes on Facebook that centered on Black feminist and queer politics created to uplift and provide community. Whitney said Facebook was her break from Twitter because she separates between her professional life on Twitter and kinship networks on Facebook. Additionally, participants took breaks from social media, and while offline, indulged in their favorite hobbies or commitments such as riding bikes, watching television, and practicing spirituality. Healing offline included venting to offline community of family and friends; among our participants, mothers were a common confidant that participants reached out to.

Layla said, “[Bumble] pushed her to pay attention to her relationships offline so there was a net positive impact. This would be a form of healing. A healing realization for me. Growth.” Niema reflected on social media’s capabilities to be a part of healing, saying that being reflective and having confidence in yourself was healing for her. “Social media can be a part of the healing by strengthening your validation and helping healing techniques that foster wellness.” Ilesha, informed by her bystander experiences of behaviors directed towards other Black women on Twitter, concluded that she would be more mindful of the energies around her and highlighted that the pandemic has made it easier for her to navigate this mindfulness offline and online, especially online where boundaries can be porous. Nashelle highlighted the positive impact of awareness to other identities and, Tiffany, a community organizer, expressed that her experiences online affirmed her activist work in supporting Black women in her community.

For Mikayla, Black joy was located on Instagram with images of Black people happy. Supporting Black creators brings her joy. However, seeing news of Black people being oppressed constantly was mentally draining even when people rely on it to be educated. She said “Black people are not here to educate you on their suffering.” For many participants, Black joy centered around carefully curating social media spaces to focus on Black women succeeding, Black people sharing community, funny Black memes, and other positive content. One participant shared, “It seems as if everybody is fixated on like Black pain and Black oppression. And being like, no, what I’m focusing on is Black joy. So I’ve also protected my statuses and another friend of mine, she just posted yesterday, like listen, all Black things, all Black joy all day. Because I know the pain we’ve I know all of that... But she’s like, don’t bring it to my door. Because this feed is all about Black people and all their glory and all their joy and all their like, that’s all it’s about.”

Some of our participants’ discussions about joy centered on their faith, especially those in the older age group (51-70). Amery, as mentioned above, drew on her faith which helped her decide to spend less time on social media. Katrina shared that she did not let online harassment experiences affect her joy and it was all about keeping things in perspective. For example, if the conflict on her church-related Facebook discussions didn’t happen, she would not have been educated on how to combat those experiences. Veronica similarly said she learned a lot from social media and it didn’t take away her happiness. She keeps going with life because her faith in God sustains her. Veronica said her daily bike rides brought her a lot of joy—the music she listened to, the view, and her ability to ride bikes at 68 years old. She said that being alive and healthy at that age was something to be joyful about. Que found joy on Black Twitter, particularly in sharing commonality among continental Africans and the African and Black diaspora.

Our intention with centering restorative practice in our protocol was to engage with the Black feminist liberatory love politic. As a testament of this effort, we observed that participants valued being in the study itself as a form of healing for them. Many of our participants during the focus group and via email afterward expressed appreciation for the opportunity to convene and talk about their online experiences—an opportunity many had not experienced before the focus group. For instance, in a follow-up email, Catrina wrote to our research team, “I wasn’t sure what to expect from the study when I signed up but I think you guys did a great job with the study. I thoroughly enjoyed the experience.” They appreciated being in a space where they could talk about their online experiences in a safe and supportive format. We designed the structure of the focus groups carefully, using restorative justice principles, which in themselves may have nurtured healing.

## 5 DISCUSSION AND REFLECTIONS

Our results describe the kinds of harm Black women and femmes experience on social media and how they engage with those experiences. Some of our findings echo and expand prior work on Black women’s experiences online, especially experiences of misogynoir [4] and efforts to reclaim space through resistance and joy [13, 74, 77]. We reflect here on emerging themes from our study that push HCI scholarship in new directions. The first theme focuses on

cultural betrayal and the complexities of harassment perpetuated by Black men. The second wrestles with harm and healing in the context of content moderation practices. We then return to transformative justice frameworks and a provocation: what would TJ look like on social media?

### 5.1 Online Harassment and Cultural Betrayal Trauma

The interpersonal nature of harassment and unwanted behavior was felt deeply by participants, but its impact varied based on who was doing the harassing. Participants described unwanted behavior from white women and men as well as from Black men online. We will return to racism they experienced from white people in the next sections; here we wish to engage with how they spoke about their experiences of harassment from Black men. Multiple participants shared that they received unwanted harassment from Black men and that they used a variety of strategies to cope but they struggled with the experience. There is a burden placed on Black women and femmes to bear what Jennifer Gómez explains as (intra)cultural pressure to protect the minority group and not go against the “unwritten family rule,” that “Black women will support Black men no matter what [43].” This pressure was something that participants wrestled with, and indeed their struggles harken back to Black feminist knowledge-building by hooks and Smith over many decades.

Gómez describes how the compounded negative effects of harassment and discrimination from within an ethnic group is associated with breakdowns of (intra)cultural trust and development of cultural betrayal trauma [48]. In the case of Black women and femmes, experiences with harassment online represent how internalization of oppression, prejudice, and generational trauma can negatively impact (intra)relationships [39, 48, 120]. This experience of harm associated with cultural betrayal is not an anomaly: transformative justice acknowledges structural violence as a cause of gender-based violence within communities.

This struggle was also something that the research team itself contended with in reporting these results. It is likely that participants felt comfortable disclosing their experiences because the researchers conducting the focus groups were from similar racial and gender demographics as their participants. Additionally, we had designed the focus group with restorative practices that were designed to support Black women and femmes’ disclosures about their experiences. However, revealing our own (two of the authors’) within-racial group conflicts to a predominantly white research publication and a discipline, still reckoning with its ingrained white supremacy and racism [16, 36], is a complicated step, as is white-presenting coauthors being a part of a narrative that is not theirs. Cultural betrayal is a direct product of societal trauma, and longstanding inequities, and reporting on our participants’ within-group conflicts is important in illuminating another facet of how discrimination affects communities of color—of any gender.

We want to make this clear, disclosures and stories in this study are shared to highlight the nuance of Black women and femmes’ digital lives. We condemn any interpretation of this study that centers on toxic narratives about Black men, especially since the study and inclusion of Black men are few and far between within

HCI. As TJ and RJ both posit, no one in this world is disposable, we are complicated human beings and these complications are part of the human experience. We know that intergroup harm happens across identities and can impact communities in profound ways. What we hope readers take away from the explanation of cultural betrayal trauma is that racism and white supremacy has effects that reverberate—they create a state of mind and actions focused on seeking power over others which can be inhabited by those marginalized as a way to survive, succeed, and gain their own power.

### 5.2 Black Feminist Thought and Content Moderation

Moya Bailey’s concept of misogynoir describes the passive and active ways that Black women and femmes are depicted as ugly, deficient, hypersexual, and unhealthy in digital spaces [4]. Many of our participants’ interactions online were defined by negative caricatures, like the sapphire portrayal of the “angry Black woman” or colorist remarks. The jezebel trope is frequently enacted onto Black women and femmes online in the form of direct sexual solicitation by men. It is important to tell Black women and femme’s stories of online harassment to counteract the legacies of erasure from public memory that normalizes violence in their lived experiences and in the archive (e.g. [23, 46, 110]). Saidiya Hartman describes in *Venus in Two Acts*, “the ubiquitous presence of Venus in the archive of the Atlantic Slavery, an emblematic figure of an enslaved woman in the Atlantic world, whose story, life, and presence is minimally told or narrated by a few lines about a whore’s life, a medical treatise, and inventory of property, asterisks in the grand narrative of history” [58]. Social media is a form of archiving, and choosing to bring Black feminist epistemology to online harassment is an acknowledgement of whose stories can be told and how, which is necessary for repairing harm [83, 105].

However, these stories are obscured and occluded by existing content moderation practices. The harm and violence experienced by Black women and femmes is rendered largely invisible by content moderation algorithms and reporting processes on social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter. It can be difficult to capture racism and harassment algorithmically [80], especially through direct messages, and many of our participants said that reporting did not help them. As a result, harassment is rendered invalid by systems that don’t recognize it, or is made invisible by systems that bury it. Thus, by way of their own efforts, Black women and femmes resist harm and harassment becoming ubiquitous and invisible fixtures in their digital lives. The Practice Refusal Collective, formed by Tina Campt and Saidiya Hartman, defines refusal, as “a rejection of the status quo as livable and the creation of possibility in the face of negation; a refusal to recognize a system that renders you fundamentally illegible and unintelligible... using negation as a generative and creative source of disorderly power to embrace the power of living otherwise” [17].

Participants practice myriad approaches to refusal, such as blocking and reporting interactions that sexualized and racialized their digital presence, even with the knowledge that these affordances may not afford participants the protection they should. Many participants expressed how their political and social commentary have

been targeted by known and unknown users to them, causing them to self-censor or leave platforms altogether. It is the ancestral bequeathing of resistance practices known to Black women and femmes from their mothers, grandmothers, and aunties to care for self and community when adversity is encountered [26, 61, 62]. However, our participants expressed how their efforts in calling in/out oppression offline and online frequently is policed by known and unknown users, and at times, the platforms' reporting mechanisms were weaponized against them. There have been widespread calls for greater transparency and accountability in platform governance [10, 94, 102]; it is also important to document, archive, and share the stories that go underreported and obscured. As Ruha Benjamin tells us, technology has been historically perceived as objective and progressive but Black women and femmes neither benefit from nor experience such characteristics [7].

### 5.3 Healing and Joy as Transformative

We return to the transformative justice framework to conceptualize how Black women and femmes leverage Black feminist liberatory love politic—that is, a commitment to freedom from oppression and towards liberation, safety, and accountability. What would social media experiences built on transformative justice principles look like? Structurally, it may not be possible in the current climate of platforms, which rely on large, privately-owned spaces that claim neutrality and scale and that rely on surveillance and carceral logics [51, 73, 121]. Furthermore, merely turning to principles of community or locality is not enough, as it puts much of the labor on those most impacted. Additionally, TJ recognizes that harm can occur in any community as discussed above—platforms built on TJ frameworks could embrace principles of accountability rather than punishment after harm occurs [69, 100] and healing rather than scale and profit. Indeed, scholars have called for public interest platforms (e.g. [122]) built on design justice principles [28]. According to Johonna Turner, transformative justice posits that “creating safety for ourselves activates our imaginations, strengthens our resilience and cultivates joy and love” [118]. Participants' experiences of harassment online cannot be disentangled from the sociohistorical worlds they reside in. Their experiences with sexual harassment from men, racism, and dissolution of relationships are not unique to social media, but social media enables and magnifies the landscape for such experiences. Transforming the online ecosystem cannot be disconnected from offline socio-political struggles for accountability and justice.

Brock proposes the concept of the libidinal economy to describe the (un)conscious desire to exchange, invest, and value on Black digital life and participation [13]. As our findings show, in this libidinal economy on social media, Black women make visible the convergence of violence and pleasure online. On one hand, the desirability for Black women and femmes, their joy, community, politics, activism, and the resulting content provision valuable engagement—i.e. income—for social media platforms. On the other hand, Black women and femmes endure seen and unseen harassment, constantly trading and accumulating between pleasure and violence online. Our participants gave voice to the ways the matrix of domination persists on social media platforms in their experiences of online harassment and, subsequently, the ways in which

they transform these experiences to cope, heal, and experience joy. Misogynoir helps to name and explain the violence that Black women and femmes face online; together with Collin's matrix of domination and transformative justice frameworks [6, 26, 57], we can understand how power relations that exist in society manifest online to enable and feed digital misogynoir as libidinal desire. Yet, as revealed by our participants, the digital alchemy and (love) practice of community, activism, joy, and enjoyment experienced on social media is valuable to them as Black women [78] and provides reason to participate on platforms.

## 6 CONCLUSION

Now that it has been said, and now that you have read this, it cannot be unseen. Black women and femmes in the U.S. have experienced long histories of discrimination and violence. These histories continue into their present-day digital spaces where racism and misogyny persist. In this work, we conducted focus groups with 49 Black women and femmes about their experiences on social media. We show how they experience harassment and unwanted behavior on social media, but that they also reclaim those spaces for healing and joy. We draw from transformative justice frameworks to connect experiences of harm with a transformative politic of healing and joy online. We also reflect on the complexities of cultural betrayal trauma, where Black women and femmes experiences with Black men as well as from white men and women. We conclude with lyrics from Frankie Beverly and Maze's 1980 “Joy and Pain”:

“Don't it seem we go through life going up and down  
Seems the things that turn you on, turn you around  
Always hurting each other, (If it ain't one thing it's another)  
When the world is down on you, love's somewhere around  
And I want you to know that  
Joy and pain are like sunshine and rain”

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