

DIGITAL GUARDIANS: POLICY STRATEGIES FOR COUNTERING VIOLATIONS AND ENSURING THE WELL-BEING OF BLACK WOMEN ONLINE

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Abstract

Online trolling and digital violence have become pervasive problems, especially towards Black women on social media platforms such as Twitter. Yet, there is a lack of care and concern for the safety of Black women on social media and their abusive experiences being handled poorly. Addressing these issues, this study employs the Muted Group Theory to explore the experiences of Black women on social media. The research intends to find strategies that Black women are utilizing to cope with online abuse and to suggest measures that can be implemented by social media sites to regulate and punish policy violations. The study utilizes qualitative research methods such as literature reviews, focus groups, and individual interviews to gather data. Research indicates that online harassment targeting women is increasing, and Black women are impacted the most. The study intends to change the current safety policies on Twitter and generate effective ways to combat online harassment to promote a safer online environment for Black women. The findings of this study will highlight the need for a safer online community where all women can feel protected from abuse.

Keywords: Twitter, social media, online harassment, Black women, digital violence, safety policies, muted group theory, qualitative research.

Introduction

On July 18th, 2016 Leslie Jones logged onto Twitter as most social media users do. She logged on looking forward to the feedback from her big-break movie, *Ghostbusters*. With a hopeful heart and an open mind, she began to look through her mentions to see what her fans thought of her dynamic performance. Unfortunately, Leslie was met with verbal abuse of known conservative troll, Milo Yiannopoulos. Like most Black women online, Jones, a comedian and actress, reached out to twitter immediately for assistance but nothing happened. Out of fear and sadness, she deleted her account only to return days later to find that she was being attacked online by others. Harassment has led to the deletion of accounts and even suicide attempts. This form of harassment is detrimental to women. Black women such as Leslie Jones bore the brunt of ugly jokes that have led them to certain extremes. According to the Center for Disease Control, 42,000 suicides occur each year, with a bulk of them happening being due to online harassment in the forms of cyberbullying and cyberstalking ("Faststats", 2017).

Online harassment, digital violence and cyberbullying is a very serious problem. There is a void in the existing literature on the harassment that Black women face on social media websites such as Twitter. According to WomensActionMedia.org (2016) over 27% of women experience harassment online. Moreover, 12% of women experience threats online ("Reporting, Reviewing, and Responding

to Harassment on Twitter”, 2016). Cyber-bullying, a word usually used to describe harassment online amongst teenagers, is now being attached to the instances of the intimidation that women face on Twitter. (Timm, et.al, 2010).

Women experience harassment online via social media sites like Twitter. The company has been criticized for being slow to respond to complaints. (“A Snapshot of How Twitter Deals with Online Harassment”, 2015) Twitter addresses about half of the cases reported. This process became more streamlined with the assistance of Troll-Busters.Com/ Women’s Action Media, which focuses on eliminating harassment against women (“A Snapshot of How Twitter Deals with Online Harassment”, 2015).

Background

Social media is a tool of communication that allows its users to share videos, photos and creates dialogue. It allows users to build their networks with either people they know offline or even strangers. “Social media employ mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content” (Kietzmann et.al, 2011).

Because it is easily accessible to anyone with access to the Internet it can act as an “interactive social space” (Brock, 2007). In these social spaces many cultures can come together to share like experiences and memories. Twitter specifically creates the “interactive social space” Brock speaks of above.

Twitter is a social media network that allows users to post updates of 140 characters on a “ticking timeline” basis. “Conceptually, Twitter is the nexus of several communication tools and strategies that help construct the community and conversation formed by its users” (Clark, 2014). Since it is accessible to Internet users of all kinds it is also susceptible to violence.

There has been little research, which specifically addresses the impact of online harassment towards Black women, in particular, however, there is ample research on how women are affected by harassment and trolling online. Trolling is a form of harassment done by trolls who are defined as according to John Bishop, who are “persons who try to provoke others” online. This word dates back to the 1960s but has gradually evolved and adapted for the digital age (Bishop, 2014). These “Internet trolls” have been causing women to abuse themselves and even take their own lives. Organizations like Women’s Action Media have created websites for women to submit claims on the harassment they face daily online due to Twitter’s lack of proactive involvement. This is instrumental today because it sets the tone for how harassment online will be dealt with in the future. It also pulls back the cover on the violence towards women online and how it goes unnoticed. The goal of this study is to educate and enlighten others on the abuse that is happening online and how the abuse does not only affect teenagers but adults as well.

Black people, more specifically Black women, are being attacked verbally on social media websites such as Twitter more than other groups. Among Black people, Black women experience the most harassment online (Online Harassment Data, 2016). Over time the phenomenon has become more aggressive and vicious with little to no consequences. Twitter, according to their abuse guidelines, will suspend an account for the following violations: violent threats, harassment, hateful conduct, multiple account abuse and releasing private information (Safety Council, 2016). Although these

suspensions pose concrete consequences, the amount of time this process may take is not revealed in user guidelines. There is also the risk of the suspended user creating another account to harass the victim again or repeatedly after being sanctioned. Black women are also the most unprotected group online when it comes to verbal abuse compared to other groups who use online social media sites such as Twitter according to the Daily Dot (2016) such harassment is viewed as commonplace among many Black female users online famous and not famous (“The abuse Leslie Jones endured on Twitter is nothing new for black women”, 2016).

Actor and comedian Leslie Jones experienced trolling, on July 19th, 2016, after the release of the remake of the fan-fiction movie *Ghostbusters* this summer. Leslie Jones attacker, Milo Yiannopoulos, began his trolling against Leslie Jones by stating his disdain for the remake of *Ghostbusters* and her role in the movie as seen below in Figure 1 and Figure 2. (Archived Tweet of Milo Yiannopoulos, 2016) After his remarks were made online other racist trolls began to fill Jones’ mentions on Twitter with lewd, cruel, and racist remarks.



Figure 1 Archived Tweet of Milo Yiannopoulos, 2016

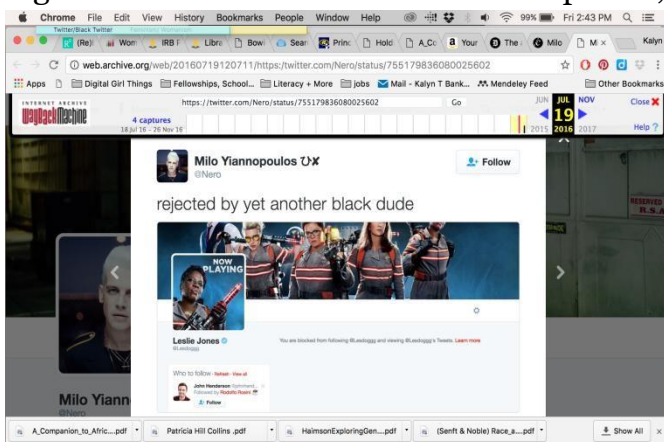


Figure 2 Archived Tweet of Milo Yiannopoulos, 2016

Initially, Jones felt confident confronting her attackers but once the harassment became overwhelming she deleted her account as shown in Figure 3 below (Archived Tweet of Leslie Jones, 2016).



Figure 3 Archived Tweet of Leslie Jones, 2016

The hashtag #LoveForLeslieJ was created on Twitter where people posted positive remarks using the hashtag in order to pad Jones' mentions with positive words in order to help redirect the hateful comments she was receiving. Paul Feig, director of *Ghostbusters*, was the first to start the trending hashtag in support of protecting Leslie Jones as seen below in Figure 4 (Archived Tweet of Paul Feig, 2016).



Figure 4 Archived Tweet of Paul Feig, 2016

Yiannopoulos' account was suspended, and he went on to say in many interviews that he did not regret what he had done. *Daily Dot* (2016) Jones eventually reactivated her account but this narrative of Black women being harassed is not uncommon.

Akilah Hughes (2016), YouTube Comedian, told the *Daily Dot* "It felt like I was reading my own mentions on nights when I decide to take a stance or use a trending hashtag. When you're black, it's totally common to be called a slur after just existing on this site and using it like everyone does." Hughes, along with many other users expressed their views via tweets and interviews on how Jones' attack felt all too familiar. Black Twitter, which is a moniker for a segment of the online Twitter community of Black users, creates their own hashtags that are specific to their culture and experiences. This online community attempts to bring awareness to issues that affect Black people on the site in many ways (Clark, 2014). Hashtags such as #YouOkSis and #MaybeHeDoesntHitYou have been created as a way to educate others about abuse against women offline. These campaigns

have been the subject of verbally abusive feedback on Twitter. This kind of constant abuse limits the “safe-spaces” for Black Women online to freely be able to use a public platform without harassment from online trolls (Hashtag Feminism, 2014).

Problem Statement

Trolling has become a way to chastise and verbally abuse people online. Trolls have attacked women such as Leslie Jones on Twitter for no reason. Even though Twitter has abuse guidelines and a Trust and Safety Council their consequences for the actions of trolls are just a temporary solution for a long-term problem. Black women have had to either delete their accounts or create their own way of addressing these issues. Because of abusive tweets about Black women and women, in general, the public space of the online community can seem unsafe. Social media companies such as Twitter seem unsure of how to properly address this issue. More stringent user policies and crisis control must be applied on sites so all women can feel safe in all online communities. There is absolutely no reason for Black people, specifically Black women to be excluded from this narrative of the overwhelming amount of online harassment just because there is a lack of research that includes this group. This research study seeks to ask and answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What strategies are Black women using to cope with online abuse via social media sites such as Twitter?

RQ2: What strategies can Black women use to fight back against online abuse via Twitter?

RQ3: What actions or policies can twitter, and other social media sites enforce to effectively regulate and punish policy violations?

Theoretical Framework

The Muted Group theory is a critical theory, which focuses on the marginalized groups and how they remain powerless in comparison to other groups. The founder, Edwin Ardener, believed that the voices of women are often ignored or muted in comparison to men. This theory was created in 1975 with the help of his wife. Ardener’s theory will be accompanied by other research dealing with Black Feminist Thought and Black feminism to fill the voids that the research has in reference to this study. In this theory the male is seen as the dominant class, which causes the act of muting to occur against women (“Communications Theory”, 2010). Kramarae (2005) states that with this theory “women are more constrained than are men in what they can say, when, and with what results” (Kramarae, 2005). For this study the Muted Group Theory will be applied for the following reasons, Black women are a stigmatized group that is silenced due to their race and gender offline and now online. Their voices often go unheard until their sentiments are brought forth by anger or protest and when other groups outside of their own back it. In her research on feminism Griffin (2000) states, “black women [are] denied the privileges of femininity and protection from physical and discursive violence” (Griffin, 2000). Therefore, these Black women are muted and denied the chance to be protected from misogyny and harm on Twitter.

Articles from the *Daily Dot* written in 2016 in response to the harassment Leslie Jones face contain countless interviews of those who are a part of Black Twitter discussing how this silencing is common. Griffin’s (2000) outlook on Black feminism as it pertains to Du Bois explicitly talks about how Black women are denied the protection and because of that are subjected to violence (Griffin, 2000). This violence has transpired to online harassment. Collins (2000) says “Everyone has spoken

for Black women, making it difficult for us to speak for ourselves” which leaves the Black woman muted, silenced, and erased from the narrative.

In several case studies, the muted group theory has shown that it is detrimental to the psychological and emotional well-being of the muted group. Although these case studies do not directly relate to social media due to its novelty in recent academia there were plenty of cases that discussed the impact of this theory on women.

In 1996, A.M. Bowes and T. Meehan Domokos did a study on Pakistani women, maternity care, and how their voices for this care were often muted by the patriarchal society they live in. The study focused on ways in which research can strategically assist with raising the muted voices in the women.

Bowes, et.al, (1996) state, “working with women who have been systematically silenced is highly problematic, an appropriate research approach can enable such women to speak” (Bowes, et.al, 1996). Through their study, they met with many different women and conducted interviews to get their feedback on professional healthcare as it relates to their maternity needs. Some of the women were satisfied but others felt as if they did not have a choice in their own healthcare. They also felt as if they were helpless.

Bowes, et.al, (1996) agree that Ardener’s approach to developing new approaches in research would assist with empowering this marginalized group and other groups. They also believed that through their interviews and research they could tap into the stresses that women face when muted. Ardener urged anthropologists to “pay more attention to the alternative worlds of women in their studies” in order to empower and protect those women from continuing to be silenced (Ardener, 1977).

Ardener’s theory on the muted voices of women attributes to this study because it focuses on the root of the problem and also gives insight on what can be done to solve the problem.

Methodology Introduction

Online harassment as stated in the background of this study affects women more than any other group. Subsequently, it affects Black women the most out of this group. The increasing numbers of harassment on Twitter and the time it takes to address this issue does not match. This study seeks to determine what can be done to change the safety policies on Twitter. It also seeks to further investigate these accounts of harassment that Black women are facing on Twitter. Qualitative research methods contain open-ended questions and interview data (Creswell, 2013). In order to effectively create ideas for policies based on research qualitative research must be done (Karner and Warren 2015). The purpose of this study is to investigate and create strategies for Black women to be safer online when it comes to abusive language and harassment. With these strategies, Black women will be given concrete and effective ways to combat online harassment essentially insulating them from further harassment. This study also seeks to investigate the research on the harassment Black women face online and prompt others to further investigate these instances of abuse that are being ignored. The study will be focusing on questions that apply to the lack of research on Black women who are harassed online, harassment the subjects may have faced, and ideas for ways Black women can fight back against online harassment on Twitter and influence a change in social media policies on harassment. The hopeful change in policies based on this research will result in stricter

consequences for online harassment. It seeks to force Twitter to create more effective processes for identifying and tackling online harassment on their website.

Research Method

This study will use literature, archived tweets provided by subjects, interview transcripts, and the focus group to compile and categorize the data collected. This organization will allow for the researcher to create an inductive data analysis of the data gathered. This will, according to Creswell (2013), allow the researcher to work with themes from “the bottom up, by organizing the data into increasingly more abstract units of information” (p.175). It is important that the researcher focuses on the participants’ meanings because it prevents the writer from bringing their own ideas into the data (p.175). In order to preserve the participants’ meanings from the interviews and focus group, this study will use direct quotes, with the permission of the subjects, to validate the data found and to preserve its meaning. The qualitative research process is ever-changing and Creswell (2013) believes that in order for the process to be successful it must be able to change over time and be emergent. In order to remain emergent, this study will change when needed based on the data and any new research found during the process (p.176).

Qualitative research methods on online harassment embody the characteristics of qualitative research as explained by Creswell (2013) in the third edition of the Research Design text (p.173). In the Journal of Interpersonal Violence, Jerry Finn (2004), used a survey to conduct his qualitative research on A Survey of Online Harassment at a University Campus. Finn (2004) created a survey that asked college students at UNH about their experiences with online harassment. The researcher used a natural setting that contained the college where the students in his study attended. Finn (2004) then took into consideration the hypothesis he created based on the survey of the responses he would get. Finn’s (2004) use of the two-page long survey with 5 students on campus allowed him to create a conclusion based on their responses to the questions.

Based on Creswell’s (2013) and Kraner and Warren’s (2015) breakdown of the characteristics of qualitative research methods and Finn’s (2004) demonstration of these methods this study seeks to gather information based on the focus group conducted on the experiences that Black women have faced with online harassment.

Instrumentation

The research will use a questionnaire that will be read during the focus group and during the individual qualitative interviews. The questionnaire format is being used to allow participants to speak freely but to keep the conversation on the research being surveyed. The only weakness with this type of instrumentation is that the responses could be vague or familiar to a certain demographic of people, which would void it of being a generalized collection of data for a specific group. Finally, the research may require outside supporting literature to explain responses given by the participants that are familiar to that demographic or leave some room for multiple interpretations. The questions that will be used for this study are listed below. The researcher will read Twitter’s safety policy beforehand to familiarize the subjects with the information. There will also be a printed version of Twitter’s safety policy provided for the subjects to have during the focus group.

1. Why do you feel that Black women are being harassed online, specifically twitter, more than other women?

2. What emotions do you feel when you experience or witness harassment online towards Black women?
3. Do you report, spam, or block the attacker?
4. Based on the policy for safety read earlier, does Twitter act on those things in a timely matter?
5. How can Twitter change their policies to create a safe space for Black women online?

Findings Introduction

The research explored Black women who have faced harassment online via the social media website Twitter. In-person interviews were conducted in the form of a focus group to examine what Black women have experienced online using Twitter as a form of social media. Muted Group Theory was used to analyze their responses. The researcher has created themes based on the research and responses of the participants. The themes are as follows: isolation/jealousy, emotional distress, Twitter policies, and reform. Each theme was carefully selected based on the responses to the questions.

Findings

The researcher has reviewed the responses of the participants to the questions to get a better understanding of their concerns and the interviews. Below will be a breakdown of each question, the researchers understanding, and the responses to the questions. Each participant was given a number to remain anonymous this includes the phone interview participants as well. Each question builds up to the idea of what solutions can be made to fix the problem of online harassment towards Black Women on Twitter.

Theme 1: Isolation due to jealousy, which leads to a lack of consequences.

Six out of eight of the participants believed that harassment happened to Black women the most on Twitter because people were jealous and intimidated by them. The other two participants believed that because of this people recklessly disrespected Black women online because there would not be any repercussions. Participants who agreed but had a different outlook response to the questions were: **P5**: Black Women – least protected species. **P8**: Black women in social media are the last protected, although we tend to have the loudest and most intelligent voices, we are often misinterpreted and viewed as being the bottom of the totem pole. These responses revealed that not only is there an issue of jealousy and isolation but there is also an issue of protection which they believe leads to the harassment of Black women online.

Theme 2: Black women experience harassment/abuse online neglecting that they are real humans with emotions and feelings.

Most of the participants felt an array of negative emotions when it came to online harassment. From seeing it and even experiencing they expressed many emotions that can range from anger to numbness. Emotions and feelings reported by some participants were: **P2**: People feel like words won't hurt is. **P8**: Anger and sadness. **P7**: I guess the emotions I feel are anger, disrespect, shame, and vengeful. **P2**: Numb. Far too much going on already in our lives -Why do we have to go through this every day? It can be interpreted that most of the participants feel a sense of helplessness when they see or experience harassment online. Although Twitter has policies in place it seems from the responses that the women still face harassment and still feel many negative emotions when it occurs.

It also can be interpreted that social media users can be emotionally impacted by what is said to them or others online, especially if it is a recurring incident.

Theme 3: Twitter policies seem to be helpful on paper but lack the follow up of helpfulness online.

As the conversation progressed the participants began to discuss Twitter's policies for preventing harassment to continue. They also discussed how they deal directly with harassment online or what they do when someone else is being harassed. All of the participants agreed that Twitter does not seem to move quickly enough when dealing with the reports made. Some of the participants provided information real-life experiences of what happened when they reported harassment online. A few of their responses are as follows: **P8**: I reported someone who sent images of dead children and Twitter asked me to submit a copy of my ID. I was appalled. **P1**: They protect who they want to protect. **P4**: There's a hierarchy for who is protected from harassment. Actual verified and applied verified accounts are probably safe, while among regular Twitter users; it's every man for himself. **P7**: I don't think Twitter acts on harassment in a timely fashion. It happens every day, but the bigger celebrity whether attacker or survivor, those are the ones that get noticed and acted upon first.

From these responses, it can be concluded that Twitter makes it difficult to report harassment. Twitter also seems to act quickly when it comes to certain types of users based on their fame and or account status. All of the women said they report, block, and mute accounts that display harassment like behavior. They all also agreed, "Twitter is flawed" (**P3**, 2017). The conversation of accountability arose and many of the women believed that twitter should consult the people who are harassed and disable many accounts.

Theme 4: Accountability and reform.

The conversation ended with a discussion on "what's next" guiding the women into a discussion that involved action. The participants had many different ideas on what Twitter should do to better assist those who are victims of harassment online. Many of the participants believed that Twitter should hire Black women in order to really create reform. Some of their responses were: **P1 and P5**: Hire Black women in high positions to create policies and methods to protect people of color. **P7**: Twitter could be more specific, but they have to be vague so it doesn't look like it's favoring anyone. However, the huge tech company is definitely up its diversity. Often times, the people monitoring the accounts just get rid of the situation by deleting tweets and if it's a ghost account (you know, the one with the eggs), then they probably just suspend it for like a day and that's it. If Twitter hired more Black women who'd be able to identify these kinds of attacks, then I think the policies would be a lot more productive. These kinds of situations are like dog whistles, only the kind of people it's directed to will understand. Some of the women agreed that there should be some type of "task force" to hold the users accountable for their responses. Many of the women also agreed that accountability is an issue and that users have to continue hold Twitter accountable for not acting as quickly as they should.

Interpretations and Recommendations

The results of this study will greatly contribute to the missing gaps of untapped research of social media networking sites as they relate to online harassment specifically towards Black women. Today's social media websites have grown in numbers of users, which makes online harassment

easy to commit due to the overwhelming number of users online, especially Twitter. The disparaging amount of research in means of primary sources and reports of online harassment towards Black women has caused a rise of fear and anger amongst the marginalized groups it impacts directly. Moreover, this study can act as the framework for studies on online harassment dealing explicitly with Black women and act as a resource to build a comprehensive awareness on how twitter policies can be reformed to create a safer and conducive environment for this marginalized group. This study will also serve as the foundation of research of this magnitude that focuses on action and not reaction towards social media networking sites such as Twitter and their safety policies.

Subsequently, this study will have an impact on research dealing with the field of face-to-face communication also known as interpersonal communication because it deals directly with the conversations between people online reflecting their thoughts and feelings. Research from this study will attempt to explain how face-to-face communication can transfer to online spaces and its impact on groups that are consistently targeted in an adverse way. The study will also serve to oblige social media networking sites and the scholars that study them to take a deeper look into the long-term power of destructive behavior through face-to-face communication. There are immense opportunities for researchers alike to look into what causes these adverse situations and create more strides in educating others on policy reform for online social networking websites.

Edwin Ardener's Muted Group Theory was founded in 1975, before the invention of social media networking websites such as Twitter so it is necessary to append social media networking harassment towards Black women to Ardener's existing research. Ardener's study along with this research can explain the impact harassment online has on the voices of Black women and also human behavior. Furthermore, this study can create awareness in today's society as well as expand on the many other marginalized groups such as the LGBTQIA communities who also suffer from online harassment consistently.

Interpretations

Twitter makes it accessible for any user to communicate with another user as long as their page is not set to private. Consequently, this can make users vulnerable to many different forms of dialogue, including harassment. From the focus group and interview results, it can be concluded that Black women are concerned with their safety on Twitter and that Twitter does not act judiciously to resolve the many cases of harassment. Ott (2016) said that Twitter basically "trains our consciousness in particular ways" through a means of "medium theory" which is the theory that suggests that technology has its own key "physical, psychological, and social features that are distinct and fixed." (Ott, 2016) Although, the language used on Twitter can be esoteric, Ott (2016) believes that it trains users to "devalue others, thereby, cultivating mean and malicious discourse." (Ott, 2016) That esoteric language can be translated into the destructive discourse that Ott (2016) talks about in his findings. The themes from the focus group proved that Twitter often overlooks harassment irrespective of their safety policies. Due to the impulsivity Twitter promotes with their structure of Tweets, limiting users to 140 characters, Ott (2016) believes that it stops users from being detailed and providing sophisticated messages. This allows users to Tweet quickly without thinking about what they are saying.

Murthy's (2011) study on Twitter journalism breaks down the digital divide based on class and race.

Murthy (2011) states that “Marginalized populations often lack or have limited net access in their households (Witte and Mannon, 2010), making access to Twitter newsfeeds a socially stratified practice. Indeed, even among children – a demographic which is painted as a homogeneously net savvy generation – digital divides based upon lines of class and other socioeconomic factors continue to exist.” (Murthy, 2011)

Like the study, Black women, are members of this digital divide and more often than not their stories and reports of harassment are often overlooked. Although the research shows that the victims are aware of the harassment there is a huge gap between what secondary sources report on versus primary academic sources produce studies on. However, organizations like Women, Action, and the Media, use their website trollbusters.com to attempt to combat the digital divide amongst the reports of harassment placed by all women of color.

A great deal of research over the years has focused on how cyber-bullying/harassment has impacted the lives of teenagers and women and how it has made social media usage very menacing at times. Face-to-face communication online has allowed anonymous accounts to attack users repeatedly because of their lack of identity on their social media pages it is almost impossible to track down the person who may be behind these accounts. The behaviorism talked about by Ganda (2014) focuses on how the identity can be used online as a way to be someone else. This can make it hard for websites like Twitter to keep track of harassment. If a user has many accounts they can continue to harass the victim without any repercussions because they have the freedom to choose many identities online.

Carl Timm (2010), et.al, believes that cyber-bullying/harassment can turn into physical threats towards victims. Timm (2010), et.al, state, “Given the wide variety of avenues and ease, a person can put on a disguise to infiltrate and harass. The opportunities for those who perform these deeds are enabled very easily, given the tools, which we use to communicate.” (Timm, et.al, 2010) According to the focus group, the women spoke about safety briefly, and even feeling helpless as online users due to how easily harassers can re-create accounts and attack again. This ties into themes, 2 and 3, which touch on abuse towards Black women on Twitter and the lack of help they receive online.

Furthermore, the following research questions are answered and analyzed with the findings from the focus group and interviews. The questions are as follows:

RQ1: What strategies are Black women using to cope with online abuse via social media sites such as Twitter?

This question sought to inquire how Black women were dealing with online abuse on Twitter in their day-to-day lives. It seeks to delve deeply into how they were protecting themselves and what emotions they were trying to protect themselves from.

Some of the women believed that it was almost impossible to avoid online harassment whether it was personal or happening to someone they knew online. This demonstrated that many of the women had to resort to blocking, muting, or reporting pages as spam to avoid seeing the conversations. It also resulted in them removing themselves completely from the application or disengaging to protect themselves from the harsh and obscene remarks. Many of them refrained from expressing their coping mechanisms because they were unsure of how they coped. It seemed like a normalcy to the participants to experience harassment or second-hand harassment on a day-

to-day basis. Responses from P1 and P7 were very similar in that they discussed the frustrations and how they felt like they had to speak up in order to keep themselves and other women safe online. Many of the other participants, in order to protect themselves, did not find that speaking up helped at all.

RQ2: What strategies can Black women use to fight back against online abuse via Twitter?

This research question was answered in depth with theme 3 and 4 which discussed how they feel about violence online and what they would like to see done. The questionnaire also touched on options for protecting the user's page from abuse by blocking, muting, or reporting the pages. The responses varied based on if the women had personally been attacked online before versus if they were witnesses to online harassment. Some important responses were: **P7**: At first, when I witnessed harassment of Black women online, I used to stand back. I hadn't found my voice; I was too embarrassed to stand up for other Black women in fear of being attacked as well. But then, I went to college (Howard U) and things changed. I was way more vocal. I didn't care what people thought of me, I was just standing up for what was right. No one should be harassed. I report, spam, and block the attacker. I do not want to see any of that on my TL nor do I want them to keep attacking innocent people. **P3**: We need to hold these platforms accountable.

RQ3: What actions or policies can Twitter, and other social media sites enforce to effectively regulate and punish policy violations?

The women came up with several different ways that Twitter can reform their policies in order to act quickly when claims of harassment are being reported. The unanimous decision was that Twitter must first hire Black women to be able to identify these esoteric terms that are being overlooked by the Twitter Safety Council. Some of the responses were: **P1 and P5**: Hire BW in high positions to create policies and methods to protect women of color. **P3**: Why isn't there a department monitoring these issues? Watching for trigger words or responses. **P7**: Twitter could be more specific, but they have to be vague, so it doesn't look like it's favoring anyone. However, the huge tech company is definitely up its diversity. Often times, the people monitoring the accounts just get rid of the situation by deleting tweets and if it's a ghost account (you know, the one with the eggs), then they probably just suspend it for like a day and that's it. If Twitter hired more Black women who'd be able to identify these kinds of attacks, then I think the policies would be a lot more productive. These kinds of situations are like dog whistles, only the kind of people it's directed to will understand.

In relation to the focus group and interviews, Muted Group Theory served as the framework for the questions asked during the focus group and interviews. Ardener believed that this theory focused on power and how it is used to silence people. During the study through the literature and the responses to the questions it can be inferred that the lack of proactive measures to protect Black women against online harassment on Twitter contributes to the silencing of these women. The power lies within the policies and whom they protect. Collins (2000) discusses how the exclusion of Black women from different groups silences them. She states that "The exclusion of Black women's ideas from mainstream academic discourse and the curious placement of AfricanAmerican women intellectuals in both feminist and Black social and political thought has meant that Black women intellectuals

have remained outsiders within all three communities" (p12) Because Black women are the "other" or outsiders as Collins calls them it allows their voices to be muted and acts as a form of erasure basically deleting their claims from society and academia. Arderner focuses solely on the relationship between men and women and how the power structures in these relationships can determine who has the voice and who doesn't.

Conclusions and Future Recommendations

The focus group and interviews made it apparent that Black women are constantly attacked on Twitter even if past research neglects the claims. It also made it apparent that Twitter does not act quickly in responding to claims of harassment and that it can be very difficult to find solace and safety online.

In the future, social scientists should conduct research specifically on how Black women are impacted by online harassment on social media networking websites. It doesn't have to be limited to just Twitter but Twitter can be the foundation for the research and it can branch out to other social networking websites such as Facebook, Snapchat, Tumblr, and Instagram. The focus group and interviews revealed that Black women are indeed not safe and do not feel safe online expressing their views. It also revealed that Black women are concerned with how companies such as Twitter view them and their safety when their cries for help go unheard or are silenced.

Another phenomenon that should be stated in relation to Muted Group Theory is Black Feminist Thought and how it navigates from the real world to the digital world. Using scholars like Collins (2000) to discuss how the silencing of Black women is common offline and online would bring legitimacy to the claims that seem to be overlooked due to its lack of research and study in academia. Collins (2000) states, "Reclaiming the Black women's intellectual tradition involved examining the everyday ideas of Black women not previously considered intellectuals. The ideas we share as mothers in extended families, as othermothers in Black communities, as members of Black churches, and as teachers to the Black community's children have formed one pivotal area where African-American women have hammered out a Black women's standpoint. Musicians, writers, poets, vocalists, and other artists constitute another group of Black women intellectuals who have aimed to interpret Black women's experiences ... Such women are typically thought of as non-intellectual and non-scholarly, classifications that create a false dichotomy [division] between scholarship and activism, between thinking and doing." (p 15)

Collins (2000), along with the participants believe that Black women have to be the voice behind the reforming of the way Black women are seen, specifically in this study, on social media. Black women need to be in the headquarters working alongside Twitter's safety council to assist them with finding the trigger words and phrases that may go overlooked. One of the participants suggested a task force being created. By creating a task force to assist the Safety Council, Twitter can have them scanning for trigger words and phrases that are attacking and nature and identify them as harassment. This will aid them in quickly disabling accounts to further protect users such as Black women. The task force could consist of Black women and other marginalized groups to not only diversify Twitter's headquarters but also act as an inside intelligence team on what is culturally acceptable and what is not.

Moreover, multiple studies need to be conducted on the policies for all social media networking sites and their guidelines of safety. The studies need to delve deeply into studying how who creates these policies, and how quickly they are forced. From there these policies need to be rewritten and reformed to ensure that marginalized users are just as safe as other users and that all users can feel safe online.

Finally, Kimberle Crenshaw's belief that "drawing from the strength of shared experience, women have recognized that the political demands of millions speak more powerfully than the pleas of a few isolated voices" (Crenshaw, 1991) ties into the belief of the participants and myself that marginalized groups can work together to hold social media websites like Twitter accountable for their lack of timely responses and assistance with combating online harassment and digital violence.

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